

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel B. Heimovics, *Managing Editor*

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# Southern Jewish History

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## Rabbi Alphabet Browne: The Atlanta Years

by

Janice Rothschild Blumberg

“**T**he dedication of the Jewish Temple yesterday,” as reported in the *Atlanta Constitution*, “was one of the most impressive scenes that ever occurred in Atlanta.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed on Friday, August 31, 1877, the Moorish style brick and stone structure at the corner of Forsyth and Garnett streets was packed with a standing-room only crowd fully an hour before its scheduled opening at four o’clock. Clad in billowing academic robe, *tallit*, and mitered hat, the Reverend Dr. Edward Benjamin Morris Browne, the congregation’s new rabbi, led the processional with its president, Levi Cohen. When the long line of participants reached the *bimah*, the first of fifteen young girls dressed in white presented the key on a velvet cushion, the two elderly members who carried the Torah placed the scrolls in the ark, and the president gave a speech reviewing the congregation’s history. Then the rabbi delivered his sermon based on Jacob’s words when he awakened from his dream, “How awe inspiring is this place! This is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

Although this introduction in the Gate City may have seemed like an opening in the gate of heaven on that day, it did not remain so very long. Both the thirty-two-year-old rabbi and his ten-year-old congregation struggled to determine their identity, the latter in deciding between tradition and reform, the former in establishing a firm base for his career and his growing family. The congregation did not reach its goal until the arrival of Rabbi David Marx in 1895.<sup>3</sup> Browne never succeeded in his,

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despite extraordinary skill and humanitarian purpose. An examination of their time together provides insights into the southern Jewish experience between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. It also illuminates a seminal period in the career of a most unusual rabbi whose outspoken opinions were far ahead of their time.

### *Early Life and Education*

In 1845 Browne was born to an affluent family in Eperies, Hungary.<sup>4</sup> The precocious only son of Jacob and Katje Sonnenschein Braun, he was trained in Talmud from childhood by private tutors and was often asked to display his knowledge (and ability to repeat verbatim anything after hearing it once) for charitable purposes. His father was a scholar and judge in the Jewish community.<sup>5</sup> A woman who had known young Browne from childhood recalled that he was always “beloved and respected by all the Jewish people in his native place as a hard student and a very kindhearted boy.”<sup>6</sup>

Browne’s motive in immigrating to America in 1866 can only be conjectured, but the influence of his secular education plus the movement toward progressive Judaism in Hungary during his youth probably convinced him that his future lay in American reform.<sup>7</sup> He brought with him a degree from Dr. I. H. Hirschfield and “Fuenfkirchen Theological Seminary” as well as testimonials from a “Government Scientific School,” all obtained before his twentieth birthday.<sup>8</sup> He spent a year in Cincinnati studying at Farmers College followed by a year teaching Hebrew at the Savannah Hebrew Collegiate Institute when he also studied medical ethics at the Savannah Medical College. Then he returned to Cincinnati where he lived as a member of the family of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, who in the next decade would establish the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) and its Hebrew Union College, the first surviving seminary in America for the training of rabbis. While Browne studied privately with Wise, he also earned a Doctor of Medicine degree from the Cincinnati College of Physicians and Surgeons,<sup>9</sup> and wrote a 267-page book of lyric poetry in English as a thank-you gift for the Wises.<sup>10</sup>

*E. B. M. "Alphabet" Browne in 1869.  
The photograph was taken in Montgomery, Browne's first pulpit.  
(From the collection of Janice Rothschild Blumberg.)*

*Early Career*

According to Browne's daughter, Wise ordained Browne in 1869 and sent him to Montgomery, Alabama, where he served Congregation Kahl Montgomery (later called Temple Beth Or) for less than a year before going to Milwaukee as the first rabbi of Congregation Emanu-El.<sup>11</sup> After a few months there he was dismissed as "incapable of fulfilling any aspect of his job."<sup>12</sup> According to his version, he left because he discovered that they had no synagogue building. Next he moved to Madison and earned a law degree at the University of Wisconsin. "I was then writing 'Commentaries of Rabbinical Law,'" he explained years later. "It was my specialty. . . .To aid me in writing these Commentaries I . . . attended two courses and graduated receiving a diploma and was admitted as counselor at law. . . ." Thus, with degrees in law, arts, divinity, and medicine, he began signing his name E. B. M. Browne, LL.B. (later LL.D., thanks to an honorary degree from Temple College),<sup>13</sup> A.M., B.M.,D.D., M.D., which inspired his colleagues to call him "Alphabet."<sup>14</sup>

Fluency in English besides seven other languages gave Browne a great advantage in that there were few rabbis in America at that time who could preach in the common tongue. The older generation preferred sermons in German, but because they wanted their children to remain involved by hearing them in English, congregations such as Charleston's historic Beth Elohim, the first in America to declare itself Reform, sought rabbis who could do both. Thus they called on Browne to be their English preacher. On his way to Charleston he stopped in Evansville, Indiana, where he learned that a yellow fever epidemic was raging in South Carolina, and so he decided to remain where he was. He joined the faculty of the Evansville Medical College as Professor of Medical Jurisprudence and Diseases of the Mind and became rabbi of that city's Congregation B'nai Israel.<sup>15</sup> Briefly toward the end of his stay, he edited a newspaper, the *Jewish Independent*.<sup>16</sup> In Evansville he also met and subsequently married Sophie Weil, the talented sixteen-year-old daughter of a successful insurance executive who was a leading member of B'nai Israel.<sup>17</sup>



In 1874 Browne went to Congregation Anshai Emeth in Peoria, Illinois,<sup>18</sup> where his first child, daughter Lylah, was born in 1876.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately he was stricken with an eye disease that seriously threatened his vision. His ophthalmologist urged him to pursue work less taxing than the rabbinate, whereupon he resigned his position and sought an appointment as United States Consul to fill an opening in Latin America. Thanks to an endorsement from President Ulysses S. Grant, he was offered either Mexico or Argentina but ultimately declined both because of insufficient salaries.<sup>20</sup>

The question of how this thirty-year-old, unemployed, Jewish immigrant became known to the President of the United States can perhaps be answered by the fact that Browne began to be recognized as an orator in the early 1870s. He was recommended to Grant not only by Rabbi Wise but also by Illinois Senator Richard J. Oglesby, who presumably had heard the rabbi's address to the Illinois Senate in January 1874.<sup>21</sup> Springfield's *State Journal* reported that the latter "was one of the very best, wholly extempore, eloquent and interesting throughout."<sup>22</sup>

Browne did not consider himself to be a professional lecturer at that stage of his career. "It was only impending blindness (according to the conclusions of our great oculists) that has driven me from the pulpit," he wrote, "and for the want of other employment to support my family I had to lecture. As soon as Dr. Wolf, of Galveston, performed the miraculous operation on my eyes, restoring me to full sight, I concluded to return to the pulpit, in spite of the Eastern lecture bureaus, who had and still have me on their books."<sup>23</sup>

During this era Christians were beginning to meet Jews as colleagues in the cultural and civic life of their communities. Many were themselves recent immigrants from Europe, specifically from Germany, as were the vast majority of Jews. Thus they shared nostalgia for the culture left behind. The interaction, particularly for Bible Belt Protestants, aroused great curiosity about Jews, about their biblical history, and about their contemporary practices.

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Browne's eloquence in English and knowledge of Christianity as well as Judaism made him an excellent ambassador to the gentiles, a role perceived by most American Jews, fresh from the antisemitism of Europe, to be of utmost importance. There were hardly any Jewish religious functionaries in America qualified to do that in the years following the Civil War. Rabbinical duties were served primarily by knowledgeable laymen, readers who were granted the honorific title of rabbi or minister, which neither required nor implied the qualifications and performance of rabbis in Europe. Until 1840 there was no ordained rabbi in the entire United States and none in the South until the eve of the Civil War.<sup>24</sup> In 1872, according to an editorial in the *New York Herald*, there were only seven rabbis besides Browne in the entire country who could speak English well enough to do it publicly.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout his career Browne specialized in speaking to mostly Christian audiences on such subjects as "The Crucifixion of Christ, or Have the Jews Actually Crucified Jesus of Nazareth?" and "The Talmud: Its Ethics and Literary Beauties." He put this acumen to good use for philanthropic purposes as well as to supplement his earnings when he was underpaid or out of work. The *Chicago Tribune*, reviewing his lecture on the Talmud in 1874, noted that "The Rabbi is a lecturer of no mean attainments, and the subject he has chosen was one of unusual interest and beauty. The subject is treated with rare judgment and skill, and to this is added a good voice and excellent delivery."<sup>26</sup> The *Indianapolis Sentinel* reported, "In point of brilliant scholarship and fine liberal tone, [a lecture Browne delivered at the local YMCA was] the most remarkable one heard in this city . . . . He has no prejudices and expresses his view with the earnestness of an apostle and the liberality of a large-minded scholar. . . . In manner the Doctor is vivacious, clear and highly entertaining . . . ."<sup>27</sup>

Levi Cohen, president of the Atlanta congregation, and three other leading members may have first heard him at his lecture on the Christ's crucifixion at the Springer Opera House in Columbus, Georgia, in March 1877. They were so impressed that they offered to finance the completion of the synagogue building, which had been halted due to lack of funds, if the congregation would

employ Browne as its rabbi.<sup>28</sup> The *Columbus Enquirer-Sun* lauded the talk, reporting that the audience of 125 people including one “colored Baptist Minister” listened with “profound interest.” The reviewer apologized that because of its length — “about two hours and a half” — he could not give a “thorough synopsis.” Nonetheless he wrote, “His lecture was as able, systematic and forcibly [*sic*] as we have ever had the pleasure of listening to . . . . His power of illustration by analogizing is apt and wonderful, and through the whole ran a vein of almost imperceptible humor, which was as subtle as is possible to conceive—fine, rich and highly enjoyable, though accompanied with due reverence.”

The gist of the message as reported was the rabbi’s assertion that the Jews were not responsible for the crucifixion because the mode of the trial was contrary to Jewish laws. Moreover “scalawags” and Romans had carried out the trial and sentence. In a statement apparently intended to sustain his absolution of the Jews, Browne contended that the judges and officers had been bought and “Only two of the Judges . . . could read Hebrew.” He even managed to exonerate Judas, on the grounds that the supposed betrayer was really trying to save Jesus but was duped by the bad guys, and could have escaped with far more profit than the “thirty pieces of silver” if he had been so inclined. As for the true villain among the twelve disciples, Browne tapped Peter, but unfortunately the Columbus reporter failed to record the reason why.

The reviewer also noted that Browne “attributed to Jesus a much more dignified character than is credited to him by Christians . . . .” He concluded, “Dr. Browne was truly liberal throughout his discourse and expressed sentiments that are noble indeed and worthy of any man. He is a gentleman of high culture, of profound thought, backed by extended [*sic*] reading and possesses a true heart overflowing with generosity of sentiment. We wish that his entire lecture would be published that the people might read and study. He ought to be induced to repeat his effort.”

Actually, Browne did expect to have this and at least two other major lectures published, but no copies have been found.

The reason may be that, although he gave them advance publicity and thereby sold many subscriptions, their publication was aborted due to the same affair that resulted in his departure from Atlanta, as shall be discussed below.<sup>29</sup>

*Atlanta and the Temple*

In 1877 when Browne arrived in Atlanta the city had 35,000 inhabitants, 525 of whom were Jewish. Approximately half of the latter were members of the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation (Gemilath Chesed Kehillah Kodesh) that, on completion of its building, became known as the Temple.<sup>30</sup> With only one exception, the men of the congregation were foreign-born, mostly young newcomers, and at least six lived at what were then formidable distances from the city in such places as West Point, Georgia, and Dadesville, Alabama. There was only one lawyer in the group and as yet no physician. Most were engaged in various businesses, from dry goods, general stores, and manufacturing to banking, insurance, and real estate. Although one was native-born, one from France, and a few from Hungary, their language and culture was unquestionably German, as was that of many non-Jewish Atlantans. Thus a shared homeland-nostalgia accelerated and eased the entrance of Jews into the mainstream of civic life. Their abilities were recognized and solicited to help develop the city that, although not yet expressed as such, even then thought of itself as "the city too busy to hate."<sup>31</sup>

The congregation had seen three rabbis come and go in the decade preceding Browne's arrival, and two more followed him before stability was achieved under the fifty-one-year reign of Rabbi David Marx (1895-1946), an American-born and trained, consummate ambassador to the gentiles.<sup>32</sup> Lithuanian-born Rabbi Henry Gersoni, who immediately preceded Browne (1874 to 1876), was, like Browne, a linguist, orator, author, and editor of newspapers (in Chicago after leaving Atlanta) who pleased the congregation by his successful outreach to the non-Jewish public. He was believed to have temporarily converted to Christianity at one point, a dubious distinction that apparently had no adverse effect on the performance of his duties because the congregation

*The Temple, c. 1887, as it would have  
looked when Browne arrived in Atlanta in 1877.  
(Courtesy of the Atlanta History Center.)*

duly appreciated his talent, learning, and “social qualities.” A glowing report sent by one of his Atlanta congregants to the *American Israelite* reveals those assets most valued by a Jewish community of that day. “This gentleman who came to us pretending to be ‘no chazan at all,’” it states, “proves to be a great attraction to the lovers of a sonorous and harmonious voice. The Hebrew becomes a living language, and the rhythm of our prayers strikes more melodiously the ear even of such who do not understand the sacred tongue . . . .”<sup>33</sup>

Besides Browne, two other early congregation spiritual leaders were noted for their erudition. The synagogue’s first rabbi, David Burgheim, who arrived in 1869, was also a scholar, linguist, and avid student of the New Testament. He opened a secular school, the English German Academy, which some authorities contend was the immediate predecessor of the Atlanta Public Schools that were established in 1870. When the private school became the English German Hebrew Academy, Burgheim departed, and left Rabbi Benjamin Aaron Bonnheim, whom he had engaged as principal of the school, to operate it as well as minister to the congregation.<sup>34</sup>

The succession of these first four rabbis in Atlanta would indicate a leaning of the congregation at that time toward spiritual leadership with a background of secular learning and outreach to the Christian community, qualities valued by Wise who had recommended them. With Browne’s departure this apparent leaning toward liberalism temporarily shifted in the opposite direction; the synagogue turned to the more conservative Rabbi Marcus Jastrow of Philadelphia for recommendations for its next two rabbis.<sup>35</sup> As congregations struggled to define themselves in regard to reform, such innovations as family seating, organ music, and confirmation reflected the fluctuation of opinions within a changing lay leadership as much as they affected their selection of rabbis. Typically rabbis and congregations were equally divided.

During this period all rabbis in America were foreign-born, often loners who had emigrated as individuals seeking freedom from the restrictions of Jewish life in Europe as well as pulpit opportunities that those inclined toward reform would have been

unlikely to find in the old country. Each tried to establish his own interpretation of reforms that would sustain Judaism in America with its relatively open society and few facilities to maintain tradition. Inevitably, lay leaders often disagreed with their rabbis and the rabbis with each other. Tempers were volatile, membership fluid, and financial support inadequate, all of which contributed to brief tenures for the rabbis. Minutes of the Temple board relate petty controversies over such matters as assignment of pews, assessment of dues,<sup>36</sup> decorum during services, and whether or not to permit the rabbi to leave town for a day or for two months, equal consideration being given to each. There was no record of discussion on matters of ideology. When the rabbis departed, either of their own volition or otherwise, newspaper accounts and synagogue records were worded with an eye to public relations, often obfuscating the true cause of the separation. This was the environment in which "Alphabet" Browne functioned.

After only three months in Atlanta, Browne announced his intention to make it his permanent home.<sup>37</sup> He had family connections that smoothed his settlement. His wife's uncle was Herman Haas, an esteemed pre-Civil War member of the community whose son Aaron had become one of Atlanta's most prominent citizens. An innovative business leader, Aaron had been a blockade runner for the Confederacy during the war, helped organize the Temple as well as several civic and cultural institutions immediately after the war, served as city alderman, and, in 1875, as Atlanta's first mayor *pro tempore*. In 1877 he was president of Gate City Lodge, B'nai B'rith,<sup>38</sup> in which Browne promptly enrolled.<sup>39</sup> Haas family members built homes close together on a block near the new synagogue, and the Brownes, who first lived at 46 East Hunter Street,<sup>40</sup> later joined them there at 182 Forsyth Street, presumably on a lot next door to the Temple that the congregation purchased for a parsonage.<sup>41</sup>

Because the congregation was able to pay its rabbi only \$1,500 per year, considerably less than Browne had earned elsewhere,<sup>42</sup> trustees suggested that he supplement this by operating a private school for boys on weekdays using the Temple's facilities. He abandoned the school after one year because of his inability to

collect tuition.<sup>43</sup> He did reorganize a Sunday school with four classes in which his wife Sophie and several other women served as teachers.<sup>44</sup> A religious school board administered both the Sabbath school, which met on Saturdays and Sundays, and the afternoon Hebrew school, which met four times a week for two-hour sessions. The rabbi usually conducted the latter as a private activity in order to supplement his salary. The congregation later operated the Hebrew school and financed it through special assessments.<sup>45</sup>

The Temple had been one of the earliest to join the UAHC when Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise organized it in 1873. Like its leanings back and forth between tradition and reform, however, it waffled in and out of the UAHC throughout the 1870s and 1880s. In 1878 and 1879 it did belong to the Union, however, and sent Browne as its representative to meetings in Milwaukee and New York respectively. He had previously attended each of its conferences as representative of other congregations, and he had given the closing prayer at the fourth one.<sup>46</sup> Browne was one of those who urged the Union to encourage circuit-rider rabbis to visit isolated Jewish communities, an activity especially needed in the South, and to implement religious education in congregations, an issue which although ignored at the time, became a signature service of the Union in the twentieth century.<sup>47</sup>

The gradual development of reform practices in Atlanta, as in other American cities, may be traced during these years. Organ music and a choir were introduced shortly after Browne's arrival, yet a motion to permit the removal of hats was tabled. Confirmation for girls as well as boys at age fourteen was also introduced, albeit without abandoning bar mitzvah, which was maintained for over a decade after Browne's departure.<sup>48</sup> He discarded such prohibitions as riding on the Sabbath but strongly opposed the movement to abandon the Jewish Sabbath in favor of conforming to Christian worship by meeting on Sundays. He advocated the dismissal of all "external additions" to the Decalogue that were "suited to the dark ages in which the lawgiver lived, but having existed through milleniums [*sic*] were at last outlived by growing civilization. . . ." <sup>49</sup>



The small but highly visible Jewish community of Atlanta drew a disproportionate share of positive public interest in the 1870s. This may be attributed to curiosity on the part of people who had never before known Jews as well as to the prominence of numerous Jews in the business and cultural life of the city. In 1870, long before the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation had a permanent home, the *Atlanta Constitution* devoted an entire editorial column to describing the High Holy Days, including high praise for those who observed them. "Among her most orderly, enterprising and public-spirited citizens," it declared, "the Israelites of Atlanta may be justly classed. Some of them are ranked among our oldest and most respected business men. In our cosmopolitan city, but little of that general prejudice against Jews is ever demonstrated."<sup>50</sup>

The editorial writer also advised that "The solemnity and good order which prevails during the worship in their synagogue is worthy of imitation by many of us Gentile Christians." He continued with an explanation that illustrated the mixture of continuity and change:

Their worship is, for the most part, conducted in the Hebrew language. A choir and organ discourse music which rivals in beauty and execution that of other houses of worship in the city.

The Israelites of Atlanta have never divided upon the question of orthodoxy and reformation. They are extremists on neither side. While many of the prayers and customs if not applicable to the present age, and the present conditions of the descendants of Jacob, are omitted by the members of their Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, they do not go as far in ignoring ancient traditional usages as do the extreme reformers in many other places. . . .<sup>51</sup>

In 1878 on Rosh Hashanah, the *Daily Constitution* not only announced the time of the morning service, reported that the evening services had been well attended, and Rabbi Browne's sermon "very appropriate . . . and a very able one," but also explained the custom of observing from sundown to sundown and noted that "The Orthodox Jews observe two days." It devoted

even more space and laudatory comment to Yom Kippur, referring to several books of the Bible that mention the holiday and praising Jewish businessmen for keeping their stores closed on that day. It described the tone of the observance as follows:

The sermons which are delivered by the Rabbis on this occasion teach the respective congregations to remember the poor, the needy, the widow, the orphan and the stranger, and give evidence that the charity practiced by the Hebrews in the days of yore still lives. . . . We can best admire the devotion of the Jews for their church and the fidelity with which they observe all the festivals. They set a noble example which Christians might follow with profit to themselves and to the liveliness of their faith.

The article also noted that the services were attended “not only by members of the Jewish church, but also by a number of Christian friends.”<sup>52</sup>

City and state officials recognized Browne’s ability during his first year in Atlanta and engaged him accordingly. The school board appointed him one of its six “examiners” for high schools in the newly formed public school system, and Governor Alfred Colquitt designated him Georgia’s representative at a “World Congress of Social Science” to be held the following summer in Stockholm. Also billed as the “International Conference for the Prevention and Suppression of Crime, Including Penal and Reformatory Treatment,” its president invited Browne to deliver there his lecture on “Jews, Temperance and Crime; or How the Chosen People Keep Sober and Out of Mischief.”<sup>53</sup> Browne was also scheduled to stop in Paris en route to attend a meeting of the Jewish Ecumenical Council sponsored by the Alliance Israelite Universelle. Unfortunately, Sophie suffered a severe illness, probably postpartum depression, after the birth of their son Jesse in June 1878, which required her husband to cancel his journey and remain home.<sup>54</sup>

Browne continued public lectures while in Atlanta, usually for the benefit of the congregation or for such worthy causes as the B’nai B’rith Orphans’ Fund for which contributions were being solicited in order to build the Hebrew Orphan’s Home in Atlanta.

In cases such as these he waived his customary fee of \$150.<sup>55</sup> Tickets usually cost twenty-five cents each, with free admission for clergy. He helped raise funds in this way for victims of the potato famine in Ireland and for sufferers in the severe yellow fever epidemic of 1878, twice touring the South on the latter's behalf. Among the many expressions of appreciation he received was a petition from the B'nai B'rith of Navasota, Texas, to name its lodge in his honor.<sup>56</sup>

Considering the difficulties of travel in those days it is surprising that this rabbi could find the time and energy to do as much of it as he did. In addition to his lectures for special causes, he was occasionally asked to speak at the dedication of a new synagogue in another city. The first such dedicatory occasion, in Selma, Alabama, threatened to be a problem. Selma was then an approximately twenty-four-hour journey from Atlanta by train, and Browne had a wedding planned for the same day and hour that the Selma-bound train was scheduled to depart. Nothing if not enterprising, "Alphabet" persuaded the stationmaster to delay the train's departure until after the hurried ceremony. Apparently all went well except for the fact that the happy couple received complaints from some of their guests for having been invited to an event of such short duration.<sup>57</sup>

### *The Jewish South*

Browne's major accomplishment in Atlanta was establishing the South's first Jewish newspaper. On October 14, 1877, barely two months after his arrival, the *Jewish South* made its debut. Although one might suppose that he was mainly motivated by the prospect of improving his financial condition, the cut-rate \$2 cost of subscription, as compared with \$4 or \$5 for other Jewish papers such as Wise's *American Israelite*, validates Browne's own statement that this was not the case.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore he had observed the success with which other rabbis, notably his mentor, Wise, influenced American Jewry through their newspapers, in Wise's case the *Israelite* in English and *Die Deborah* in German, so he understood the efficacy of using the printed word to promote

himself and his ideas. These now began to diverge from those of his teacher.

It would not have been difficult for a discerning reader to recognize that issues important to southern Jews were not being adequately addressed by other Jewish journals, which were largely based on the two coasts plus Cincinnati and Chicago, and targeted mostly local interests. Indeed, since the death of Rabbi Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia in 1868, and the subsequent changes in his once influential paper, the *Occident*, the field had been left virtually clear for Wise,<sup>59</sup> who, after Leeser, was the only rabbi to embrace the whole of American Jewry as his potential constituent.<sup>60</sup> As Browne wrote in his "Salutatory" inaugurating the *Jewish South*:

We are fully convinced that the Southern Israelites need an organ of their own. The Western and Eastern Jewish journals are scarcely known beyond the Atlantic and Pacific coasts respectively, being chiefly local in circulation and tendency.

The only journal in the Middle States [the *American Israelite*] has too large a territory to oversee, and affairs nearer home will naturally obtain preference over items from the far South. Hence we maintain the interests of Southern Judaism and the dignity of the South call loudly for a mouth piece worthy to represent them.<sup>61</sup>

Browne, having gained insights into Christian culture through his experience on the lecture circuit, was keenly aware of the desirability for Jews and Christians to know more about each other. This, he believed, was especially needed in the South and at a price that all could afford.<sup>62</sup>

He was not alone in this perception. Although he later wrote that he had started the *Jewish South* with personal funds, brothers J. R. and W. B. Seals, who were not Jewish, were listed as its initial publishers. In the introductory issue they wrote:

The necessity for an organ for the Israelites of the South has been made apparent to us by many of our Hebrew friends, and we—considering the matter purely as a business enterprise of

*The Jewish South, June 13, 1879, upper half of the front page.  
(Klau Library, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio.)*

course—were anxious to undertake its publication some two years ago, but for the want of a competent editor. Having found a gentleman of that kind in Rabbi Browne, we cheerfully embarked with him as our Editor-in-Chief.

They assumed full responsibility for financial affairs and left all else to the rabbi.<sup>63</sup>

Proudly proclaiming “Independent and Fearless” on its masthead, Browne declared that the paper would be an educational instrument, a clearing house for news of Jewish interest in the South and, referring to the battle then raging over changes taking place in Jewish worship, that it would not get involved in “the combative liturgical and theological arguments” of American Jewry but would be a promoter of brotherhood among

Jews of all religious positions. He announced in its very first issue that the weekly would be a source of information about Jews for non-Jews in order "to drain the swamp of ignorance in which breed the diseases of hatred and bigotry," and entreated Christians to subscribe, gearing much of the contents toward their interests. Judging from correspondence to the editor, he succeeded in attracting them during the first year while the paper was being published in Atlanta.

In June 1878 the *Jewish South* was sold to Herman Jacobs of New Orleans, who represented a "stock association," and its business operations moved to that city. New Orleans had the largest Jewish population in the South and was central to the paper's area of circulation, which reached into Texas and Arkansas. Although Browne continued to edit and write from Atlanta, the paper's greater concentration on Jewish news and less "folksy" tone after its first year reflect a change of objective to suit a different majority readership.<sup>64</sup>

Advertising, at a cost of \$1.50 per inch for a single issue and \$30 for the year, was bought by local and regional, Jewish and non-Jewish businesses. Whole pages were purchased by railroads, showing maps of their routes and schedules.<sup>65</sup> Other advertisers included congregations seeking rabbis and the Southern Educational Institute for Boys, which offered Judaic studies as well as preparation for college at \$400 (a bargain rate compared with \$1,000 tuition at northern schools). Browne promoted his own lectures to benefit the Temple and the sale of his translation of *The Book Jashar*, considered a lost book of the Bible (420 pages, for the reduced rate of \$2.50).<sup>66</sup> Ads listed plantations in Florida from \$2,500 to \$15,000, while businesses as far away as New York, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis offered such items as tea, toupees, pianos, the study of French dentistry, and a brownstone in Manhattan.<sup>67</sup>

The paper's first reporters were Elias Haiman, of the Southern Agricultural Works in Atlanta, and Henry Powers, of Nashville, listed as "traveling correspondent."<sup>68</sup> Browne's primary assistance came from his associate editor, Charles Wessolowsky, a former state legislator and patriarch of the congregation in

Albany, Georgia. In early 1878 Joseph Menko became the local editor.<sup>69</sup> Wessolowsky then began traveling across the South contributing insights into the condition of Jews in dozens of small, isolated communities.<sup>70</sup>

The following year Wessolowsky visited sixty-two communities as far west as Fort Worth and as far north as St. Louis, encouraging individuals whom he met to become subscribers besides contributing their opinions and local news, reinforcing Browne's initially published invitation for them to do so. Such voluntary contributors were not unique to the *Jewish South*, but with their numbers they provided it with more widespread and personal coverage than was to be found in other contemporary Jewish newspapers.

The very format of the *Jewish South* suggested a more popular appeal than that of the *American Israelite*. Both rabbi-editors promoted their own lectures, books, and Friday night services, and published entire texts of selected sermons by prominent rabbis. Browne frequently reprinted relevant sermons by Christian ministers as well. Both used serialized novels and other literary works including poetry, sometimes contributed by readers or translations of Hebrew poets such as Judah Halevy.<sup>71</sup> Unlike Wise's paper, however, the *Jewish South*, in its appeal to diversity, published chess columns, a column "All About Diamonds," familiar quotations by such authors as Jonathan Swift and Washington Irving, and a "Boys and Girls" department. Later issues carried a section called "Our Christian Brethren—what they are saying and doing for their religion—Know thy neighbors as thyself," with news of various denominations from across the United States and foreign countries. A category titled "All Sorts" included literary trivia, theater commentary, fashion notes, and humorous items such as "A few words to the ladies from a rooster-pecked wife."<sup>72</sup>

While other Jewish journals published social news from various major cities, the *Jewish South* proliferated in items from southern, often isolated, communities, giving readers in such places a feeling that they were part of the wider Jewish world. These included events like a bar mitzvah in Natchitoches,

Louisiana, the opening of a B'nai B'rith lodge in Hallettsville, Texas, activities of the Ladies' Aid Society in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and a 5 to 0 baseball victory of the Natchez Press Club over the Milwaukee Lager Beers. The informal style reached a height during the yellow fever epidemic when one Louisiana town reported succinctly, "Plasquimine yehudim all doing well."<sup>73</sup>

The *Jewish South* did not neglect news of national and international origin. Intriguing items included the establishment of a new congregation in South Africa, knighthood being conferred on seven Italian rabbis, construction of the railroad between Jaffa and Jerusalem, and the belief that the Zulu language is full of Hebrew idioms. In "The American Hebrew in Politics," Browne posed the question of why more Jews did not become involved in government in America as compared to Europe where a much greater number participated despite the virulent antisemitism in their countries.<sup>74</sup> A caption particularly captivating to a present-day reader asked, "Are We to Have Peace in Israel?" It referred to the "warfare" then being waged between the venerable Board of Delegates of American Israelites, an organization that had advocated Jewish interests worldwide since 1859, and the five-year-old, Cincinnati-based UAHC whose primary purpose was the promotion of American Judaism.<sup>75</sup> In December 1877, only a year before, the two had agreed to merge.<sup>76</sup>

Browne devoted ongoing attention to Jewish education. Having failed to get results from his 1878 appeal to the UAHC to provide circuit-riding rabbis and to strengthen religious instruction within the congregations, he continued to advocate these ideas through editorials, even personally attempting to foster the organization of Sunday schools by setting forth the procedures in the *Jewish South*.<sup>77</sup> He published prayers to open sessions of these schools, such as, ". . . Thy indispensable assistance for the labors of our teachers. May their instructions be received by willing hearts, so that the mind will easily accept what Israel confesses to be divine truth." His closing prayer gave thanks "for the privilege of having imparted Thy word and Thy will to the children of Israel."<sup>78</sup> In his "Jewish catechism", he posed a series of questions and answers under different headings. The first of these,



“Religion,” addressed the students’ understanding of the word itself and its interpretation within Judaism.<sup>79</sup> He followed that with a series of chapters on biblical history, beginning with a definition of the patriarchs which included such specifics on Noah and the flood as:

Q. How long did the waters prevail on the earth?

A. One hundred and fifty days, and the ark rested on the mountains of Ararat.

Q. Where are the mountains of Ararat?

A. In Armenia, a province of Asiatic Turkey.<sup>80</sup>

For the more advanced students he included a section, “Hebrew Poetry and Poets,” with an introduction to the Hebrew language.<sup>81</sup>

While Browne kept his promise of neutrality on the issue of orthodoxy versus reform, he did not hesitate to criticize those aspects of Jewish life in America that he considered detrimental to its progress. In a series, “The Iron Mask of the XIX Century: The American Jewish Pulpit—Its Shame and Its Glory,” he attacked both the rabid traditionalists, who responded to innovations with violence, and the extreme reformers, whose more subtle lack of constraint was still no less devastating to reconciliation, and he cried out for regulation, which he believed should be addressed by the UAHC.<sup>82</sup> In succeeding issues he discussed the relative treatment of Christian ministers and rabbis by their congregations as well as the relative expectations placed on them and their performance in regard to training and responsibilities. The following illustrates his lengthy and repeated views on the subject:

Presently our ministers are neither paid nor respected. Whose is the fault? Not the congregations. . . . Indeed, I am the last to charge them with guilt. . . . A congregation of average pretensions wants a minister. They advertise for one that has to be a teacher, a reader, a lecturer in German and English, a Shochet (and Mohel preferred) who shall also be able to instruct a choir, and besides, that man must be a “gentleman.” A Reverend Tom, Dick or Harry appears and secures the position. He is, of course, not what the congregation advertised for. He has just failed in

business, and having no other mode of making a living, he says to himself, "I can read Hebrew . . . ." <sup>83</sup>

Apparently the entire series was aimed at instigating an extensive examination of the UAHC's policies and needs for attracting qualified candidates as rabbinical students at its Hebrew Union College. To that effect Browne published the text, recorded in the *Chicago Times*, of a lengthy speech he had made at the 1874 meeting of the Union. In it he proposed resolutions calculated to improve the situation for rabbis as well as to weed out those who were unqualified to serve as such, for which he was ruled out of order.<sup>84</sup> The first of his proposed resolutions designated that the UAHC have jurisdiction over its constituent congregations and their rabbis, with a council to adjudicate problems arising between the two. The second called for the appointment of a committee (from which he excluded himself) to examine the credentials of those claiming to be rabbis, since few in America at that time could produce evidence of having received either *smicha* or a diploma from a qualified institution. The committee would be empowered to grant licenses and preclude the hiring of those unqualified. That resolution was finally adopted in June 1878 and duly applauded in the *Jewish South*.<sup>85</sup>

Although Browne's treatment of the subject did not appear to be an intentional slur upon the UAHC or its founder, this could have easily been construed as such by the lay and rabbinic leaders in question.

#### *Wise and the Gathering Storm*

Ostensibly, a social item triggered Browne's fall from grace with his mentor and former sponsor, I. M. Wise. In June 1878, Wise's daughter Helen eloped with James Malony, a non-Jewish friend of her brother Leo. Due to the father's fame and his outspoken opposition to intermarriage, this caused a scandal reported by major newspapers throughout the country. Browne, never known for tact or discretion, copied the story from the *Cincinnati Enquirer* in the *Jewish South* of June 7.<sup>86</sup> He then dispatched an apology to Wise, "It scarcely occurred to me possible for you to pass by with silence an event of such notoriety. Had you stopped

me the matter would never have appeared in our columns." Continuing the letter in a familial tone, he asked for news about Wise's main interest, the Hebrew Union College, begun in 1875, for use in promoting the seminary in a forthcoming edition of the *Jewish South*.<sup>87</sup>

In the conclusion of this letter Browne hinted that a source of conflict between them already existed. "Our relations of late," he wrote, "especially since my having started this paper, have been made so cold and distant . . . that it is a matter of delicacy with me to inquire into matters which greatly interest me in connection with you and yours."

Evidence corroborates Browne's belief that Wise turned on him due to the potential competition posed by the *Jewish South*, which could have implied a challenge to the older rabbi's influence as arbiter of American Judaism. It was noticed by readers as early as January 1878, less than a month after the paper began its regular weekly publication in December. A letter writer from Bayou Sara, Louisiana, complained that Browne had not responded to Wise's "abuse" of him in the *Israelite*. "I must confess that the sense of propriety was shocked in many of our people," the author stated, "to see such rude treatment of the man whom Dr. Wise, for the last ten years, and even last winter, praised to the sky. Why even the ordinary journalistic civility was denied you, and the name of the editor was altogether ignored."<sup>88</sup>

Browne did not take up the gauntlet. He instead excused Wise on the grounds that the *Israelite* was then being edited in Wise's absence by his son Leo, and therefore the rabbi could not be held responsible.<sup>89</sup>

Several weeks afterward a reader from Florence, Alabama, commented on another instance of "rude treatment" in the *Israelite*. The writer declared, "It is a fabrication gotten up to injure your paper."<sup>90</sup> Again Browne declined comment.

Later Browne did publish letters that criticized the UAHC for ignoring the problems of small congregations, publication of which could certainly have been interpreted as encouraging the resignation of some congregations from Wise's Union.<sup>91</sup>

Although such respected historians as Bertram Korn and Steven Hertzberg have written of Browne in derisive tones, based primarily upon one letter and later sarcastic references to him by Wise and his followers, current research suggests that they may have reached erroneous conclusions.<sup>92</sup> Wise did recognize the shortcomings of his former student when in 1873 he chastised Browne for having had “four places in five years or so, and came away quarreling,”<sup>93</sup> but this did not signal the beginning of the hostility that subsequently developed between the two. Had the younger rabbi been persona non grata when Wise’s wife, Theresa Bloch Wise, died three years later, he would not have been asked to read from Psalms and deliver the prayer, which he did, while her casket was being removed from Wise’s home. Nor would he have been invited to join Wise’s contemporary and close friend, Rabbi Max Lienthal of Cincinnati’s Bene Israel congregation, in conducting her funeral, or to return to the Wise house as a member of the family afterward.<sup>94</sup> Nor would Wise that same year have praised Browne in the *Israelite* for a lecture that he had recently given in Indianapolis.<sup>95</sup>

Browne’s claim that he was considered the spokesman for Wise until 1878 is substantiated in the words of a New York rabbi, Israel P. Feigl, who did not even know Browne at the time of which he spoke having met him years later. In testimony that referred also to the then existing rivalry for power between Wise and the east coast rabbis led by David Einhorn, Feigl testified as to the common knowledge among rabbis that Browne was “Dr. Wise’s representative in all public questions there being two parties in Jewish pulpit. . . . The Western and Eastern ministers, who opposed one another with the bitterness of two political parties. Dr. Browne being with Dr. Wise the leaders of the Western party. . . .”<sup>96</sup>

Also attorney Adolph L. Sanger, a New York Jewish leader, referred to having worked with Browne on the committee calling on all Jewish organizations to commission a sculpture in honor of the American Centennial in 1876. In all likelihood Browne’s participation was as Wise’s deputy.<sup>97</sup>

Biographers portray Wise as intolerant of those he could not control, especially when their opinions differed from his or threatened the success of the institutions he was creating. It is therefore logical that his highly articulate protégé, established in a fast-growing community with his own regional weekly newspaper, might be seen as a potential threat to the master's leadership.<sup>98</sup>

Although Wise's own journals ranked ahead of all others of Jewish interest in the country, the *Jewish South* actually had shown signs of overtaking it. Even discounting Browne's claim to have "stolen" all of the *Israelite's* southern subscribers,<sup>99</sup> hyperbole typical of the time as well as of the man, the fact that the *Jewish South* received letters from readers in 177 towns across thirteen southern states indicates a readership the size and breadth of which represented a creditable challenge.<sup>100</sup> According to Browne, Wise conspired to remove the *Jewish South* from Browne's hands and ultimately shut it down.<sup>101</sup>

### *Losing the Jewish South*

Browne's account of how he lost the *Jewish South*, one-sided as it may be, provides some basic facts and raises pertinent although unanswered questions about the integrity of the rabbis with whom he dealt. According to Browne, he started the *Jewish South* in Atlanta with his own money, assisted by Herman Jacobs, editor of a paper in Charleston, South Carolina, and Charles Wessolowsky, the former state senator from Albany, Georgia. A year later he transferred its publication office to New Orleans with Jacobs, then a resident of that city, replacing the Seals brothers as financial manager. Despite Browne's belief that the paper was "well established" with its large and growing circulation, its fiscal condition may have precipitated the move.<sup>102</sup>

At some point within the next two years, perhaps encouraged by Jacobs anticipating his subsequent move away from New Orleans, Rabbi Joseph Hayyim Mendes Chumaceiro of that city's Touro Synagogue asked to buy a partnership in the newspaper. Browne agreed and drew up a contract designating Chumaceiro as managing editor responsible for business matters only but precluding him from writing or making editorial

decisions. Browne took the contract to New Orleans to be signed but had to leave before copies could be made for three absent signatories. Consequently, he signed both the contract at hand and three blank legal forms to be filled in for the others, leaving the copies with Chumaceiro. When he received his own copy a few days later, he filed it without checking the contents.<sup>103</sup>

After a few weeks of smooth operation, according to Browne, "all at once Chumaceiro began stealing articles from an old English book *The Festivals of the Lord*, which he printed as leading editorials in my name, ignoring all my instructions and protests." Jacobs reported a change in Chumaceiro's attitude. He had become domineering and had asserted that Browne was no longer in charge. One day Jacobs came into the office unexpectedly and noticed a blank sheet of paper with Browne's signature on it. Chumaceiro whisked it away, but not before his visitor saw what it was.<sup>104</sup>

When Browne learned of this he looked at his copy of the contract, noticed for the first time that it did not contain his signature, and realized that the text had been altered on the other copies to give Chumaceiro control.<sup>105</sup>

Consequently, Browne hastened to New Orleans to confront Chumaceiro, who then offered to buy him out. Realizing that he had little choice, Browne accepted the latter's bid of \$6,400, four hundred of which was in the form of a note and, according to Browne, "not worth a cent." It was less than a third of what Browne thought his *Jewish South* was worth.<sup>106</sup>

Still determined to publish, Browne arranged with his colleague in Houston, Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger, who, after emigrating from Amsterdam in 1872, had served several congregations in the east, to join him as co-editor of a new journal that he proposed, called the *Jewish American*. Voorsanger had contributed as a reporter to Wise's *Die Deborah* and presumably had obtained the Houston position in 1878 through Wise's influence.<sup>107</sup> Chumaceiro, too, had contributed articles to Wise and would likely have been indebted to him for his recommendation to Touro Synagogue.

*Advertisement in the Jewish South for Browne's lecture.  
The lecture was presented "under the auspices of the Jewish ladies."  
(Klau Library, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio.)*

Browne bought a new printing office, "spending a little fortune simply because I had Voorsanger's help in New Orleans,"<sup>108</sup> and engaged the aid of distinguished friends in Cincinnati and New York as well as the prominent Civil War veteran Major Raphael J. Moses in Atlanta.<sup>109</sup> The *Jewish American* lasted for less than a year, due to Browne's departure from the South.<sup>110</sup>

The *Jewish South* continued for a short time. Its last known issue, August 5, 1881, contained the announcement that Chumaceiro and Voorsanger would henceforth be the editors. Voorsanger is believed to have edited it in Houston until 1883.<sup>111</sup>

Browne noted, no doubt with pleasure, that Chumaceiro and Voorsanger “did not remain long in friendship together. . . . Soon after they gave each other the lie and called one another the vilest names in the *Israelite*, and finally Wise bought the *Jewish South* and killed it.” Clearly, Browne believed that Wise was behind his loss of the paper, intending to kill it regardless of cost, and saw his opportunity when Chumaceiro came to New Orleans.<sup>112</sup>

#### *Departing Atlanta*

Browne’s next tale of woe related to his position as rabbi of the Temple. According to newspaper accounts<sup>113</sup> and Temple records, in January 1881 the committee for the annual reelection of the rabbi decided not to reelect him by a 4 to 3 vote. The reasons given were that the congregation had not made progress under his leadership and that he did not teach the children. The minority reported that these conditions were not entirely his fault.<sup>114</sup>

Omitted from the minutes of the meeting was the fact that two of the four negative voters, both newcomers to the board, were Jacob Elsas, owner of the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills and reputedly the wealthiest man in the congregation, and wholesale merchant Max Franklin, who headed the reelection committee. Also unrecorded was the fact that during the meeting Elsas had stated publicly that he objected to having a minister who embezzled money. Challenged by members who did not believe such an allegation about Browne, Elsas replied that “two of the most honorable and responsible men in the city . . . [who] were ready to prove it,” told him that the rabbi had accepted money intended to cover the cost of printing and distributing a souvenir newspaper about an Atlantic crossing from fellow passengers on an excursion to Europe the preceding summer. The rumor contended that Browne had used the funds for his own purposes instead of printing the paper. Franklin said that he, too, had heard it.<sup>115</sup>



The meeting adjourned, postponing for two weeks the decision on whether to reelect the rabbi. The next day one of the leaders brought the news to Browne, who had been confined to his house with a broken foot, unhealed after many months of treatment. He immediately produced a copy of the paper in question, "and upon intercession of mutual friends promised to forgive Messrs. Elsas and Franklin provided they name the 'reliable source' . . . or else I should sue them for slander."<sup>116</sup> He thereupon sent the same message to Elsas in a letter. When, by January 14, he had received no response, he filed suit and sent his resignation to the congregation. His reason for suing, he explained, was to vindicate himself. By so doing he would no longer be able to remain as rabbi since "Elsas and Franklin and their relatives controlled the congregation, [and] I knew it was impossible for me to live in peace with a suit against them in the court."<sup>117</sup>

The letter was read at the congregational meeting two days hence. Elsas and Franklin admitted that they were wrong in believing the rabbi guilty of embezzlement, but they refused to reveal the source of the rumor. Apparently, knowing that Browne was committed to residing in Atlanta and even had invested in the construction of two houses there,<sup>118</sup> they assumed that he would back off from the lawsuits. His own attorney advised him to desist, citing the enormous expense involved and the likelihood that the court action would drag on for years. This did not stop the intrepid rabbi. He proceeded to sue Elsas and Franklin, the two most powerful businessmen in the congregation, for \$20,000 each, "publicly binding myself to give the money for charitable and religious purposes."<sup>119</sup>

Even then his situation might not have become desperate had it not been for Howard Williams, publisher of the *Sunday Gazette*, a local weekly, and his reporter, Smith Clayton, who were determined to publish the story with or without the facts. Clayton first asked the rabbi to disclose the nature of the trouble between him and his congregation, to which Browne replied that there was no trouble and he would explain the situation in the next issue of the paper. He sent Williams a letter stating:

Your reporter has just left me and I deem it judicious again to warn you against the publication of statements on the alleged dismissal of mine unless you can upon inquiry give the names of your informers to the public.

From the points your reporter gave me I judge that you have not seen men of both sides, such as Messrs. Aaron and Jacob Haas, A. Rosenfeld, Joseph Hirsch, Levy Cohen, Emanuel and Isaac Steinheimer, Menko Bros., and I think it proper for you to get the statements of those men also if you are resolved to publish the statements of those sent me by Mr. Clayton.<sup>120</sup>

Despite this warning, Williams published the story on January 23 under the headline, "BROTHER BROWNE RECEIVES HIS DISMISSAL FROM THE CONGREGATION, The Capers That Led To It, etc." After repeating the rumors, including one that said Browne had been faking a lame leg in order to receive insurance, at the bottom of a ten-inch column the article added, "This We Do Not Believe," an affirmation that the rabbi was known to have been "a sufferer for months, and is now scarcely able to walk without the aid of his crutches."<sup>121</sup>

Major newspapers from New York to Cincinnati repeated the story adapted according to their own views and in some instances lacking attribution. The *American Israelite* copied it from the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, datelined Atlanta, as early as January 28, 1881.<sup>122</sup>

Browne went to New York to be treated for his broken foot, the infirmity that had caused the delay in printing the souvenir newspaper. He stopped in Washington on February 2 to speak at the Mount Vernon Place Methodist Episcopal Church at the invitation of its pastor, Dr. W. P. Harrison, who was also chaplain of the House of Representatives. Apparently unfettered by his problems in Atlanta, according to the *Washington Star*, he was "more humorous than Mark Twain," while the *National Republican* called his speech "a most interesting and eloquent exposition of the philosophical and literary gems of the Talmud, revealing beauties which gentile eyes have seldom gazed upon."<sup>123</sup>

After several weeks in New York, where he underwent treatment, Browne returned to Atlanta only to discover that the

libel about him had been published in the *New Orleans Democrat*. Friends in Canton and Columbus, Mississippi, as well as Brownsville and Austin, Texas, informed him that the news had reached Jewish communities throughout the South.<sup>124</sup>

Browne knew that the civil case would drag on for years and he needed to clear his name quickly in order to obtain another job. For that reason he brought his charges against Elsas and Franklin to the local B'nai B'rith, since one of the functions of B'nai B'rith in those days was arbitration of disputes between members, the findings then publicized and respected by Jews throughout the country.<sup>125</sup>

Atlanta's Gate City Lodge exerted pressure on Browne to drop the suits in court by threatening to expel him if he refused. He did refuse, whereupon the lodge expelled him for "misbehavior," acquitted Elsas and Franklin, and brought charges against Browne for swearing at the members and leaving the lodge without permission. Browne then appealed to higher courts of B'nai B'rith.<sup>126</sup>

On March 27, the board of trustees of the Temple, at the request of Elsas, adopted a resolution indicating that newspaper stories reporting that Browne was dismissed due to charges affecting his character were contrary to fact and that he had voluntarily withdrawn his candidacy.<sup>127</sup> They sent copies of the resolution to Browne and the *Atlanta Constitution*.<sup>128</sup>

Browne responded by returning the resolutions to the board with a letter stating:

(H)ad you rebuked the slander three months ago, you would have done justice to yourselves, to Judaism and to my family, saving this community at the time a good deal of disgrace; but now, after a delay of THREE LONG MONTHS, so far from disarming suspicion, your action only gives public opinion the assurance that the actions against me must have been true, or else you should not have required three long months of deliberation to refute them. In truth, your resolutions, at this late hour, have the appearance, and are actually looked upon by the public, as a WHITEWASH of the thinnest kind.

He continued with a sixteen point outline of his case, including the fact that his opponents, their relatives, and business partners were trustees of the Temple and their attorney, its president, which stacked the deck against him in any appeal he might make to the congregation. He also mentioned that he had been "charitable" to the two newspapers that consented to retract the libel and repeated his promise to give any money collected from the suits to charitable institutions. He furthermore announced his intention to take the case to the council of the UAHC at its next meeting.<sup>129</sup>

Browne's letter was published in the *American Israelite* on April 22, along with a disclaimer that it had "neither libeled Mr. Browne nor offered a retraction," but had merely copied the article in question from the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. If the rabbi felt himself aggrieved, the editor expressed his willingness to "give him an opportunity to explain." This apparently was the genesis of a libel suit that Browne subsequently brought against the *American Israelite* and thus indirectly against his one-time father figure, I. M. Wise. Browne had already contacted a New York attorney about suing other offending newspapers mainly in the New York area.<sup>130</sup>

His lawsuits were appealed from one court to the other on demurrers to gain time and bring him to yield, but he would not budge. Finally he won in the highest B'nai B'rith court, which insured that the case would be tried. A compromise was proposed but still he rejected it. When he perceived that his lawyer had been bribed in favor of a settlement, he hired another lawyer. Ultimately he won his case in B'nai B'rith, the lodge reinstated him, and Elsas gave a written apology besides paying all court costs. Isaac Frisch, a relative who had lived temporarily with the Brownes in Atlanta, reported that the rabbi had accepted only to please his wife.<sup>131</sup>

Even after five years of litigation and untold expense, and having forgiven Elsas and Franklin, Browne still did not know the identity of the two "honorable" men who initiated the trouble by starting the rumor about him. Finally in 1889, through friends in New York, he learned who they were. One was identified as Dr.

Henry Back, a newcomer to Atlanta whom Browne had helped and used as his family physician. We do not know his motive, but it could have been resentment at Browne for having sought medical help elsewhere after Back had been unable to heal the rabbi's broken foot. The other informant was Samuel Weil, Atlanta's "Jewish lawyer" who was president of the congregation in 1881 at the time that the rumor was launched. Frisch noted that some Atlantans believed that Weil, married to an Irish Catholic, hated Browne for having preached against intermarriage. Also incriminated was Senator William Loewenstein, of Richmond, the lawyer who had been appointed by Aaron Haas as Browne's defender before the B'nai B'rith Grand Lodge, who was later dismissed for selling him out.<sup>132</sup>

As a result of the foregoing events, friends deserted the Brownes and Sophie suffered a mental breakdown. When the rabbi applied for vacant pulpits in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Portland, Oregon, his reputation had been so damaged that the congregations did not even bother to reply. The Atlanta & Piedmont Railroad hired him to edit its "Emigration" paper but reneged when the owners heard of the libel.<sup>133</sup>

Then Senator (former governor) Joseph E. Brown and Representative Alexander Stephens of Georgia and Senator John A. Logan of Illinois asked President James A. Garfield to appoint him to a diplomatic post. The president wrote him on March 26 that he could have the consulship in Jerusalem if it became available, otherwise he would be sent to Port Said or Alexandria. He informed Browne that his name would go to the Senate as soon as the current deadlock, presumably that of the "Half-Breeds" versus the "Stalwarts," rival factions of the Republican Party, was over. The deadlock lasted longer than expected, during which time someone showed President Garfield newspaper stories about the scandal. That ended the rabbi's prospects, but nonetheless he visited President Garfield in the White House on July 2, 1881, to plead his cause in person.<sup>134</sup>

Next Browne reported that the trustees of Baltimore's Lloyd Street Temple had invited him to be their rabbi, assuring him that ratification by the congregation at its next meeting would be a

mere formality and he should prepare to move his family to Baltimore. He complied, selling his houses at a loss, only to be turned back again when the Baltimore congregation saw newspaper articles charging him with dishonesty.<sup>135</sup>

By then in financial straits, he agreed to a debating tour on Judaism versus Christianity with a Christian minister, L. W. Scott of Texas, who had been soliciting him for the project for four years. As Browne recalled, it was "eagerly looked for by the Jews and Gentiles in Texas particularly." Browne said that he and the minister had invitations from throughout the state, but after everything was arranged, "even the opera house engaged in Texarkana . . . Rev. Scott wrote me that my reputation on account of the libel had become so bad that it is no honor for him to debate with me."<sup>136</sup>

The "cruellest blow of all" occurred when his publishers reneged on two books long advertised and already in the process of being printed. One was his *Encyclopedia of Jewish Beauties*, based on his lectures on the Talmud, for which "at least four hundred parties subscribed." Listed among them were "Henry W. Longfellow, Governor Alexander H. Stephens and Senator Brown of Georgia, Rev. Dr. W. P. Harrison, Rev. Dr. John P. Newman . . . Senator John A. Logan, and the late President Garfield. . . ." <sup>137</sup>

As a last resort, Browne accepted the pulpit at New York's Congregation Gates of Hope, "a broken-down little obscure congregation without even a house of worship of their own." <sup>138</sup> Although that description of his next congregation was accurate, Browne did not remain obscure either in New York or in any other of the numerous communities whose congregations he served. He immediately started another newspaper, the *Jewish Herald*, publicized abuses of immigrant aid, and fought successfully for the passage of laws on education, labor, and excused absences from public school for Jewish children on the High Holy Days.<sup>139</sup> In 1885, he attracted public notice for representing the Jewish people as a pallbearer in the state funeral of President Ulysses S. Grant. In 1887, he used his legal skills *pro bono* to save the life of an innocent Jewish immigrant convicted of murdering

*Henry Wadsworth  
Longfellow's order for  
Browne's book.  
(Courtesy of the Jacob Rader  
Marcus Center,  
American Jewish Archives,  
Cincinnati, Ohio.)*

his wife. The following year he became an activist for the Republican Party and helped elect Benjamin Harrison as president so that he could persuade Harrison to appoint a Jew to his cabinet. In 1897 he befriended Theodore Herzl prior to the First Zionist Congress, advising him, "Should Palestine not be available to us, there is this beautiful Florida," and offering to help him introduce Zionism to America.<sup>140</sup> He also traveled widely in Palestine on missions to combat European antisemitism.<sup>141</sup>

While continuing to be admired by Christians and loved by the Jewish immigrants he championed, Browne became increasingly at odds with the Jewish establishment. New York business moguls condemned him because of his liberal leanings toward labor and anti-trust legislation, and their rabbis opposed him because he spoke out effectively against the assimilationist policies



that they championed.<sup>142</sup> When the trend considered today as excesses of Classical Reform accelerated, he grew more pessimistic in his outlook and more vehement in expressing it. In 1889, he said that the state of American Judaism

is getting worse still. Wait five years, ten years longer and the Jewish pulpit will be the seat of infidelity and atheism. You will have no Sabbath, no Yom Kippur, no Milah. The "Sochet" [shokhet] is already gone, the "mohel" is soon to follow. Your sons will 'mix' marriages or do worse by not marrying the "Shiksah" at all. The next decade will find only "Schweinefleisch Juden," for there will be only "Schweinefleisch Rabbis" . . .<sup>143</sup>

During the early twentieth century, while a few like-minded rabbis were engaged in developing Conservative Judaism, Browne served congregations committed to those views if not already openly identified with the movement. Had Reconstructionism been defined then, it is possible that Browne would have found it even more compatible with his beliefs.

Although his long and stormy career took Browne to eight or nine cities after his departure from Atlanta, including eight years of the turbulent 1880s in New York, and from 1893 to 1901 in Columbus, Georgia, he and his wife Sophie continued to consider Columbus their home. He died there in 1929, she in 1936. Both are buried in their family plot in Atlanta's Crestlawn Cemetery.

Who was Edward Benjamin Morris Browne? Was he only a charismatic egotist with a touch of paranoia as his family suspected? A growing body of evidence suggests that the paranoia may have been rooted in reality. His personality was a complex mixture of engaging charm, a keen sense of humor, and, alas, a contentious, stubborn pride that too often became his undoing.

In these and many additional ways he was typical of other nineteenth century American rabbis, immigrants who had acquired a secular as well as Jewish education in Europe. Although unusual in his numerous and diverse educational accomplishments, like several other rabbis he was a prolific writer, editor, and publisher; short tempered and long winded, given to hyperbole and self-aggrandizement, rarely remaining with one



*Browne at the author's home in Atlanta, 1927.  
(From the collection of Janice Rothschild Blumberg.)*

congregation for more than a few years. He, like they, conflicted with synagogue leaders over issues on which the laity itself was divided; issues often as petty and personal as they were substantive and serious. He was a maverick in an era when America attracted many mavericks, especially those who saw themselves as men of the cloth; an individualist, when outspoken Jewish individualists were often considered dangerous by other Jews. Browne, like other reformers, believed that the greatest promise of America was the freedom to participate fully both as citizens and as Jews, and he did not hesitate to put these precepts into practice. His years in Atlanta comprised a cardinal and formative stage in his professional life as well as in the development of the congregation and the community that he served.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Atlanta Constitution*, September 1, 1877.

<sup>2</sup> Janice O. Rothschild, *As But a Day to a Hundred and Twenty, 1867–1987* (Atlanta, 1987), 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 22, 44.

<sup>4</sup> The town is now Presov, Slovakia. It is near Kaschau, now called Kosice.

<sup>5</sup> Portion of book galley prepared as a tribute to Browne by the Hebrew American Republican League in 1889, 52, (hereafter cited as book galley), E. B. M. Browne Collection, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of American Jewish Archives (AJA), Cincinnati (hereafter cited as Browne Collection, AJA).

<sup>6</sup> Eva Glasberg deposition, Box 8, case files, *Browne, Edward B. M. v. Jones*, 1881–1883, Isaiah Thornton Williams Collection, New York Public Library (hereafter cited as Williams Collection).

<sup>7</sup> Browne would have been at the impressionable age of seven when the outspoken reform rabbi David Einhorn, who headed a liberal synagogue in Budapest in 1852, had to leave two months later when the government closed his synagogue because it and he advocated reforms. For Reform in Hungary, see Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York, 1988), 157–163.

<sup>8</sup> E. B. M. Browne deposition, *Browne v. Jones*, 1881–1883, Williams Collection (hereafter cited as Browne deposition, NYPL).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Floral House Weeds*, Browne Collection, AJA.

<sup>11</sup> Conversations with Browne's daughter, Lylah Browne Goldberg, 1950–1960; Browne deposition, NYPL.

<sup>12</sup> Louis J. Swichkow and Lloyd P. Gardner, *History of the Jews of Milwaukee* (Philadelphia, 1963), 179.

<sup>13</sup> Browne deposition, NYPL.

<sup>14</sup> Rothschild, *As But a Day*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Case files, *Browne v. Jones*, Williams Collection; Browne deposition, NYPL.

<sup>16</sup> Wisconsin Jewish Archives, Bulletin of Wisconsin Society for Jewish Learning (May 1960).

<sup>17</sup> Browne Collection, AJA.

<sup>18</sup> Case files, Williams Collection; Browne deposition, NYPL.

<sup>19</sup> Goldberg, Conversations.

<sup>20</sup> Correspondence, Browne Collection, AJA; Record Group 59, Letters of Application and Recommendation for the Grant Administration, National Archives, College Park, MD. Browne's friendship with Grant progressed sufficiently for him to be an honorary pallbearer in Grant's funeral and to maintain a lifelong friendship with the Grant family. His connection with the family was such that the president's granddaughter, returning to America in 1925 after many years in Europe as the wife of Prince Cantacuzene, wrote him a warm letter of reminiscence to say that she was pleased to discover that he was still alive and well. See Cantacuzene to Browne, December 4, 1927, Browne Collection, AJA.

<sup>21</sup> Record Group 59.

<sup>22</sup> [Springfield, Illinois] *State Journal*, January 19, 1874.

<sup>23</sup> Browne to Rev. L. W. Scott, February 3, 1878, in response to request to tour Texas with Scott in debates, copied in *Jewish South*, March 29, 1878.

<sup>24</sup> Malcolm H. Stern, "The Role of the Rabbi in the South," in Nathan Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky, eds., *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry*, (Charlottesville, VA, 1970), 21-32.

<sup>25</sup> *New York Herald*, July 22, 1872.

<sup>26</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, December 18, 1874 (from reprint in Browne collection, AJA).

<sup>27</sup> *Indianapolis Sentinel*, January 17, 1876.

<sup>28</sup> Hebrew Benevolent Congregation board minutes, 1877, Joseph and Ida Pearl Cuba Archives, William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, Atlanta (hereafter cited as Breman Museum); Browne deposition, *Browne v. Burke*, Browne Collection, AJA (hereafter cited as Browne deposition, AJA).

<sup>29</sup> *Columbus Enquirer-Sun*, March 30, 1877; Browne deposition, AJA.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City: Jews of Atlanta, 1845-1915* (Philadelphia, 1978), 231. A major tenet of Reform was to abandon the idea of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, hence Reform congregations throughout America referred to their places of worship as temples rather than as synagogues.

<sup>31</sup> Rothschild, *As But a Day*, 24-43.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-61.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>36</sup> There is no record of auctioning honors during services at the Temple.

<sup>37</sup> *Jewish South*, October 14, 1877.

<sup>38</sup> Rothschild, *As But a Day*, 33.

<sup>39</sup> Application for B'nai B'rith membership, Browne collection, AJA; Rothschild, *As But a Day*, 31-33.

<sup>40</sup> *Atlanta City Directory*, 1878, 135.

<sup>41</sup> *Jewish South*, October 14, 1877, August 15, 1879.

- <sup>42</sup> His salary in Montgomery was \$2,500. Browne deposition, NYPL.
- <sup>43</sup> Case files, Williams Collection; Browne deposition, AJA.
- <sup>44</sup> Browne deposition, AJA.
- <sup>45</sup> Rothschild, *As But a Day*, 17.
- <sup>46</sup> Proceedings of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, AJA.
- <sup>47</sup> *Jewish South*, March 21, 1879.
- <sup>48</sup> Rothschild, *As But a Day*, 18, 46.
- <sup>49</sup> Review of his sermon in Selma, AL, *Jewish South*, June 8, 1879.
- <sup>50</sup> *Atlanta Constitution*, September 25, 1870.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>52</sup> *Atlanta Constitution*, September 28, 1878, October 9, 1878.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, July 5, 1878; Browne deposition, NYPL.
- <sup>54</sup> *Jewish South*, July 5, 1878, September 20, 1878.
- <sup>55</sup> *Jewish South*, January 24, 1879. This fund was the forerunner of the Jewish Educational Loan Fund established in 1876 by B'nai B'rith District Lodge 5.
- <sup>56</sup> [New York] *Graphic*, August 8, 1885.
- <sup>57</sup> *Jewish South*, June 6, 1879.
- <sup>58</sup> *Jewish South*, October 14, 1877.
- <sup>59</sup> Kenneth Libo, *A People in Print: Jewish Journalism in America* (Philadelphia, 1987).
- <sup>60</sup> Sefton D. Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise: Shaping American Judaism* (New York and Oxford, 1992), 208.
- <sup>61</sup> *Jewish South*, October 14, 1877.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, October 14, 1877.
- <sup>66</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, December 7, 1877.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, March 29, 1878.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, October 14, 1877.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, February 22, 1878.
- <sup>70</sup> Louis Schmier, *Reflections of Southern Jewry: The Letters of Charles Wessolowsky 1878–1879* (Macon, 1982).
- <sup>71</sup> See, for example, *Jewish South*, June 18, 1879.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, October 14, 1877.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, September 27, 1878.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, February 22, 1878.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, December 7, 1877.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, February 15, 1878.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, March 21, 1879.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, May 9, 1879.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, May 18, 1879.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, May 18, 1879, June 8 1879.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, January 4, 1878.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, February 22, 1878.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, June 28, 1878.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, June 7, 1878; also *Atlanta Constitution*, July 23, 1878, reported by Cincinnati correspondent, *New York World*.

<sup>87</sup> Browne to Wise, June 9, 1878, Browne Collection, AJA.

<sup>88</sup> *Jewish South*, January 18, 1878.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, February 8, 1878. It was customary to send letters and articles under fanciful names. The *Israelite* published a lengthy sarcastic attack upon the *Jewish South* from someone signed "Mordechai" also from Florence, AL, on February 1, 1878. Presumably this was the "fabrication" referred to above.

<sup>91</sup> *Jewish South*, March 21, 1879.

<sup>92</sup> Bertram W. Korn, *Eventful Years and Experiences* (Philadelphia, 1954), 214-215; Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 62-64.

<sup>93</sup> Wise to Browne, March 28, 1873, Browne Collection, AJA.

<sup>94</sup> Book galley.

<sup>95</sup> *Israelite*, February 11, 1876.

<sup>96</sup> Feigl deposition, case files, *E. B. M. Browne v. I. M. Wise*, Box 8, Williams Collection.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, Adolph Sanger to Committee (Hebrew Republican League, New York), January 14, 1889; book galley.

<sup>98</sup> Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise*, 284.

<sup>99</sup> Book galley, notes 163.

<sup>100</sup> Suzanne R. White, "Much Good In Small Places," appendix I, (Emory University honors paper, 1982).

<sup>101</sup> Book galley, see notes pages 164-165, Browne, AJA.

<sup>102</sup> *Jewish South*, September 13, 1878.

<sup>103</sup> Book galley, notes, 163-165.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, (London, 1901), s.v. "Voorsanger, Jacob"; Voorsanger File, I. M. Wise Collection, AJA. Voorsanger later went to San Francisco where he became a prominent spiritual leader, editor, and professor. It was customary for congregations then to obtain their rabbis through recommendation either by Wise or by the more traditional Rabbi Marcus Jastrow.

<sup>108</sup> Evidently Voorsanger had little difficulty traveling between Houston and New Orleans.

<sup>109</sup> Browne deposition, AJA.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, (London, 1901), s.v. "Voorsanger, Jacob"

<sup>112</sup> Book galley, 165.

<sup>113</sup> [Atlanta] *Sunday Gazette*, January 23, 1881; Temple records, 1881, Breman Museum.

<sup>114</sup> Rothschild, *As But a Day*, 18-19.

<sup>115</sup> Browne deposition, AJA.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Presumably he and Sophie had money of their own. Both came from wealthy families.

<sup>119</sup> Browne deposition, AJA.

<sup>120</sup> Browne to H. Williams, January 21, 1881, exhibit B, case files, Browne collection, AJA.

<sup>121</sup> *Sunday Gazette*, January 23, 1881, copy in Exhibit D, Browne deposition, AJA.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Washington Star*, February 3, 1881; *National Republican*, February 3, 1881.

<sup>124</sup> Browne deposition, AJA.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Book galley, notes, 134; Browne deposition, AJA.

<sup>127</sup> Temple Board Minutes, March 24, 1881 (copy in Browne case files, Williams Collection).

<sup>128</sup> Browne to Temple Board, April 6, 1881, published in *American Israelite*, April 22, 1881.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Browne to Williams, March 23, 1881, E. B. M. Browne correspondence, American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY.

<sup>131</sup> Isaac Frisch deposition May 4, 1889, copy in book galley notes, 136.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> Browne deposition, AJA.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Jewish Herald*, February 23, 1883–August 29, 1884, HUC microfilm.

<sup>140</sup> Browne to Herzl, August 29, 1897, Browne file, Herzl Collection, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

<sup>141</sup> Browne collection, AJA; Browne Family Collection in the author's possession.

<sup>142</sup> Book galley.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.