In 1852 the Bene Israel congregation erected a new synagogue on Broadway and Sixth streets. It became known as "the Broadway Schuhl."
Am I My Brother’s Keeper: Reform Judaism in the American West, Cincinnati, 1840-1870

Alan I. Marcus

Today the congregation of Bene Israel is commonly known as Rockdale Temple and the congregation of Bene Yeshurun is known as the Isaac M. Wise Temple.

Mid-nineteenth century Americans zealously pursued the cause of reform. Calling for the application of Christian tenets to contemporary life, crusaders launched evangelical attacks on intemperance and slavery, established institutions for the humane treatment of the destitute and disabled, and even tinkered with the responsibilities of city government. Behind this flurry of reformist activity lay the oft repeated revelation that the contemporary situation—modern life—was more complex than earlier times and posed problems much more serious. As a consequence of this view, reformers deemed radical measures necessary to restore the tranquility that seemed to mark the past.

The movement to secularize Christianity and to bring its fruits to bear on modern life was not the sole thrust of reform during the middle period. Many American Jews also dealt in reform, embracing change to suit the modern world. While these men and women were not immune to their age’s infectious spirit, their endeavors cannot be attributed to any enthusiasm for Christian principles. Nor did they generally advocate reform in a context similar to the Christian countrymen. Although America’s Jews engaged in many conventional reformist enterprises, they usually reserved the term reform for religious matters. Reform in Judaism meant adapting the form and, ultimately, the laws of the Mosaic religion to make them appear seemly and in concert with mid-nineteenth century American life. In short, they sought to effect a secularization of the trappings of their religion so as to put it in line with the modern age.

Such a grand scheme contained hidden dangers. As reform Judaism sentiment was introduced, disputes over the religion’s “true” tenets arose. Within American congregations, the drive to secularize Judaism’s form often produced sectarianism as proponents of reform confronted adherents of tradition. The emergence of sectarianism created a crisis among Jewish congregations of unprecedented proportions, a crisis not dissimilar to that encountered by America’s Protestant churches over the slavery issue. Like the churches, which broke into Northern and Southern entities—each of which claimed to be doing God’s work and holding to His laws—Jewish congregations on the question of reform threatened to and frequently actually did split asunder. And like the North and the South, Jewish modernists and traditionalists did battle for the hearts and minds of the Jewish community.

Sometimes these sectarian tensions left institutional or architectural monuments. As Leon Jick, a prominent historian of American Jewry, has noted, established congregations in virtually every American city constructed new synagogue buildings during the 1850’s and 1860’s. Indeed, the erection of glorious new edifices were one way that traditionalists and reformers waged war. The prospect of a new, bright structure bade fare to convert doubters to the congregation’s cause, enlist defectors, and attract non-aligned Jews. Often, however, the opening of a new building merely escalated the stakes. Antagonists frequently deflected the congregation’s onslaught with a magnificent new synagogue of their own. This counteroffensive placed the initial congregation in a difficult position. It had to face the unhappy choice of conceding defeat or of closing their recently created facility and building an even more prestigious and modern one.

Such was the case in Cincinnati. In 1853, Congregation Bene Israel (Rockdale Temple) consecrated a splendid new synagogue. Taking nearly two years to complete and costing in excess of $50,000, the congregation celebrated by opening the building’s doors to the city’s press, public officials, and prominent citizens. Yet Bene Israel’s jubilation did not last long. Ten years later, the congregation deemed their building unsuitable, planned to abandon the structure, and embarked upon a building fund drive for a new building?

That a Cincinnati congregation was a prime

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battle site in the war between modernists and traditionalists ought not to surprise. The city's location at the terminus of the two major immigration pathways certainly helped enjoin the fight. Cincinnati not only received Jewish immigrants that had come through New York—some of whom had spent considerable time in England and maintained a staunch traditionalism—but it also welcomed Jews that had entered America through New Orleans. In addition, the city served as the home of the two leading lights of American reform Judaism, Isaac Mayer Wise and Max Lilienthal. Wise is generally acknowledged as the father of reform Judaism in America, but Lilienthal's efforts were only slightly less significant. While Wise articulated grandiose plans—the establishment of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati stood as the culmination of one scenario—Lilienthal repeatedly and enthusiastically assisted Wise in carrying out his endeavors. The connection between the two men did not originate in Cincinnati, moreover. It had begun in Germany and Wise had stayed for some time at Lilienthal's New York house after he first landed in America.

Like its two Cincinnati leaders, reform Judaism had its roots in early nineteenth century Germany. As the invisible walls surrounding Jewish ghettos came tumbling down and as Jews began to fall more directly under the sway of non-Jewish potentates, several German Jewish intellectuals urged their co-religionists to effect a similar transformation of religious rites. These romantic reformers wanted to modify the Jewish liturgy to fit more comfortably with newly accessible German society. They made little headway, however. The long tradition of linking religious and civil power within the Jewish ghettos proved an insurmountable barrier. It had created an established ruling group of rabbis, who were already smarting from the efforts of secular princes to capture their civil powers. These rabbis vehemently opposed change in religious matters. They took the reformers' suggestions as further assaults on their authority, complained that liturgical changes would destroy the essence of Judaism, and generally managed to quash overt attempts to tamper with religious customs. To the German rabbinate, modernity might well yield changes in civil authority—in any case, rabbis proved virtually powerless to prevent it—but the group drew the line at religion. It held that modernization had no religious underpinnings.

While reform Judaism advocates in Germany had their paths blocked and lacked a malleable constituency, their counterparts in mid-nineteenth century America encountered no such obstacles. Reform Judaism found a ready market in America, requiring only advertising to blossom in the New World. In this instance, de Tocqueville's references to democracy and free institutions proved especially apt. And no where did the ground seem more fertile for reform Judaism than in the west. Following metaphorically from Lyman Beecher's *A Plea For The West*, the territory appeared even more flexible and promising than the east because it stood as a land without a past. It rested as a place unencumbered by established institutions. For Jews, de Tocqueville's and Beecher's sentiments acquired a more particularistic meaning. While America remained free of the plague of an entrenched ruling rabbinate, the west's promise was more apparent. Virtually none of its congregations was headed by a rabbi or even an individual with a smattering of rabbinical training; for reformers, the west seemed virgin land.
To reformers, the American west appeared to possess manifest advantages. That idea ought not to be construed as an indication that reformers could take their German notions and transfer them directly to the American soil. To be sure, changing the form of the Judaic religion to suit modern Germany was a task drastically different from translating Judaism to fit modern American life. Although the assumption that modern America bore little resemblance to modern Germany enabled reformers to view the American west as an appropriate locus of reform, it also caused them to adjust their plans to match their new land. Also, reformers quickly realized that in one sense the west never was as virginal as they would have liked. Although the section lacked rabbis, it did house a number of established Jewish congregations, the memberships of which were composed primarily of Jews from countries other than Germany. These non-Germanic Jews usually maintained a perspective quite unlike that of reformers. They argued that by and large traditional Judaism suited their modern American situation well; American traditionalists suggested that to modify Judaism's form significantly was tantamount to abandoning its tenets.

Despite their deference to tradition, few of these non-German Jews adhered unbendingly to a traditionalism that would have satisfied or pleased their European cousins. They occasionally dispensed with or amended apparently insignificant or inconvenient Jewish customs. And the lack of absolute rigidity—enforced in Europe by the rabbinate—ultimately provided the entree from which reformers were able to capitalize. Reform sentiment did not overwhelm established western congregations so much as infiltrate them. The conversion of traditional congregations into reform ones occurred slowly and in stages. The transformation revolved around a series of skirmishes, often recurring and frequently without apparent resolution, the net result of which was to move congregations, sometimes imperceptibly, farther from traditional Jewish tenets. Eased away from their previously held beliefs, these congregations found the pressure to make additional compromises almost intolerable. But while the pressure increased, resistance to further change generally diminished. Each step in the reform process seemed relatively minor and the decision to compromise in the first instance many times spawned a greater willingness to go down the same road again. And after a number of these compromises, congregations discovered that they had been completely compromised. They had embraced reform.

Prior to the arrival of substantial numbers of German Jews, traditional Jews in the American west had it all their own way. And without the conflict of reformist thought, peace reigned within each city's Jewish community. In the case of Cincinnati, Bene Israel (Rockdale Temple) was the city's only congregation and served as the sole focus of the community's Jews. Established in 1824, Bene Israel exemplified the pattern of early nineteenth century western congregations. It had no rabbi and employed a liturgy taken from Poland. This liturgy emphasized traditional Jewish principles, the basis of which was found in the traditional religious service. In the wake of the great German influx of the 1830's, however, harmony within Bene Israel did not long persist. By the middle of the congregation's second decade, sectarian tensions had begun to appear. Disagreement revolved around the service. Led by several congregants who had recently emigrated from Germany, a faction of Bene Israel protested the continued use of the Polish liturgy and demanded its replacement. Their arguments failed to convert many of their brethren, though, and rather than engage in a fight that they could not win, they chose to switch. In 1841 these renegades withdrew from Bene Israel, formed a rival congregation, Bene Yeshurun (Isaac M. Wise Temple), and rented a building to function as a synagogue. There they worshipped according to the "rites, customs, and usages" of more modern German Judaism. They also set about to recruit other Jews to their cause.
Bene Israel downplayed at first the threat posed by Bene Yeshurun. The established congregation's records suggest that its initial reaction was to ignore the new entity, reasoning no doubt that if it treated the rebels with patience and understanding they would soon return home. By early 1844, however, that approach to their wayward brothers no longer seemed tenable. The explanation was clear. Their numbers bolstered by the continuing immigration of German Jews to Cincinnati, the German congregation's trustees embarked upon a more menacing course; they created a subscription committee to raise funds to construct a house of worship. The trustees' decision to build a new synagogue structure increased the stakes of the defection. It seemed likely to place Bene Yeshurun on a par with Bene Israel, to siphon support from the established congregation, and to attract the bulk of immigrant Jews to the new, progressive congregation's fold.

Bene Israel did not stand idle, but met the thrust with an overture of its own. It did not contemplate building a new synagogue, though. Instead, the congregation sought a reconciliation within Bene Israel. In November 1844, it drafted a formal proposal urging the reunification of the two congregations under Bene Israel's banner. The interests of Cincinnati's Jews would be furthered, members of the English congregation argued, if the two groups worked "hand in hand for the future transactions of congregational business" so as "to unite the two congregations into one congregation."

Bene Yeshurun's trustees took the matter under advisement and promised to bring it before the entire congregation at the semi-annual business meeting. Prior to submitting the measure, however, the trustees attached several propositions to the proposal, each of which would have negated Bene Israel's intentions. The effect of these riders was to insure that any such agreement not be cast as a take-over but as a merger of full and equal partners. To this end, the trustees stipulated that any arrangement must result in the creation of a new congregation. It had to begin with the abrogation of the charters of the two congregations and the formation of a committee, comprised of equal members from both parties, to draw up a new document. They also stated that both congregations would have to give their ready cash and property to the new body and that all officers elected prior to the merger would be permitted to receive full pay for their terms.

Even with the inclusion of these conditions, members of Bene Yeshurun refused to consent to the merger. Not only did they retain their grievances against Bene Israel, but the establishment of the subscription committee had fortified both their position and resolve. The prospect of constructing a new synagogue had worked its magic. It had encouraged wealthy and influential Jews to come over to Bene Yeshurun and the congregation's new solvency enabled its members to spurn the older group's advances. Instead of rejoining Bene Israel, the German congregation purchased a lot in the north central part of the city, hired an architect and a contractor, and approved plans to erect a modest building, laying the cornerstone in fall 1846.

Despite Bene Yeshurun's apparent commitment to carry on alone, Bene Israel tried one last time to absorb its rival. When Bene Israel broached the subject again in 1847, it cleverly couched its scheme by initially suggesting only that the two congregations join to purchase burial ground. Bene Yeshurun's members were not taken in, however, but recognized that Bene Israel's ultimate objective remained to take over their congregation. To establish their position firmly in the English congregation's mind, they ordered their trustees plainly "to let Bene Israel know [that] we will not unite with them." Bene Yeshurun then went further. As if to demonstrate its independence from Bene Israel and its leadership among Cincinnati's Jews, the congregation advertised outside the city for a reader-lecturer to lead Sabbath services. Several well-qualified men applied for the post and the congregation selected James K. Gutheim, later the head of a New Orleans synagogue, a man not unfriendly to reform, and arguably the most learned Jew in the American west.

The appointment of a nationally prominent reader-lecturer was a new move for a Cincinnati congregation and hit members of Bene Israel with considerable force. It placed the older congregation on the defensive precisely because it permitted Bene Yeshurun to assert that it led the city's Jewry, that it alone provided for the development of its members and that it alone was a dynamic, growing institution. Nonetheless, Bene Israel found itself able to counter this turn of events and it did so in a most unusual fashion. It also hired Gutheim and, since he then served both congregations, neutralized the German congregation's temporary advantage.

Competition between the two congregations was rekindled in September 1848, as Bene Yeshurun dedicated its new synagogue. Although much fanfare marked the dedication ceremony and although many notable Cincinnatians received invitations to the festivities, the Bene Israel congregation was not formally asked to attend the affair. Bene Yeshurun attributed its snub to the failure of the
older congregation to enlist in the building drive, and Bene Israel soon responded to the affront with one of its own. It publicly called for the establishment of a federation of Cincinnati Jews that would operate with the leaders of Bene Israel at the helm and would offer a “unified approach” to religious matters so as to maintain orthodoxy. This new organization would check backsliding among the city’s Jews, a condition members of Bene Israel suggested was particularly prevalent in the Bene Yeshurun camp. It would both improve “our religious polity” and “elevate our co-religionists to the standard they are destined to occupy.”

While Bene Israel called for a Jewish federation to keep pressure on its rival, that was not the only step it took. To demonstrate its primacy in the lives of Cincinnati’s Jews and to entice others to join, the congregation resolved in 1849 to construct a grand new synagogue, far outshining Bene Yeshurun’s humble effort. It created a building committee to expedite matters and the new body undertook several important tasks. It sought and received an amendment to Bene Israel’s charter allowing the congregation to increase its property holdings, purchased a piece of land just north of its existing building, at the southeast corner of Sixth and Broadway, and began to enlist financial support for the construction of the new building.

Bene Israel’s leaders envisioned a structure so elegant as to leave little doubt about which congregation headed the city’s Jews. Its magnificence would serve as a source of constant embarrassment to Bene Yeshurun, a painful reminder of its members’ ill fated decision to abandon and, later, shun the English congregation. Indeed, the scope and sophistication of the building far surpassed anything ever attempted by Cincinnati’s Jewish community. It also exceeded the community’s ability to pay. That factor seems to have been anticipated, but it failed to cause concern. Of course, the building committee did what it could to raise money in Cincinnati. For example, it sold the unoccupied portion of the congregation’s burial ground and sought to borrow money from members and others at low interest and without collateral. But from the start the committee realized that its local fund raising efforts would never suffice. As a consequence, it solicited funds from areas outside of Cincinnati. It not only pleaded for donations from Jews in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York, but the committee also appointed a representative to travel to Europe and to raise money there.

That these extra Cincinnati efforts would not prove successful apparently did not cross the committee’s mind. Perhaps that was because it possessed a virtually unsailable selling point, one that would draw backing from almost any traditional congregation. Put baldly, the committee made the case that the future of traditional Judaism in the American west depended directly on Bene Israel’s skill in putting down Bene Yeshurun’s insurgency; if the Queen City of the West fell to reformers, other cities in the region would surely topple. These sentiments appeared to have carried the day. Many east coast traditional synagogues as well as some European ones contributed to the Cincinnati congregation’s building drive and by late 1851, Bene Israel stood poised to commence construction.

From that point, work on the building progressed quickly and smoothly. Designed in conjunction with the congregation by the noted Cincinnati architect, Robert A. Love, a devotee of the eclectic style, the foundation was completed in February 1852. Two months later, the cornerstone was laid, and in September 1853, the synagogue was consecrated. And the new building was as glorious as its sponsors had intended.
The new synagogue was a three-story monument to American eclecticism and to traditional Judaism. Possessing a fifty-seven-foot frontage on Broadway, it stood ninety feet deep and was seventy feet high. The imposing structure possessed several prominent features including a serpentine-like roof line, nine capped, attenuated vertical elements which were suggestive of Moorish minarets, elongated windows draped by a curving hood mold similar to those associated with Spanish colonial architecture of a stylized baroque character, a Tudor gothic door, and a gable overlooking the entrance. The interior was equally impressive. Its prime attraction was the sanctuary, which was used only for religious services and was constructed and furnished according to orthodox Jewish tradition. It was topped by a vaulted ceiling fully fifty-one feet above the floor and surrounded except on the east end by a double-tiered gallery, reserved exclusively for women and small children. In the middle of the ceiling hung two chandeliers, each of which had 1,800 burners and was decorated by a set of gold leaves resembling a wreath. Additional light was provided by a series of plain gilt gas fixtures lining the gallery's walls.

The sanctuary floor itself was limited to men, who purchased their pews. At the east end of the sanctuary stood the dais, which was laid with ingrain carpeting and which contained the synagogue's tabernacle—hidden from view by rich damask curtains—two marble slabs used as podiums, and several upholstered chairs for the congregation's religious leaders. Behind the dais was an immense panel of fresco and other ornamental work, enclosed by a heavy molding in imitation olive mottled marble. In the upper arch of this panel were two tablets of stone on which the ten commandments were embossed in gold Hebrew lettering. Above the commandments was a field of azure, with thin clouds and gold stars. Still higher was a gold-lettered Hebrew inscription surrounded by a halo.

While the decision to construct the splendid new structure added over twenty members to the congregation and helped it place Bene Yeshurun on the defensive, it could not be labeled a total success. Ironically, the campaign for the new building also exposed tensions within Bene Israel. The drive to beat back the modernists of Bene Yeshurun yielded the acknowledgment that Bene Israel itself was beset by internecine rivalries and that those rivalries also turned on the question of whether traditional religious practice suited life in mid-nineteenth century America. Indeed, members of Bene Israel found themselves in the early 1850's unable to agree on such simple matters as a reader for the synagogue—the reader shared with Bene Yeshurun had moved to Louisville—and disputed over the establishment of a Sunday school. The Sunday school fight was particularly bitter, and like the congregation's decision to discharge several subsequent readers, emerged as a consequence of the split between Bene Israel's modernists and traditionalists. When in 1852 modernists created the Sunday school, they were attacked by more traditional members of the congregation as "following [the] institutions of the Gentiles." The congregation's trustees should make amends for the modernists' action, they continued, by forming a Hebrew school scheduled to meet on Saturday afternoons—the Jewish sabbath—and by barring from the new school any child attending on Sunday. After much debate, the trustees tabled the issue.

Though often acrimonious, the disputes between traditionalists and modernists both within and without Bene Israel during the 1840's and 1850's pale when compared to those unleashed in the years after the arrival on
The synagogue featured a serpentine-line roof line, elongated windows draped by a curving hood mold associated with Spanish architecture and a Tudor gothic door.
Queen City Heritage

the scene of Isaac Mayer Wise. A radical modernizer, whipping boy for traditionalists, and rabbi to an Albany congregation, Wise received an invitation from Bene Yeshurun in 1853 to present a series of lectures. The timing of the decision to invite Wise reflected the exacerbation of tensions as well as Bene Yeshurun's declining fortunes, moreover, for it coincided with the planned consecration of the Broadway synagogue and was issued to draw attention from that event. The announcement of the series failed to arouse the anticipated interest, however, and Bene Yeshurun adopted another approach to offset Bene Israel's advantage. It learned that Wise had a falling out with his Albany congregation and, although he was not scheduled to come to the Queen City to deliver his lectures for almost two months, seized upon the opportunity to tender him an offer to serve as its rabbi.24

Wise accepted the post less than two weeks later and outlined his ambitions for Bene Yeshurun. He claimed to be "a friend of bold plans and great schemes" and promised to "elevate [Bene Yeshurun] to a model congregation for the west and south." Wise did not disappoint his sponsors either during his scheduled visit to Cincinnati—he had to return to Albany and was unable to assume the pulpit in the west until mid-1854—or in the first months of his tenure as rabbi. Through his skillfulness as a lecturer, the dynamism of his personality, and the significance of his scholarly reputation, Wise proved successful in rejuvenating Bene Yeshurun's sagging prospects, even publishing the American Israelite to serve as the chief English-language organ for the modernization movement. The future seemed so bright for Bene Yeshurun, in fact, that its president congratulated the congregation on commencing "a most glorious enterprise in electing Wise," while offering a not so veiled reference to its rival. Bene Yeshurun, he argued, "has begun and carried forward... an improvement that other congregations much older and possessing greater advantages than herself [are] unwilling to undertake."25

Wise's appointment produced much anxiety and consternation among Bene Israel's members. Their inability to choose a reader—much less a rabbi—coupled with Wise's prominence, combined to pose yet another menace to the congregation's survival. His attractiveness threatened to draw Jews to Bene Yeshurun and to relegate Bene Israel to secondary status. And as they had done in the case of Gutheim, Bene Israel's members chose to meet the challenge of Wise's selection in a most unorthodox manner. They did not pursue a scholar/politician of equal prominence to act as their rabbi, but instead responded to the situation by asking Wise also to preside over their congregation. He assented to the request, but Bene Yeshurun balked at the move. To prevent Bene Israel from taking this course, the German congregation had signed Wise to an exclusive contract, one that prohibited him from accepting an outside offer. Bene Israel tried initially to find some way to circumvent the contract's exclusivity, but it failed to devise a workable scheme. Bene Israel finally abandoned the gambit a few weeks later, and, as a consequence, Bene Yeshurun retained Wise's services exclusively for itself.26

Bene Israel's decision to go after Wise was extraordinary, but it provided an excellent example of the process of reform in the American west. Reformers generally did not seize immediate control of established congregations. Rather, they gained acceptance as their notions infiltrated into a congregation; the congregation tended to move gradually and often grudgingly towards reform. Only in the face of an ad hoc situation that appeared to imperil a traditional congregation's claim of superiority within a city's Jewish community did reform take great strides. Bene Yeshurun's designation of Wise as its rabbi was just such a case. Bene Israel's members never again could say they were untouched by reform. Still, Bene Israel's choice did not signal that the congregation had acquiesced completely to the reformers. Instead, it probably indicated that members were willing to adopt some changes but remained confident of their ability to restrain what they recognized as Wise's excesses. They no doubt felt that they could rein Wise in. And with the situation so desperate there seemed little choice.

That the congregation had not capitulated to reformist sentiment can be seen in its activities after it failed to secure Wise. With considerable squabbling, Bene Israel decided to launch a search for its own rabbi. Traditionalists

The chandelier, which originally had 1,800 burners, was decorated by a set of gold leaves resembling a wreath.
compromised with modernists in the congregation on the issue—the menace of Wise at Bene Yeshurun seemed so compelling—and the congregation advertised in Jewish periodicals for a man to guide it who possessed “good theological learning and a general scientific learning.” While it expected applicants for the post to hold “liberal principles” and to be “progressive and in just accordance with our age,” the congregation also made it clear that it was not seeking a “radical reformer.”

Bene Israel’s decision to seek a rabbi provided modernists within the congregation an opportunity to grasp the initiative and they quickly capitalized. They solicited Wise’s advice on a suitable candidate, one that would carry the reform movement forward at Bene Israel and one that would work in conjunction with Wise. He recommended Rev. Dr. Max Lilienthal, then serving a New York congregation. Wise not only held close and lengthy ties to Lilienthal and had stayed with the New York City rabbi when he first emigrated from Germany, but he also had received a letter of introduction from the New Yorker which enabled him to secure his post at Albany. This suggestion passed the muster of the modernists, many of whom traveled to New York on business and knew Lilienthal. By virtue of their enthusiastic testimony, they convinced their brethren that he fit Bene Israel’s announced requirements perfectly, and when Lilienthal applied for the position, he was hired sight unseen by the congregation.

Lilienthal came to Cincinnati in 1855, and traditionalists immediately discovered that they had erred. Lilienthal spelled out in his inaugural speech to the congregation what he took as the desperate state of Judaism in America and listed modernization of its laws and religious services as its only salvation. In addition, he made it clear that he would follow Wise’s lead. He would work hand in hand with Wise to set up an “ecclesiastical board to organize a proper reform,” to write an American liturgy, and to make the religious service appropriate for mid-nineteenth century America.

Traditionalists rose to these pronouncements in anger, but Lilienthal and his supporters were not deterred. He carried out in the next several months many of his plans. Lilienthal not only formed with Wise the promised ecclesiastic board and began work on the new service, but he also created a choir for Bene Israel and permitted women to join in the singing. Nor was that all. Lilienthal refused to preside over the congregation during some traditional Jewish holy days he found obsolete and declared that he would no longer celebrate the second day of any Jewish holiday.

Lilienthal’s endeavors apparently paid off in new members for Bene Israel. Its rolls showed a modest increase and Lilienthal seized the chance to hold a referendum on his actions. In August, he proposed that the congregation amend its by-laws and that the amendment make his modifications permanent. The congregation acquiesced to the suggestion, but only after heated debate. Finally, a vote was taken. While the final tally showed only forty members in favor and thirty-eight opposed, Lilienthal claimed that the results vindicated his program and proclaimed the by-laws altered.

Traditionalists were incensed by the proclamation. They contended that it took a two-thirds majority to amend the congregation’s by-laws. And in the wake both of the congregation’s reformist slant and the modernists’ cavalier disregard for its constitution, several traditionalists threatened to sue Bene Israel for either breach of contract or misrepresentation. Noting that they had devoted much time and large sums of money to the betterment of Bene Israel, the plaintiffs argued either that the synagogue did not provide the type of worship for which they had contracted when they purchased their pews, or that they had been lured into membership under false pretenses. They had been led to believe Bene Israel was a traditional synagogue when in fact it was a radical one.

The congregation’s annual elections approached as the disgruntled traditionalists considered filing suit against
the congregation and this event served as the focal point for yet another battle. Both the traditionalists and the modernists—the latter group called themselves the party of “progress, union and harmonie”—fielded slates of candidates and intense electioneering followed. At a rally for their ticket, modernists declared that the election stood as a mandate on reform and pledged to leave the congregation if their candidates were defeated. Traditionalists countered by vowing if they lost “not to acknowledge Dr. Lilienthal as a Rabbi, not to adopt...the service which he and his supporters forcibly carried through.” Rhetoric remained only one facet of the campaign as both sides worked to line up votes. Bills of delinquent and therefore disenfranchised members were paid, and an extensive lobbying effort was directed at those members who professed to be undecided as well as those who rarely participated in congregational elections.34

In September the campaign ended, and the election resulted in a clear victory for modernists. A few traditionalists assessed the situation as hopeless, decided to resign from the congregation, and established a new traditional synagogue, which they named Remnant of Israel as a symbol of their disillusionment with the affairs of Bene Israel.35 However, the majority of traditionalists remained with Bene Israel and continued to press their points. In the next several years, moreover, those who persevered apparently met with a modicum of success.

Although they continued to meet dogged resistance from modernists, traditionalists in the late 1850’s convinced the congregation to drop several of Lilienthal’s modifications. For example, the choir was disbanded and ladies prohibited from singing. Traditionalists also persuaded Bene Israel to reject part of the Wise-Lilienthal liturgy for American Jews. Even more significantly, however, they led the drive to beat back an attempted merger of Bene Israel and Bene Yeshurun, a merger proposed by Wise and Lilienthal to produce a grand reform synagogue under their joint direction. By 1860, then, the prospects of traditionalists seemed so upbeat that they had hope of returning Bene Israel to the traditionalist camp.36

Faced with a congregation that seemed to be drifting back towards traditionalism, Lilienthal took drastic action. He began his assault by complaining about the lack of decorum during religious services and the lack of conviction among the congregation’s members. He argued that both of these conditions menaced the well-being of the congregation, and placed the blame for this disastrous situation squarely on the trustees. The trustees were at fault because they permitted the congregation to use an antiquated religious service. They loosened the bonds between member and synagogue by allowing a liturgy to persist in Bene Israel that was out of touch with contemporary American life. Blind adherence to tradition, Lilienthal noted, not only led to a decline in membership—a particularly severe problem in the late 1850’s—but it also produced disorder within the congregation. As far as he was concerned, his program of modernization offered the only solution, but if the trustees did not concur, he was willing to resign and allow them to tackle the problem in their own way.37

The trustees acceded to Lilienthal’s ultimatum and urged the congregation to adopt the entire American liturgy. Lilienthal remained as rabbi and Bene Israel slowly started to implement the Wise-Lilienthal religious service.38 Tension between modernists and traditionalists had not been resolved, and in 1863 the matter once again came to a head. This time the synagogue building itself was cast as the culprit.

Stirrings for a new temple originated in the board of trustees where modernists held a decided advantage. Aware that their rival, Bene Yeshurun, had just drawn up plans to build an even more extravagant synagogue,39 they suggested that Bene Israel keep pace and at the same time move to a better section of town. More importantly, however, they complained that the present building caused the congregation’s woes; its structure made it usable only as

In 1853 Isaac Mayer Wise accepted an offer from Bene Yeshurun to come to Cincinnati and serve as the congregation’s rabbi.
a traditional synagogue and prevented the implementation of liturgical reforms. Construction of a new synagogue was imperative, they contended, because changes in the liturgy were required to tie members to the congregation and to spur the growth of Bene Israel. As a consequence, the trustees went on record favoring a new building and urged the congregation to do likewise. They proclaimed:

Whereas, we have witnessed that our present service is not at all suited to the spirit of the age, and not such as is likely to impress the minds of the rising generation with the veneration and respect that our holy cause demands—and whereas, while we do not wish nor would we like to advocate any change in the fundamental principles of the Mosaic religion, we are of the opinion that an entire change of our mode of service is essential and necessary.

Resolved, that we recommend to use our energies to build a temple with all the necessary improvements viz. family pews, an organ, a choir etc. etc., and the temple to be located in a more suitable part of the city.

The trustees then called a special meeting of the congregation to speed the matter along.

The congregation proved less willing to leave its present synagogue. Some members argued that Bene Israel should not incur a new debt, while others contended that the present building served themselves and Judaism well. The opposition countered by complaining that the location of the edifice was “neither respectable nor convenient for the masses,” or that the building itself did not reflect the prestige or the contemporary nature of the congregation’s members, many of whom were “merchants [of] the foremost rank in the city.” After a vigorous exchange, members of Bene Israel voted nearly two to one to remain at the current site.

Lilienthal and some of the wealthiest modernists then swung into action. The rabbi not only promised to resign if the congregation failed to reconsider its decision, but his supporters pledged to go over to Bene Yeshurun if the status quo was maintained. In the face of the threatened defections, another meeting of Bene Israel was hastily called, and the congregation reversed itself and narrowly approved the construction of a new synagogue.

The decision to erect a new temple touched off a period of flux within Bene Israel. Jews joined the congregation as never before, but resignations also increased at an alarming rate as many tradition seeking Jews severed their relationship with Bene Israel and united with the Remnant of Israel. At least one traditionalist went further and sued the congregation to prevent the sale of the old building. He maintained that he had purchased his pew in perpetuity, and it could not be sold without his consent. Despite the suit and resignations most of the congregation remained convinced that swinging Bene Israel straight into the reform camp was the proper course. As the congregation’s president in 1864 put it, without plans to construct a new building that would enable the congregation to change the religious service,

our congregation not only would not gain in desirable members, such as wish to associate themselves with a Body where the true and enlivening spirit of religion does actually exist—but we would visibly lose in members who would seek their natural wants elsewhere, and with such a deplorable state of affairs, our congregation would have to look its downfall into the face.

In the mid-1860’s, Bene Israel continued its twin goal of modernizing the Jewish liturgy and building the new synagogue. Along with changes in the religious service, in 1865 the congregation purchased a corner lot in the fashionable west end, and a year later laid the new temple’s foundation. Work on the new building did not progress smoothly, though, for in late 1866 the congregation had emptied its treasury and rather than go into debt, stopped construction.

Part of the congregation’s financial woes stemmed from its inability to sell the old synagogue building. Although the congregation advertised in the city’s newspapers, negotiated with prospective buyers—the Remnant of Israel made some inquiries about regaining its beloved
In 1866 Bene Yeshurun dedicated the temple on Plum Street. The style of the architecture is Moresque, designed after the Alhambra in Granada, Spain.
building—and hired a broker to find a suitable purchaser, it could not unload the synagogue. It then decided to offer the structure for sale at public auction. Even this approach failed to bring the desired effect. Bids proved so low that the congregation refused to sell. It finally reluctantly took the synagogue off the market and discontinued efforts to sell the structure until the real estate market improved.46

With the sale of the building no longer a viable option, the trustees scouted for other means to raise funds. This time they could not ask traditional congregations for assistance and the presence of Bene Yeshurun in the city made it awkward to seek aid from reform congregations. Even with these paths closed to them, however, the trustees proved equal to the task. They devised a novel solution to the problem. The trustees proposed to sell pews in the still unfinished synagogue. Noting that members of the congregation eventually would want to purchase these seats, the trustees argued that money raised now from this endeavor would only hasten the building’s completion. The congregation as a whole approved the plan, but included a proviso stipulating that construction could not resume until Bene Israel raised an additional $75,000, the estimated cost of finishing the new temple.47

Although the congregation had offered this clause to protect members in case the drive failed, it apparently imperiled the entire project. Few chose to devote funds to a proposition that seemed marginal at best, while others decided to defer purchasing pews until tangible progress had been made. Some even looked at the pew sale as an unethical plan by which the congregation received a loan at no interest. Prospects for the new synagogue seemed so bleak that Bene Israel raised an additional $75,000, the estimated cost of finishing the new temple.48

A few months later, Lilienthal dramatically broke the logjam. Disgusted by the congregation's inability to come up with the funds necessary to complete the temple and depressed by the recent loss of his wife, he resigned his post at Bene Israel. He agreed to stay on while the congregation searched for a new rabbi, but at the same time made his intentions known both to leave the congregation and Cincinnati. The trustees implored Lilienthal to reconsider his resignation, but he remained adamant.49

Even prominent Cincinnatians could not sway Lilienthal. A delegation of civic leaders, headed by the school board president—a board on which Lilienthal served—called upon the reluctant rabbi and asked him to stay at Bene Israel and in Cincinnati, but he steadfastly refused. Despite Lilienthal's disavowals, however, the matter remained far from closed. Two weeks after Lilienthal's resignation, the congregation revoked the clause requiring construction of the new temple to await the collection of $75,000 and resolved to resume building immediately. At the same time, it also asked Lilienthal to remain at Bene Israel, a request to which he immediately consented and to which the congregation responded by electing him “Rabbi for life.”50

By late 1868 Lilienthal and the modernists were firmly in control of Bene Israel. The congregation's policies had purged most traditionalists from its ranks or converted them to the modernist cause. Sharing leadership with Bene Yeshurun, the two congregations accounted for the vast preponderance of Cincinnati's Jews, relegating traditionalists in the city to the status of a minor sect. Indeed, Bene Israel had gone full circle. As a traditional congregation, it had dominated the city's community. Only in the 1840's did it gain competition for the prize. And in the face of the new menace to its position, Bene Israel made a play to remain on top. It chose to adopt some of its rival's practices so as to preempt its competitor. It also attempted to construct a monument to traditionalism so grand so as to shame the opposition. But those ploys backfired on the established congregation. They led to the discovery of sectarianism within Bene Israel's ranks, a realization that produced yet another series of compromises as the congregation's leaders tried to hold its members together. These attempts to smooth over Bene Israel's difficulties swung the religious pendulum between the extremes of reform and traditionalism. They also caused congregants much consternation. Finally, the congregation's rabbi proclaimed that the time was ripe to construct a new temple fitted for reform Judaism. From that point, there was no turning back.

In more than one sense, the congregation's move into the reformist camp had resolved its problems. It had achieved a kind of equality and comradeship with Wise's congregation and, as a consequence, the city's Jewish community possessed a sense of unity that it had lacked for the previous two decades. This harmony buoyed the spirits of Cincinnati's Jews and they looked to the completion of Bene Israel's new temple as ushering in a new era. Lilienthal hit
upon that theme during ceremonies accompanying the laying of the new temple's cornerstone. Noting that "religion has to adapt itself to the altered political situation," he called upon the city's Jewry to view "America [as] our Palestine." This "is our Zion and Jerusalem." The Bene Israel congregation no longer needed Lilienthal's guidance on that matter because it had already chosen to accept that notion. It took the cornerstone laying ceremony as an opportunity to reaffirm its decision. In the new temple's cornerstone, the congregation had placed copies of the city's daily newspapers, Washington's farewell address, the United States Constitution, and the Declaration of Independence. The inclusion of these documents within the new temple's walls was symbolic. It was a manifestation of the congregation's merger of Judaism and modern American life.


4. For the consecration ceremony, see Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, September 15, 1853; and Cincinnati Daily Commercial, September 15, 1853.

5. Wise's long relationship with Lilienthal was recounted in Isaac M. Wise, The Plea For the West, ed. and trans, by David Philipson, (Cincinnati, 1901), passim.

6. For an elaboration of this argument, see Nathan Glazer, American Judaism, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1972), pp. 22-44.


9. That there was no easily identifiable ordered set of stages through which each congregation moved as it joined the reform camp can be inferred from Jerome W. Grollman, "The Emergence of Reform Judaism in the United States," American Jewish Archives, Vol. 2 (1950), pp. 3-14.


11. Minute Books of Congregation Bene Yeshurun, September 19, 1841 and September 22, 1841, Constitution and By-Laws of Congregation Bene Yeshurun, Cincinnati, Ohio, Established September 19, 1841, (Cincinnati, 1841), pp. 1. Histories of both congregations were undertaken in the 1890's. See David Philipson, The Oldest Jewish Congregation in the West (Bene Israel, Cincinnati), (Cincinnati, 1894) and Committee of the Board of Trustees of K.K. Bene Yeshurun, The History of K.K. Bene Yeshurun of Cincinnati, Ohio, From the Date of Its Organization, Published in Commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversa-ry of Its Incorporation, Cincinnati, February 28, 1892, (Cincinnati, 1892).

12. Also for these points, see Philipson, pp. 68 and 75-41; Jick, pp. 103-104; and Trustees of Bene Yeshurun, Chapter 1. The latter history is not paginat-ed. The American Jewish Archives, located in Cincinnati, Ohio, serves as the central repository for the records of both Bene Israel and Bene Yeshurun. All primary source material for this paper is housed there.


14. None of the events surrounding the new synagogue went smoothly. See, for example, Minute Books of Congregation Bene Yeshurun, May 11, 1845, June 17, 1845, July 14, 1845, August 3, 1845, August 31, 1845, October 16, 1845, December 14, 1845, January 11, 1846, May 3, 1846, May 4, 1846, May 19, 1846, June 2, 1846, July 23, 1846, August 13, 1846, October 8, 1846, and October 11, 1846, Cincinnati Daily Gazette, October 13, 1846, p. 2.

15. Minute Books of Congregation Bene Yeshurun, April 4, 1847 and April 26, 1847.


17. See, for example, Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, September 23, 1848, p. 3 and Bene Israel Trustees Minutes, January 28, 1849.

18. "Congregation Bene Israel Minutes, October 28, 1849, March 1, 1850, and March 24, 1850," found in Minute Books of the Building Committee Minutes (hereafter cited as Bene Israel Building Committee Minutes) and Bene Israel Building Committee Minutes, March 6, 1850, March 10, 1850, March 21, 1850, April 3, 1850, April 16, 1850, May 10, 1850, and May 21, 1850. Also see "Letter from D. Ullman, Parnas, to the Board of Trustees of Congregation Bene Israel, October 17, 1852."

19. Bene Israel Building Committee Minutes, October 10, 1850, October 20, 1850, October 24, 1850, November 3, 1850, December 31, 1850, January 6, 1851, January 23, 1851, May 1, 1851, July 3, 1851, August 10, 1851, November 4, 1851, November 16, 1851, December 28, 1851, January 4, 1852, and January 24, 1852.


22. Bene Israel Building Committee Minutes, May 9, 1852, May 20, 1852, June 29, 1852, September 19, 1852, October 19, 1852, December 12, 1852, December 19, 1852, December 24, 1852, February 2, 1853, February 10, 1853, March 37, 1853, April 3, 1853, April 10, 1853, April 17, 1853.

In 1869 Bene Israel consecrated its new synagogue which had been built at Eighth and Mound streets. The building was copied from the cathedral at Chartres, France. It is "beautiful with its turrets and spire... It gives the feeling of being in a mosque."
Minutes), March 1, 1860.

June 24, 1866.

Bene Israel Minutes, 45.

Minute Books of Congregation Bene Israel, 44.

April 4, 1865, and June 24, 1866; Bene Israel Building Committee Minutes, November 8, 1863, November 10, 1863, November 12, 1863, February 25, 1865, May 11, 1861, May 29, 1865, August 15, 1865, March 13, 1866, and June 15, 1866; Bene Israel Minutes, November 4, 1864 and April 21, 1865; "Deed Transferring Broadway Property From Abraham Harris to Elizabeth Heoman," August 20, 1865; and "Letter From Congregation Remnant of Israel to Congregation Bene Israel Cancelling Purchase of the Broadway Synagogue," October 1, 1865. Bene Israel finally sold the building in 1870 to the Allen Chapel congregation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The sale price was $25,000. See Bene Israel Trustees Minutes, July 17, 1870, August 10, 1870, and October 23, 1870.

Bene Israel Trustees Minutes, June 26, 1866; Bene Israel Minutes, June 26, 1866, October 21, 1866, November 5, 1866, and November 12, 1866.

Bene Israel Trustees Minutes, May 1867; Bene Israel Minutes, June 13, 1867, and November 10, 1867.

Bene Israel Trustees Minutes, March 22, 1868.

Bene Israel Trustees Minutes, March 24, 1868 and Bene Israel Minutes, April 2, 1868.

Occident, Vol. 26 (1868-1869), p. 191; Cincinnati Daily Gazette, June 6, 1868, p. 8. The cornerstone was laid on June 5, 1868. For its contents, see Bene Israel Trustees Minutes, September 26, 1868 and October 3, 1868. The old synagogue was destroyed in late 1879 after the land on which it stood was purchased by Procter & Gamble. For a full recounting of Procter & Gamble's long attempts to acquire the plot, the transfer of the site, and the public reaction to the transfer and suspected demolition, see Alan I. Marcus, "Allen Temple—Technical Report," Appendix I. The report is housed at the Special Collections Department of the University of Cincinnati Central Library.

Queen City Heritage
The Bene Israel congregation moved to its Rockdale Avenue temple in 1906.