Opening exercises for the Hebrew Union College were held on Sunday October 3, 1875 in the palatial Bene Yeshurun Temple, known today as the Plum Street Temple.
The Hebrew Union College—
Its First Years

by Michael A. Meyer

It was a solemn, indeed an historic occasion. Long before the appointed hour, the spacious Bene Yeshurun Temple was crowded with ladies and gentlemen, both Jews and Gentiles, drawn from Cincinnati’s economic and cultural élite. Precisely at half past seven in the evening a sonorous organ prelude opened the festive program. In a dignified procession the participants ascended the platform. An augmented choir, accompanied by a complete orchestra, sang a stirring hymn, electrifying the audience of two-thousand. Carried away with admiration, the reporter for the American Israelite later wrote: “The grand and palatial building, with its oriental fresco lit by hundreds of gas flames, filled to its utmost capacity by the highest intelligence of the city, now fairly ablaze with that higher inspiration which classical music arouses in appreciative souls, presented a panorama to the quiet observer, which no pen can describe, no artist paint, and no eloquence reproduce.” That evening, Sunday October 3, 1875, marked the Opening Exercises of the Hebrew Union College, the first enduring modern rabbinical seminary in America and today the oldest and largest anywhere in the world.

When Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the founder of the College, came to Cincinnati shortly after mid-century, it was truly the Queen City of the West, the largest metropolis west of the Allegheny Mountains, and in 1860 the third largest city in the country: a bustling commercial entrepot on the busy Ohio River. It was also the center of learning for the West. Cincinnati College had been chartered as early as 1819 and since 1831 the city boasted a public high school as well. Jews had lived in Cincinnati since at least 1817. Attracted by the abundance of business opportunities, their numbers swelled to about 10,000 by the Civil War. Most of them came from the small towns of southern Germany, some from Poland and England. By the time Wise arrived, there were four congregations, two of them quite large: Bene Israel (founded in 1824) and Bene Yeshurun, the congregation to which Wise was called (founded in 1839). Though well established, Cincinnati Jewry was not yet affluent; that would come only after the war. But Cincinnati seemed clearly to be a city with a promising future and its Jewish community appeared certain to increase in size. Here Wise could flourish in an atmosphere still redolent with the pioneering spirit that so well
fit his own view of life. Here, where traditional ways of doing things were ever being challenged by new prospects, where a man was more admired for his achievements than for the profundity of his thought—here the irrepressible Wise could unleash the full energy of his spirit and hope to find a sympathetic, even enthusiastic response.2

He lost no time. In speedy succession Wise established himself securely not only as rabbi of his own congregation but for a time of Bene Israel as well. He founded and almost single-handedly edited two weekly newspapers, one in English and one in German, which spread his influence across the country. In October of 1855 he organized a conference of rabbis in Cleveland which adopted a very conservative platform intended to lay the groundwork for further efforts at unity within “American Israel.” Two years later he published his prayerbook Minhag America. One marvels at this amazing record of frenetic, productive activity! But despite Wise’s best efforts, the first two decades in Cincinnati did not yet bring about the unification of American Judaism under his own aegis that he was seeking so persistently. Nor did they bring to fruition his dream of founding a school for higher Jewish learning in the United States—though he had harbored that desire almost from the moment he first arrived upon these shores from his native Bohemia.

As early as 1848 Wise had called for a congregational union, deploring the lack of Jewish education and mentioning specifically the need for “better educated men to fill the pulpit.”3 But in this early period Wise was thinking rather of a general college under Jewish auspices, one which would teach secular as well as Jewish subjects and train young men for a variety of professions rather than for the rabbinate alone. As this was a time when large numbers of such denominational schools were being founded throughout the United States, but especially in the West, it is not surprising that the energetic and ambitious Wise should try his hand at establishing such an institution for the Jews very shortly after his arrival in Cincinnati. Using the day school of Bene Yeshurun as the basis, he hoped to create a “Hebrew College.” But when his Zion College, as the school was named, opened in the fall of 1855, it could boast only a handful of students and the most limited financial support. Jewish businessmen were not at all convinced that their children needed a college education to succeed, nor were supporters outside Cincinnati easily persuaded to contribute to Wise’s venture, especially as he acted without consulting them. When a financial panic struck in 1857, the sources of the college’s income dried up and the school ceased to exist. Thus Wise’s first effort to found an institution of higher learning failed totally. But the venture did teach him a twofold lesson: that a rabbinical seminary was the more necessary and feasible project and that such a seminary could only be supported by a pre-existing union of congregations brought into being specifically for that purpose.4

The first tangible step had already been taken on October 10, 1872 when Moritz Loth, the president of Wise’s congregation, recommended in his annual
report that Bene Yeshurun assume the initiative in establishing a congregational union. Together with four other Cincinnati synagogues it then issued a joint call for a general convention to take place in Cincinnati the following summer. Twenty-eight congregations from the West and South sent representatives. A constitution was adopted stating the Union's "primary object" was to establish a "Hebrew Theological Institute," its operation to be supported by dues of one dollar per member for each of the constituent congregations. A sinking fund, to be obtained from gifts and bequests, would be invested to provide additional income and security. It was decided that the Institute would open only after $60,000 had been collected; a building would be built once assets reached $160,000.5

When the first regular Council of the newly formed Union of American Hebrew Congregations met the following year in Cleveland, the amount which had been raised was a pitiful percentage of the goal laid down. The year 1873 had witnessed a financial panic of extraordinary severity and persistence which had affected the business interests of wealthier Jews. Though fifty-five congregations had now joined the Union, the prospects of gathering sufficient funds to open the College looked bleak indeed. The situation appeared no more promising at the second Council held in Buffalo in 1875. By now there were seventy-two congregations but the total assets as of June 30, 1875 barely exceeded $5,000. By any strict construction of the constitution the College should never have been opened that fall as planned. It was decided, however, to proceed nonetheless; the opening of the Preparatory Department was deemed not yet to be the "permanent establishment of the College."6 Thus the impressive exercises in the Plum Street Temple that fall diverted attention from the shaky financial condition of the incipient institution even while the festive oratory sought to inspire confidence in its success. The effect was apparently as desired, for in the following months generous contributions were made, especially by the Jews of Cincinnati. By December there was already a total accumulation of $64,000, though most of it was in as yet uncollected pledges.7 Thus within a few months after it had opened, the school could be considered "permanently established."

Wise had decided to begin the College with a single class, adding another one each successive year. The total program was to consist of eight years. Students were to spend the first four years in a Preparatory Department while taking classes concurrently at one of the public high schools, the second four in the Collegiate Department while studying at the recently municipalized University of Cincinnati. Thus the fall of 1875 found Wise, the unpaid president, along with an assistant, Solomon Eppinger, instructing a small class from four until six on weekday afternoons. Though Wise put the best face he could on the school's circumstances whenever he wrote of the College in the American Israelite or reported to the newly constituted Board of Governors,8 it really
As early as 1848 Rabbi Isaac Meyer Wise was concerned with the need for “better educated men to fill the pulpit.” But not until 1875 was Wise able to successfully launch his idea and found the Hebrew Union College. (Picture courtesy of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.)
A three story building on west Sixth Street in close proximity to the large Reform temples was purchased and served as home for the College for thirty years. (Picture courtesy of American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.)
amounted to little more than an intensive religious school. Recalling those first days two decades later, the founder wrote:

*There sat the wise men of Israel, namely the good old teacher Solomon Eppinger and fourteen noisy boys, most of whom had come only to kill time at the command of their parents. Four of them wanted to study; ten wanted to make noise.... No one who failed to see the embryonic college can imagine how ridiculous was this little hole-in-the-wall of a school in its not-too-bright cellar, carrying the pompous name of college. Fortunately we did not have to be ashamed in front of visitors, for none came.*

But with persistent effort the school slowly grew and, as a result, the need for some permanent quarters became apparent. After two years the classes were moved from the basement of the Mound Street Synagogue to that of Plum Street Temple, but these quarters, too, were deemed only temporary. When an attractive private mansion at a bargain price became available in 1880, the Union leaders decided to use their limited funds to purchase it for $25,250 and renovate it for instructional purposes. The building was located on west Sixth Street, at that time a most fashionable section of the city and in close proximity to the large Reform temples. Its design served the purposes of the College very well. Three stories in height, with an elegant free-stone front, the structure presented an impressive appearance, and once the name of the College was hewn above the entry in large gold letters, it gave the school an identity of its own and an aura of permanence which it had not previously enjoyed. On the first floor there was space for the rapidly expanding library as well as for a richly furnished president's office; on the second floor, bedrooms were turned into an adequate number of classrooms; and on the third floor a large hall was soon converted into a chapel. The building, which was dedicated on April 24, 1881, served H.U.C. for thirty years until at length it was deemed no longer of sufficient size and its location no longer desirable.

The students who entered the College were required to pass an examination in Hebrew reading and conjugation of regular Hebrew verbs. They had to be able to translate at sight any passage from the book of Genesis and were to be familiar with the history of Israel from Abraham to Zerubbabel. They also had to possess the qualifications for admission to a public high school. Considering the students' limited preparation upon entry, the small number of class hours per week available, and the fatigue of the students in the late afternoon after a full schedule at the high school, the curriculum devised for the Preparatory Department was remarkably, even absurdly ambitious. At the end of four years—and before beginning the Collegiate Department—a student was to have mastered Hebrew and Aramaic grammar, read in the original most of the Bible and large selections from the rabbinical literature, including portions from both the Babylonian and the Palestinian Talmuds, and to have familiarized
himself with the entire span of Jewish history.\textsuperscript{11}

Wise made every effort to fulfill the prescriptions of the curriculum. It was of great importance for the future of the school that scoffers, who had argued the impossibility of teaching classical Jewish texts to American youngsters, be proven wrong, and that traditionally inclined opponents find that the College's students were learning what had always been required of a rabbi. Thus in his regular reports to the Board of Governors, later printed in the \textit{American Israelite}, Wise was ever at pains to indicate precisely how many chapters of Psalms had been covered in the preceding month, how many pages of \textit{Mekhilta} (a rabbinical commentary to Exodus), and the like. In order that the achievements of the College's instruction be presented to the Jewish world at large, it was decided to employ a then common practice in American education: the public examination conducted by outside examiners. From 1877 until 1889 (when the task was given to the president and faculty), groups of three examiners were regularly appointed by the Union at its Councils. These panels, which included rabbis and laymen of varying points of view, repeatedly expressed appreciation of the school's accomplishments. Their only evident criticism was directed at Wise's over-ambition, which allowed students to begin study of talmudic writings when they had as yet insufficiently mastered the Pentateuch.\textsuperscript{12}

Though it is not possible to measure the quality of the students' learning in those early days, the quantity of material which in some fashion at least they managed to absorb is astounding when one considers the concurrent obligations (including classical and modern languages) at the high school and university. During the year 1883-84, for example, the senior class of the Collegiate Department actually read forty-nine full folio pages of Talmud, forty chapters of codes, and twenty chapters of the homiletical commentary Midrash Rabba; they also heard lectures on talmudic literature, methodology, and terminology. In Bible they read forty chapters of Ezekiel plus Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and a number of Minor Prophets; and in philosophy they did Joseph Albo's \textit{Book of Principles} and Saadia's \textit{Book of Beliefs and Opinions}. In addition, they wrote Hebrew compositions and heard regular lectures on Jewish history and theology.\textsuperscript{13} Finally, the senior year was also the time when students were required to write a rabbinical thesis and (though this requirement was eventually dropped) "stand final examination in all subjects of the collegiate course, read \textit{prima vista} (or after a short preparation) any part of the Hebrew Bible, the ancient Targumim \textsuperscript{[Aramaic translations]} and commentaries, Talmud, Midrash, Code, the philosophical and poetical literatures of the Hebrews..."\textsuperscript{14}

The quantitative achievements of the lower classes (at least on paper) were hardly less remarkable.

The faculty which taught according to this curriculum grew slowly as year after year was added on to the school and as funds became available. At the very
In 1879 Moses Mielziner joined the faculty as Professor of Talmud. Mielziner, undoubtedly one of the ablest modern talmudic scholars, developed a “scientific” method of presenting the Talmud which enabled students to read and explain very difficult passages in a very short time. (Picture courtesy of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.)
beginning there was only Wise himself along with the aforementioned Solomon Eppinger, an elderly teacher in Wise’s religious school who was the only one to receive a regular salary. Max Lilienthal, the rabbi of Bene Israel who joined the staff the second year to teach history, like Wise taught without compensation. During the initial period there was no figure of scholarly stature who was a regular member of the faculty; indeed none such was required to teach basic texts to the high school students who at first made up the entire student body. But with the opening of the Collegiate Department in 1879, the need for a full-time teacher of recognized credentials became imperative. Fortunately, Wise was able that year to persuade the capable Moses Mielziner to join the faculty as Professor of Talmud. Mielziner, who would teach at the Hebrew Union College for more than two decades, was undoubtedly the ablest modern talmudic scholar in the United States. Of even greater immediate significance, he possessed the ability to teach rabbinic sources in a fashion which made them meaningful to his students. Expounding the Talmud in English from the original text, as was done at the College, was pioneer task which required the development of a hitherto non-existent technical terminology. In this effort he was eminently successful. Mielziner also created a “scientific” method of presenting the Talmud which the examiners in 1884 praised for enabling students to read and explain some of the most difficult passages after an hour’s preparation. In his teaching he would also draw comparisons with Roman and modern law and would concentrate on subjects such as the marital laws, which seemed to be of particular contemporary relevance. 

Until the 1890’s, the other regular members of the faculty were of distinctly lesser stature. They consisted of whomever Wise could persuade to accept a teaching position at the meager salary offered by the Board of Governors. Some gained the respect of their students, others did not; one, Heinrich Zirndorf, who was the first regular professor of Jewish history, failed so egregiously in his teaching that students openly reviled him and the Board, after much acrimony, was eventually forced to dismiss him. Those faculty members who came toward the end of Wise’s presidency—Gotthard Deutsch in history, Max Margolis in Hebrew, Moses Buttenwieser in Bible—elevated the level of the College considerably, but Mielziner remained the senior scholar and the most important of the regular teachers during Wise’s presidency.

The faculty member’s lot in the early days of the College was not an enviable one. Compensated at from about half to only slightly more than the salaries earned by the first graduates, he was forced to accept other employment—preaching, editing, teaching religious school—in addition to the thirteen to sixteen hours per week spent in his classroom at the College. He possessed no tenure; each faculty member stood for yearly re-election by the Board of Governors. He enjoyed no pension or security other than what he could set aside on his own. Monthly, he was required to submit to the president a report of the material covered in his classes. By explicit ruling of the Board
of Governors he was prohibited from spending any portion of class time on "matters foreign to the instruction set for the respective hour" or to dismiss his classes before the bell. Lack of funds during the early years meant that the faculty was usually understaffed. Classes were combined and advanced students employed to do some of the more elementary teaching. In 1882-83, when the final eighth year of the school was added, the total faculty—diminished by a number of deaths—consisted of Mielziner, Eppinger, and Wise. In 1887, when the size of the student body for the first time demanded eight separately taught classes, there were still only five faculty members to teach them. In later years, one professor served as the "ordinarius" for each class, placing upon the shoulders of each faculty member responsibility for the welfare of a particular segment of the student body.

No less meager than the faculty were the size and quality of the Hebrew Union College library in the first years. Nearly all of the early books were gifts donated by friends around the country. Aside from an abundance of worn-out prayer-books, these contributions consisted mostly of bibles, mishnas (the first portion of the Talmud), Hebrew grammars and dictionaries. By the end of the first year there was a total of 103 usable volumes, all dutifully enumerated by Wise in his report to the Board of Governors. In the beginning, the books received little care. When the first catalogue was undertaken in 1878 it was discovered that seventy-two volumes had been lost or destroyed, constituting at that time a considerable percentage of the library's total holdings. Each student, we learn from a report, considered himself the librarian. At length, a faculty member was persuaded to take on the additional duties of supervising the library—for which he was paid the munificent salary of $50.00 per year. Not until 1878 did the Council of the Union authorize an appropriation specifically for the purchase of books. These funds, plus an increasing number of donations, thereupon enabled the library to grow very rapidly so that by 1881 it possessed 7,800 volumes, making it the largest Jewish library in the country. Its preeminence was permanently assured when Rabbi Samuel Adler upon his death in 1891 willed his private collection to the College. His rich assemblage of some 1,600 bound volumes and 300 pamphlets of Hebraica and Judaica was the first major acquisition to come into the College's possession, though smaller collections of some importance had been received earlier. By the end of the century, the Hebrew Union College library possessed more than 14,000 volumes, including a number of rare and precious works.

Of the students who attended Hebrew Union College during its first quarter century the majority by far were born in the United States. They came from poor families of German origins in the Midwest and South or were the wards of Jewish orphanages. Well-to-do Jewish parents would not hear of their sons entering a profession which was for the most part poorly paid and lacking in prestige. Becoming a rabbi was widely considered a last resort for a young man,
For the first two years students attended classes in the basement of the Mound Street Synagogue. (Picture courtesy of American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.)

Students attending H.U.C. during its early years benefited from "Wise" counsel and understanding of the faculty and the board of governors. (Picture from the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.)
appropriate only for someone who, as an Alabama congregation candidly wrote to the Board of Governors, "is not fit for anything else." Two of the Union's leaders in Cincinnati did in fact send their sons to the Preparatory Department for a time, but their intent seems to have been nothing more than to supply their progeny with an intensive Jewish education and to bolster the number of pupils. For serious students Wise was forced to turn to those families for whom the tuition-free education offered by the Hebrew Union College in conjunction with high school and university studies provided an opportunity they could not otherwise afford. In some cases Wise himself knew the parents from his wide-ranging and frequent trips to preach and to dedicate synagogues in the small towns of the Midwest; in other instances word of the new school had come through his two newspapers. Contact was also maintained with the Jewish orphan asylums and a scholarship offered to one student from each of them. As Wise's colleague, Max Lilienthal, had noted at the Opening Exercises, the composition of the student body was really quite in keeping with traditional precedent: "Our old rabbis have already said, thousands of years ago, 'Take care of the poor, they will be your scholars and your teachers.'" 24

Since the students were without means, they were supported financially by the Board of Governors which provided them with all necessities from books to clothing, food, and lodging. In fact, for the first four years of the College's existence the majority of its total budget was expended to care for these "indigent students," as they were called. In the course of their stay at the College, some of them tried to outgrow or forget their humble origins. A few anglicized their names; one amused a professor when in his presence he tried to prevent his father from gesticulating with his hands. 25

The age range of the students was such as to place the immature teenager at the same class table with the more grown-up, but in Jewish knowledge ignorant, older pupil. In the year 1876-77, the lowest grade had nine students ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-eight. Although in 1888 the Board of Governors passed a resolution to make fifteen the minimum age for admission, it was not consistently observed and an age range from fourteen to twenty in a single grade still existed as late as 1896. Finally, in 1898, the age for admission was raised to sixteen years. 26

Most of the students were quartered in a boarding house or else lived with Cincinnati families whose children they sometimes tutored. Their lodgings were closely supervised by a committee of the Board of Governors. Life in such a boarding house, as one occupant later recalled it, was hardly luxurious. Students lived four in a room on the third floor, slept together in trundle beds and sometimes had to study in their overcoats for want of proper heating. Aside from the beds, their furniture consisted of four kitchen chairs, one table, and a single study lamp. In the morning the students were aroused by a bell and assembled downstairs while one of their number rushed through the Hebrew prayers as speedily as possible. The food was cheap and poorly cooked,
so that whatever spending money students had went for eating in restaurants. When one of them needed clothing, he went to a particular member of the Board of Governors who owned a wholesale clothing business and who upon seeing him would bluster loudly: "What again?"27

Explicit rules and regulations closely governed the life of the student in his boarding house. He was required to rise daily at 6:15 during the winter months and at 5:45 during the summer (though he might rise as early as 4:00 if he desired to study). Ten o'clock was mandatory bedtime for those in the Preparatory Department. eleven for those in the College. Students were cautioned against boisterous talking and laughing at meals and to avoid physical quarrels. The superintendent of the house reported monthly to the Board of Governors on the deportment of the young men under his charge. The College building, too, had its rules: students were allowed to enter only by the side entrance; they were cautioned not to deface the property, open mail addressed to the College, or visit the president’s room in his absence. Only one book at a time might be taken out of the library except by permission of the president of the Board of Governors. Teachers in all classes reported regularly not only on student progress but also on attendance and behavior in the classroom.28

Such rules, however, were often broken. This was an age in which the authorities of every school tried to exercise strict control over their charges and in which students frequently engaged in rebellion, malicious pranks, and even violence against instructors and college presidents29 Hebrew Union College students were no different from their compers in other institutions. Wise and Mielziner seem to have suffered little from their diabolical imaginations but others were not so fortunate, especially those whose fiery tempers presented a particular challenge to student incitement or whose accents called forth a talented mimicry.30

In those days the Hebrew Union College was a family in a very real sense, not merely in the metaphoric one in which the term was often later used. Each student from outside the city had one member of the Board who was declared his legal guardian during his stay at the College31 The faculty, the president, and to the largest extent the board exercised a parental role toward the students, and they, in turn, replied with all the ambiguities of love and rebellion that characterize such a relationship. Wise, as a rule, was gentle and understanding in his treatment of students, thus earning their love and respect. But his posture was possible only because the Board of Governors chose to exercise discipline directly. Students delinquent in their studies or guilty of misconduct were frequently summoned before the board and given a reprimand by its president or occasionally even expelled. In 1892 a particularly severe breach of discipline produced a memorable scene. Saturday afternoon, April 9th, all the local members of the Board of Governors, faculty (except for Wise), and student body gathered in the College chapel after the service to hear the president of the board solemnly exhort the students to perform the duties expected of them in the
College vis-a-vis their teachers and the Board of Governors, all of whom were ever ready to aid them. He then publicly reprimanded two students for being involved in a brawl and reduced one of them to a lower grade for a year as punishment. Another student, he announced, had failed to pass his examinations satisfactorily and consequently had been stricken from the roll.  

The pressure under which students labored and their sometimes difficult personal adjustment to the life of the College produced one notable tragedy in those early years. A deeply disturbed student, who had left the school in 1889 after apparent misconduct, was allowed to reenter a year later. He and a younger pupil who came under his influence entered into a suicide pact and together one day each of them shot himself. Although a note signed by both students explained that they had been treated kindly by everyone at the College and that they did not hold the institution responsible for their act, hostile Jewish newspapers chose to blame the College. At a funeral service held in the H.U.C. library the president of the Board of Governors eulogized them morallyistically, saying “they were wrong, . . . these poor, misguided friends.”

Yet if life at the College had its rigors and even its tragedies, if the students were often more children than prospective religious leaders, the Board of Governors more stern disciplinarians than enlightened educators, there was much that characterized the College in those days which inspires admiration. Academically, every effort was made to maintain a demanding curriculum. Socially, a spirit of close unity prevailed, perhaps especially because the school was a pioneering venture which outsiders so often called into question. The students took pride in the accomplishments of their alumni and a deep feeling of fellowship existed among them; there were “close companionships and devoted friendships.”

At the very beginning Wise created a literary society for the students which he called Atzile Bene Yisrael ("Noble Sons of Israel") and which was later divided into two sections for students of the Preparatory and Collegiate Departments. These societies met weekly for debates, declamations, music, and drama. Though students seem to have enjoyed this activity, participation in the societies was mandatory, and their secretaries were even required to hand in monthly reports to the secretary of the faculty. Not until the last decade of Wise’s presidency did students become more independent and desirous of taking their own initiatives. In 1896—on their own responsibility and without financial assistance from the Board of Governors—they founded the first College periodical: the H.U.C. Journal, published monthly during the school year until 1903. Students, faculty, alumni, and friends of the College contributed to this new venture. In most lively fashion its pages reflected the major issues of the day. The Dreyfus case, Zionism, and Sunday sabbath observance were discussed there along with American phenomena bearing on Judaism such as the number of Jews attracted to the appearances of the agnostic orator Robert Ingersoll or the controversy over the teaching of Bible in the public schools.
There were also précis of sermons given in chapel, book reviews, and scholarly papers. The students' level of thought and expression, as evidenced by the Journal, was remarkably high; their tone was serious and thoughtful, neither flippant nor sophomoric.

In those same years students were also exposed to occasional lectures delivered by prominent Jews not associated with the Reform movement: the novelist Israel Zangwill suggested to them that on account of its poetic beauty the ancient liturgy should remain unchanged, and Hirsch Maslianski, the famous Jewish nationalist preacher, on two occasions addressed the students in Hebrew. In this period, too, we find the first evidence of student social concern when one student urged his fellows to form a "College Settlement" on the model of the one run by the University of Cincinnati and to spend their spare time leading societies, clubs, and classes among the Jewish poor of the city.

A regular weekly religious service took place on Saturday afternoons following an hour of classes. It was held in the chapel on the third floor and attended by all students and faculty, often, as well, by members of the Board of Governors. Students of the junior year conducted the service while seniors gave the sermon. The speakers were required to submit their speeches in advance to the professor of homiletics for corrections while readers had to hold a rehearsal before the professor of liturgy on the preceding day. During the services kaddish (the memorial prayer) was read at the anniversary of the death of College benefactors, some of whom had made the reading a stipulation in presenting their gifts.

The student sermon and reading were frankly regarded by Wise as "examinations in homiletics" and as such they served a valuable pedagogic function for the preacher and reader. But it is interesting to note that the question of the role of the chapel service in the life of the College—so much agitated in later years—had become an issue in some minds even before the turn of the century. In April 1899, Wise's assistant at Bene Yeshurun, Louis Grossmann, a graduate of the College and later its professor of ethics, suggested in the H.U.C. Journal that it was "not quite congruous with a high sense of religiousness to turn worship into an academic exercise" and expressed doubt as to whether the weekly services "contribute much toward the development and intensification of the Jewish spirit in the students ...." The student service, he added, should be "a religious experience that goes deep down into the heart of each one of those who attend it, as much as of those who officiate in it." If there was a desire for religious ecstasy and spiritual strengthening, he concluded, then the service would have to be a "communion" shared in by all, professors as well as students.

In view of the rigors of the curriculum, it is not surprising that a great many of the early students did not complete the course of studies. Some were eliminated when they failed to pass their examinations in the high school or university, others were dismissed for academic weakness at the College or for
Although seven of the original dozen or so students graduated from the Preparatory Department in 1879, only four students persevered all the way to ordination in 1883. (Picture courtesy American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.)
breach of College discipline. Still others left of their own free will to seek careers in more lucrative occupations. Of the dozen or so regular students in the first class of the school, seven made it to graduation from the Preparatory Department, celebrated for the first time in 1879. They received the degree of Bachelor of Hebrew Literature (later: Letters) with the Hebrew title: *haver le-atzile bene yisrael.*

Fewer students persevered all the way to ordination. Of the original class, only four were ordained at the first such exercises, held on July 11, 1883. Yet though the number of graduates was small, their ordination—far more than the opening ceremony eight years earlier—was an occasion for genuine rejoicing. It was first time in the history of American Jewry that such an event had taken place. Once again Plum Street Temple was filled to capacity and ablaze with lights; once again there was resounding music and festive oratory. Among the guests gathered within the richly ornamented shrine were representatives from seventy-six congregations, concurrently celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Union. Wise, who had taught the graduates personally for eight years and knew each of them intimately, pressed the "kiss of ordination" upon every forehead, gave each one his blessing, and proclaimed: "In the name of God and by the authority of the Governors and of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and in the name of all good men, I declare you to be rabbis of the Jewish faith, that you may preach the Word of God to the people, that you may be patriots in America and standard-bearers of the people." Each graduate received a rabbinical diploma in Hebrew and in English bestowing upon him the privileges of rabbi and teacher. According to one observer, many were the tears of joy that were shed and more than one of the rabbis present were heard to exclaim: *ashre ayin ra'ata kol ele* —"Happy the eye that saw all these things!" Thus with this first ceremony of ordination, Hebrew Union College passed the initial milestone in a history that has now stretched a full hundred years.

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(1) *American Israelite*, October 8, 1875.
(3) *Occident*, VI (1848), 433.
(8) In the *American Israelite* for October 22, 1875, he wrote: "No college of this kind has ever opened with a larger class or with better talent. We feel perfectly satisfied with the start, which appears very promising to us, as regards both number and talent, and when among the class feel as happy as a king:"
(10) *UAHCP*, II (1879-85), 928, 933-38; David Philipson, *My Life as an American Jew* (Cincinnati, 1941), p. 12. In 1878, the school adopted a seal, proposed by Wise, with two mottos: *hatom tora belimudai* ("Seal the instruction among My disciples": Isaiah 8:16) and *ha-boker or* ("The morning's light": Genesis 44:3). The stationery was inscribed with *shalom rav le-ohave toratekha* ("Great peace have they that love Thy law": Psalms 119:165).
(11) *UAHCP*, I, 148-49. A later, somewhat more modest curriculum is to be found in *Programme of the Hebrew Union College, 1894-1895*, pp. 15-16. This is the first regular catalogue that was issued.
(14) *Programme*, p. 20.
(16) *UAHCP*, I, 640-41.
(17) Clifton Harby Levy, "How Well I Remember," *Liberal Judaism*, June 1950, p. 33; Gotthard Deutsch Diary [in German], December 19, 1893, AJA; Board of Governor Minutes (preserved in the safe of the H.U.C. - J.I.R., Cincinnati), July 2, 1889, September 9, 1890 (these minutes are cited only for items not included in *UAHCP*); Zirndorf Papers, AJA Box 2288.
(18) During 1882-83, Mielziner, the highest paid member of the faculty, received $2400 per year; Solomon Eppinger earned only $1200. The first ordinees each received $2000 (Maximilian Heller to his parents, November 25, 1883, Heller Papers, AJA).
(19) *UAHCP*, II, 993; III (1886-91), 1901; Board of Governors Minutes, April 1, 1890.
(20) *UAHCP*, I, 231-34.
(21) The original copy is in the AJA. It appeared in print in 1879.
(22) Board of Governor Minutes, September 2, 1878.
(25) Deutsch Diary, June 19, 1897.
(26) *UAHCP*, I, 339; III, 2208; V, 3900; Reports to the Board of Governors of the College by Isaac M. Wise, May 4, 1896 – January 30, 1900, AJA Documents Files.
(28) Minutes of the Board of Governors, November 4, 1878; *UAHCP*, III, 2360-62.

(30) *Telling Tales Out of School*, ed. Stanley R. Brav (Cincinnati, 1965), pp. 5-6, 61, 63.

(31) *UAHCP*, II, 1006-7. The reason for this action, however, was to gain resident status and hence free tuition at the high school and university (*ibid.*, V, 3967).


(33) *UAHCP*, III 2746-48; *American Israelite*, March 12, 1891.


(35) *UAHCP*, I, 229; II, 1490.

(36) A hectograph version of the *H.U.C. Journal*, on a much lower level, appeared for three issues from January through March 1896. The printed magazine began to appear in October of the same year. When requested to endorse the Journal to the public, the Board of Governors refused to do so and indicated that it "did not wish to be understood as being in any degree responsible, financially or otherwise, for the publication ...." (*Board of Governor Minutes, Executive Session, April 6, 1897*).

(37) *H.U.C. Journal*, III (1898-99), 36, 72, 208.

(38) *UAHCP*, I, 317; III, 2362.


(41) *UAHCP*, II, 1041; *Board of Governors Minutes*, June 30, 1879.


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Once again Plum Street Temple was filled to capacity for the ordination ceremony of the first graduates. It was an occasion for genuine rejoicing as each of the four graduates received his "kiss of ordination" and rabbinical diploma.