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Rabbi Bernard Illowy: Counter Reformer

by

Irwin Lachoff

As an enlightened, assimilationist Judaism evolved in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, a handful of religious teachers fought to preserve orthodoxy in America. One such leader was Rabbi Bernard Illowy, who for almost twenty years published articles and preached from pulpits imploring the Jews of America to embrace tradition and reject reform. From 1861 until 1865 Illowy served as minister at Congregation Shanarai Chasset, or Gates of Mercy, in New Orleans, one of the least religious communities in the country. During his four-year ministry at Gates of Mercy Illowy not only failed to energize the congregation but also served as an unwitting catalyst for Reform Judaism in the city. With the end of the Civil War and the impending return to New Orleans of the city's most esteemed Jewish leader, the Reverend James Koppel Gutheim, Rabbi Illowy bowed to the inevitable and resigned his position. A review of Illowy's career illustrates the weaknesses of the rabbinate in relation to lay power and changing religious dynamics, the frustrations of religious indifference encountered by orthodox leaders in the United States, and the corresponding affinity for, if not the inevitability of, Reform Judaism in nineteenth century America.

The Jewish Community of Antebellum New Orleans

Antebellum New Orleans was a boomtown that, by the 1830s, had become one of the country's major seaports. As a transportation hub the city was home to a large transient popula-

tion. Everyone, including those who settled in New Orleans more permanently, sought fortune. Disease, primarily yellow fever, claimed many lives. Vice and violence were common. Meanwhile, an accommodating Catholic clergy succumbed to a nominal Catholicism. The members of other denominations joined with the Catholic majority in only an occasional foray with prayer.¹ In “this ungodly city,” where “the sanctions of law and religion” were often afterthoughts, men pursued more worldly concerns.²

In spring 1827 Jacob Solis, a New York businessman, arrived in New Orleans on an extended business trip. The day before Passover Solis attempted to purchase matzo to celebrate the exodus from Egypt. Failing to find any available, he baked his own. Infuriated by the lack of any Jewish communal organization, Solis decided to create a congregation himself, and, in fall 1827, Congregation Shanarai Chasset was organized.³ Influenced by Solis’ Sephardic background, the new congregation adopted the Sephardic *minhag*, even though the majority of members were of German or Alsatian origin and followed Ashkenazic ritual.⁴

The constitution of the congregation acknowledged certain realities of the city’s Jewish community. Some three-quarters of the thirty-four charter members were married to gentile women. The constitution allowed these “strange” spouses to be buried in the congregational cemetery, albeit in a walled off section to the side. Even more contrary to Jewish law, the constitution allowed the children of these spouses to be considered members of the congregation and, therefore, Jewish.⁵

German migration to the United States flowed in earnest by the 1830s and continued into the 1850s. With a direct line from Bremen to New Orleans, the city became a major point of entry for Germans making their way up the Mississippi River to the Midwest. Immigrants from the west side of the Rhine River, in particular Alsace and Lorraine, were also drawn to the city because of the preponderance of the French language and culture.⁶ New Jewish arrivals joined the only congregation in the city and in 1842 the now overwhelmingly Ashkenazic membership voted to exchange the old constitution with a new charter that replaced

Rabbi Bernard Illowy

*(From Henry Illoway's book about his father,
Sefer Milchamot Elo-him, published in Berlin, in 1914.)*

the Sephardic ritual with the Ashkenazic rites. Albert I. "Roley" Marks, local actor and "poet laureate of the New Orleans Fire Department," served as the volunteer hazan of the congregation. During the High Holy Days that year, Marks, barely fluent in the Sephardic ritual or pronunciations but even less so in the Ashkenazic, lead the service in the Sephardic style he learned in his youth. Several Ashkenazic members, disturbed by Marks's use of

the recently revoked liturgy, protested loudly. Finally, Marks proclaimed for all to hear, "Jesus Christ, I have a right to pray!"⁷

Gershom Kursheedt, son of the New York Jewish community leader Israel Baer Kursheedt and associate of Isaac Leeser, publisher of *The Occident* and one of America's leading advocates of traditional Judaism, arrived in New Orleans in 1836 to enter business with his brother-in-law, Benjamin Florance. Upon his arrival he joined Gates of Mercy and quickly became a congregational leader. The first truly religious Jew in the city, Kursheedt led the fight to restrict membership to those married within the faith and to discontinue the burial of children of gentile mothers in the congregational cemetery. In 1845 Kursheedt spearheaded the organization of a Sephardic congregation, which he named Nefutzoth Yehudah, or Dispersed of Judah, in honor of one of the city's preeminent Jewish citizens, Judah Touro, and Touro's father, Isaac. The latter had served as hazan at Congregation Nefutzoth Yisroel, or Dispersed of Israel, in Newport, Rhode Island. Two years later Touro presented the new congregation with property he owned on the corner of Canal and Bourbon Streets, the former Christ Church, which was remodeled and finally dedicated on May 14, 1850, as the first synagogue in the city. Kursheedt and Touro selected the Reverend Moses N. Nathan to serve as minister.⁸

The members of Gates of Mercy, jealous of the upstart congregation, redoubled their efforts. Soon after the Touro donation to Dispersed of Judah, Gates of Mercy began to search for a hazan, a "gentleman of good moral character who can give a good English discourse, is well versed in the Holy Tongue and capable of giving instructions in the same." Consequently, in 1849 the congregation elected James Koppel Gutheim to the position.⁹

Gutheim was born in Menne, District of Warburg, Westphalia, in 1817. He studied at the Teachers' Seminary in Muenster and then with Rabbi Abraham Sutro, who granted Gutheim a diploma in Hebraic proficiency, but without rabbinical ordination. From 1838 to 1842 Gutheim served as preacher and teacher in Sedenhorst, Westphalia.¹⁰ When he arrived in New York in 1843 he worked in his brother's counting room and taught Hebrew

school.¹¹ In 1846 he moved to Cincinnati to serve as lecturer and reader at Congregation Bene Israel and moved to Bene Jeshurun the following year.¹² In 1849 Gutheim announced to the Board at Bene Jeshurun that he had been in communication with the Portuguese congregation of New Orleans (Dispersed of Judah), that he intended to take up the position of minister there and therefore would not be a candidate for that position in the next election at Bene Jeshurun. Even with this announcement, Gutheim almost won reelection.¹³ Within a year, however, he was in New Orleans, not as minister at the "Portuguese congregation," but at Gates of Mercy.

Meanwhile, Gutheim also had been nominated for the pulpit of Congregation Emanu El in San Francisco, which position he declined. Gutheim's popularity resulted from his being one of the few Jewish religious leaders in the country who could speak and write fluently in English.¹⁴ Gutheim remained at Gates of Mercy for only three years before moving to Dispersed of Judah, whose members were socially prominent, wealthier, and able to offer a sizable salary increase.

On March 5, 1851, the members of Gates of Mercy dedicated their newly built synagogue in the five hundred block of North Rampart Street on the edge of the French Quarter. They had been meeting in a small building, with poor acoustics, in the same location. That building was demolished and the new synagogue replaced it.¹⁵ After Gutheim departed in 1853 Dr. Hermann Kohlmeyer occasionally served as a temporary minister. Kohlmeyer was highly respected for his religious knowledge and had been appointed by Isaac Mayer Wise to serve as a member of the *beth din*, which was to examine Wise's proposed prayer book, *Minhag America*. Eventually Kohlmeyer decided to forgo a career in the ministry and instead pursued a career in education, teaching Hebrew and Oriental literature at the University of Louisiana (now Tulane University). As Rabbi Maximillian Heller of Temple Sinai later wrote, Kohlmeyer's "shrinking modesty and his retiring habits probably unfitted him for the responsibilities of the spiritual leader."¹⁶

Bernard Illowy's Origins and Education

Bernard Illowy first visited New Orleans in January 1856 to deliver a series of lectures at Gates of Mercy.¹⁷ The leaders of the congregation were impressed with his knowledge, presence, and speaking ability. Illowy was without a pulpit at the time and some discussion took place about his becoming minister, but no official offer was tendered. The Reverend Solomon Jacobs was elected minister in 1859. After Jacobs's death the following year, congregational leaders were delighted to entice Illowy to New Orleans. The congregation quickly learned that Illowy suffered from neither "shrinking modesty" nor "retiring habits."

Illowy, born in Kolin, Bohemia, on April 14, 1814,¹⁸ came from a long line of learned rabbis and teachers. His great-grandfather, Rabbi Phineas Illowy, was *haus* rabbi, or private chaplain, to the Oppenheim family of Moravia, the most influential Jewish family in the Austrian empire. Bernard's grandfather, Rabbi Jacob Illowy, moved the family to Kolin, where he headed the second largest congregation in the kingdom of Bohemia. Bernard's father, Rabbi Jacob Joseph, was in business and did not have a pulpit, but was renowned for his learning and attracted many students. In 1842 Bernard married Katherine Schiff, the daughter of Wolf Schiff, a prominent merchant of Raudnitz, Bohemia. Through his in-laws Illowy probably heard of, if not actually met, the young firebrand rabbi of Raudnitz, Isaac Mayer Wise.¹⁹

Illowy received *smicha* from Rabbi Moshe Sofer at the renowned yeshiva in Pressburg, Hungary, and a Ph.D. in Languages and Classics from the University of Budapest. He attended the Collegio Rabbinico Italiano, headed by Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto, in Padua, Italy. This yeshiva, one of the first orthodox seminaries to combine secular with traditional Jewish learning, integrated a scientific approach to the study of traditional Jewish text.²⁰

During his years of study Illowy encountered an environment infused with Western culture and increased religious freedom. While influenced by modernization, Illowy, unlike many

maskilim, refused to forsake orthodoxy. Illowy believed orthodoxy should, and could, be maintained in an enlightened world. His secular training allowed for change but without clearly defined limits.²¹

At the completion of his studies in Padua he returned to Kolin to teach. During the widespread revolts of 1848 Illowy spoke in the public square of Kolin in support of revolutionary forces as they marched through town on their way to Prague. Later, when returning from a trip to Paris, a cursory inspection of his belongings by border authorities revealed a stamp proclaiming "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité." These two incidents on his record marked Illowy as a subversive by the authorities. In 1850 he applied for the position of rabbi in Hesse, Germany. The local Jewish community voted their overwhelming approval, but the Minister of the Interior vetoed the appointment. Soon ever-increasing censorship, antisemitism, and police surveillance convinced Illowy it was time to immigrate to America.

American Reform and the Counter Reformer

In early 1852 he arrived in the United States where he found what Leon Jick has described as "a Jewry in a state of flux, lacking in direction or program but increasingly prosperous, full of energy, pursuing a variety of options."²² Assimilated lay leaders, still nominally traditional, strictly controlled the clergy. By the mid-1850s all of the leading religious leaders, from Leiser in Philadelphia, Gustavus Poznanski in Charleston, Max Lilenthiel and Leo Merzbacher in New York, Abraham Rice in Baltimore, and even Isaac Mayer Wise in Albany, had either lost their positions or been forced to resign. Meanwhile, as Marc Lee Raphael explains, "The liberal spirit of the land, the absence of a vigorous and traditional Jewry to oppose reforms, and the desire, once again, to articulate a Jewish ritual in the idiom of the times for those who found the ancient way no longer to their liking, combined to spur reform in the United States."²³

Illowy hoped to fit into this milieu as a defender of traditional Judaism in the modern world. For Illowy, an enlightened, assimilationist Judaism in America had to be set within the

framework of the immutable halacha. Reformers, meanwhile, were attempting to alter the old ways, to modernize or Americanize what they considered a "medieval" religion. Illowy was soon drawn to defend the true faith to counter this Jewish Reformation. And just as was the case with the Catholics in Luther's Wittenberg, politics, together with a desire for religious modernization, would lead to Illowy's failure.

Already preeminent among the reformers at the time of Illowy's arrival was Isaac Mayer Wise. Wise's personality was perfectly attuned to America, which was, according to Michael Meyer, "a place where individuals could freely elaborate their own views and seek to convince others of their validity. Very little was fixed; most everything was being shaped. Religion was untrammelled by state control . . . but was only necessary to show that the ancestral faith was well suited to American values . . . consistency, moreover, was simply not his highest value."²⁴ Jick describes Wise as magnetic and flexible, progressive and traditional.²⁵ His primary goal, which he eventually achieved through the Reform movement, was an Americanized Judaism. Meyer explains, "But it must be emphasized that the precise ultimate course of Reform, whether moderate or radical, was not really Wise's basic concern. He was determined above all else to establish a stronger and united Judaism in America, and he was quite ready to be flexible in utilizing whatever organizational means or unifying philosophy could most effectively achieve that end."²⁶

But flexibility and compromise had little place within Illowy's Judaism. For the next twenty years the two battled in the Jewish press: *Occident*, *Asmonian*, *Jewish Messenger*, and Wise's own, *American Israelite*, often with bitter, insulting, and sarcastic attacks; Wise, on the offensive, continually advancing the causes of reform and enlightenment, while Illowy fought a rear-guard defense of orthodoxy. Nonetheless, perhaps because of a relationship forged in Raudnitz through Illowy's in-laws, they were and remained personal friends. After Illowy moved to Cincinnati in 1865, the two met regularly to engage in friendly, spirited, and, no doubt, unyielding discussion.

Beginning with the Cleveland Conference in 1855, the Reform movement within American Judaism began to evolve into an autonomous denomination, free from orthodoxy. Yet Illowy was one of the signers of the original call for the conference. He hoped to establish a formal union of American synagogues, discuss the preparation of an American prayer book, and plan for the education of Jewish youth. Ultimately, however, he did not attend the meeting. Illowy suspected “that the conference agenda would be dominated by reformist thinkers,” a fear that proved all too correct.²⁷

Just months after the Cleveland Conference, Temple Emanuel in New York, guided by its religious leader, the Reverend Leo Merzbacher, published the reform prayer book *Seder Tefilla: The Order of Prayer for Divine Service*, a fundamental revision of Jewish theology. Eager to delete religious beliefs deemed either irrelevant or offensive in modern life, Merzbacher shortened the service, altered prayers relating to the coming of the Messiah, and eliminated references to animal sacrifices and the restoration of the Temple.²⁸

At the time Illowy was the minister at the United Hebrew Congregation in St. Louis. Asked by the leadership of the congregation whether the new prayer book could be incorporated, Illowy responded by issuing a public *cherum* on anyone using the book either in the synagogue or at home. Illowy wrote a sarcastic letter to the *Occident* in which he ascribed interest in the new prayer book due “partly, perhaps by the beauty of the binding and the fineness of the paper . . . and partly perhaps by the brevity of its contents.” He could not support the adoption of the book, he explained:

For this book regards the words of revelation, the sayings of the prophets and those sublime truths which made our fathers happy . . . those truths which upheld and sustained them amidst the incongruous mass of nations they were among . . . for which they encountered the most terrible death, and for which they shed their precious blood — as mere fiction.²⁹

Two years later Wise published *Minhag America: The Daily Prayers*, his liturgy for America’s Jews. This was a further

pared-down prayer book, reflecting, in Wise's view, the temperament and beliefs of the Jews in modern America. Purged of excessive repetition, the service was less cumbersome, making it more meaningful and decorous. No more preoccupied with the mysticism of earlier ages, "Two thirds of American Israelites neither expect nor wish the coming of the Messiah King and the prayer book should be the common good for all," Wise explained in the *American Israelite*.³⁰

The following year the most radical of the reformers, David Einhorn, published his prayer book, *Olat Tamid*. Einhorn excluded even more traditional prayers and what remained was almost entirely in German, not the sacred Hebrew. With this steadily increasing radicalism, Illowy wanted to caution the Jews of America concerning the reformers and their reforms. Signing as "A Jew of Syracuse," where he was then minister at Congregation Knesset Israel, he wrote a letter to the *Occident*, titled, "Whom Shall We Follow? A Letter to My Brothers in Israel," and attacked.³¹

Illowy complained, "Israelites of this country esteem nothing holy in their houses, nothing holy in their lives, and stand before the world without a God, without a faith." He cautioned his fellow Jews about their new religious leaders, "Do not allow yourselves to be misguided any longer by false teachers, by the faithless shepherds who lead God's flock on poisonous pastures. . . . Withdraw yourselves from the false prophets, who only desire to obtain paltry lucre—while, however, they do not mean to be honest, either toward you or God." He then explained that these men were simply salesmen who "deal with truth as with ordinary merchandise, laying aside what is no longer fashionable, and changing, for this reason, their views, from day to day, because, they must manufacture their principles anew, to have them always in accordance with the popular taste."³²

Then he turned to Wise's *A History of the Israelitish Nation*, in which Wise, according to Illowy, rejected a belief in revelation and described himself as non-Jewish, nevertheless, as Illowy incredulously proclaimed, "continued still farther to follow the calling of a Jewish religious teacher." Illowy asked:

How can you, brothers, entrust you and your children's salvation unto such a man, who turns like a bulrush in the direction of every wind, and reels to and fro like an inebriate, and finds a firm footing nowhere? Will you be asked to be instructed by a man who plays his own game with sacred truth, who deals with so much levity with the holiest things, who has even no principle, and changes his position constantly?

*Illowy in New Orleans: "Where Rabbis Dare to Declare
Oysters Kosher for Jews"*

When the Civil War erupted, Illowy was serving as minister of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. In his sermon given on January 4, 1861, the National Fast Day proclaimed by President Buchanan, Illowy, while not condoning slavery, fretted over the southerner's loss of rights. "Who can blame our brethren of the South for seceding from a society whose government cannot, or will not, protect the property, rights and privileges of a great part of the Union against the encroachments of a majority misguided by some influential, ambitious aspirants and selfish politicians."³³ A few months earlier the Reverend Jacobs of Gates of Mercy in New Orleans had passed away. In view of Illowy's apparent southern sympathies, the leaders of the congregation once again offered him the pulpit. This time he agreed, helped in large part by a tripling of his salary to three thousand dollars a year. In September 1861 he arrived in New Orleans just in time to celebrate the Jewish New Year.

Illowy was immediately faced with a question of halacha: was it permissible to have a choir? He ruled that as long as the members were Jewish males it was permissible, and in October 1861 a seven-member choir was organized by the hazan, S. Moses. Among the members was Frederick Hollander, a future president of the congregation, who would become one of Illowy's bitterest critics.³⁴

In his decision about the choir and in other decisions described below, Illowy demonstrated an unwillingness to veer too far from tradition. But how much was *too far*? This was a key dilemma the rabbis faced. Change, adjustment, and compromise

seemed inevitable but only when minimizing the erosion of the essence and laws of the religion. During the nineteenth century rabbis drew their own end lines in different places, some of which they moved over time and under different circumstances. Yet each one believed that they had the correct marker, which meant that inevitably their rivals were not only wrong but that they jeopardized the very survival of Judaism.

Even though Illowy knew the Jews of New Orleans had a reputation for religious laxity, he was still appalled by their indifference and lack of religious knowledge. Many of the members did not even know their Hebrew names. In April 1862, because of this deficiency, Illowy agreed to the calling to the Torah by number rather than name.³⁵ This practice was instituted in other congregations and considered a reform, but again Illowy ruled it permissible not in the name of reform but in the interest of decorum and in the hope of involving more men in the service. Meanwhile, auctioning of *aliyot* continued. Several months later the board agreed to Illowy's suggestion that each potential bar mitzvah boy be required to pass a test, "to see if he can read the Hebrew correct."³⁶ The test would be administered by Illowy, who would then issue a certificate that would allow the boy to read from the Torah. Later that month, August 1862, the board felt impelled to remind Illowy that his contract called on him "to deliver a Lecture in the english Language [*sic*] once a month." At the same time he was also reminded that he was to attend "divine services at the Synagogue every Saturday." If he was not actually attending services, the disinterest displayed by the members so distressed him that perhaps he preferred to say his prayers at home.

On October 29, 1862, Rabbi Abraham Rice, the first ordained rabbi in the United States, passed away. Upon learning of Rice's death, Illowy, who had served with Rice at the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, gave a stirring eulogy in honor of his patron, a tribute in which he also attempted to warn the Jews of America away from their growing abandonment of true Judaism.³⁷ "O if there were many such teachers in Israel, how much better would it now be with the cause of our religion; we should not see so

Gates of Mercy, 1851–1881.

Located on the 500 block of Rampart Street, the congregation remained here until it merged with Dispersed of Judah in 1881.

(From History of the Jews of Louisiana, c. 1905,

Courtesy of Touro Infirmary Archives,

New Orleans, Louisiana.)

many sons and daughters in Israel led astray by false and erroneous doctrines and shallow principles." Illowy complained, "What good can we expect from a class of people who, like our younger generation, do not know more of their own history and religion than this, that their fathers were Jews and that they are born as such?" The problem, he claimed, was with their teachers. He asked: "Where lies the cause of this great evil? It lies in the great want of true and faithful ministers, who fear God more than the mighty ones in their congregations, who fear God more than the loss of material gain; who do not wish to please, but to teach; not to flatter, but to show the truth in the true light, color, and shape; and who care little for the fat, milk, and wool of the flock."

In July 1863, Samuel Friedlander, Illowy's closest ally and the three-term president of the congregation, resigned his position to

spend more time with his business. Illowy, upon threatening to resign over the naming of a new president, received veto power in the selection of Friedlander's successor. Lion Cahn, another Illowy ally, was ultimately elected.³⁸ In March 1864 both Illowy and Friedlander were presented with tokens of appreciation for their service to the congregation. That December Abraham Lehmann, still another Illowy confidant, was elected president. Beginning the following summer, however, Illowy's orthodoxy began to polarize the congregation and weaken his position.

As mentioned earlier, the original constitution allowed the children of "strange" spouses to be buried in the congregational cemetery. While the charter of 1842 had rescinded the practice, many members continued to marry gentile women. In early July 1864 the question of the burial of these spouses came before Illowy. In a compromise, he ruled that the burial could take place, but that the grave must be "eight yards distant from any others, the corpse must be laid in a position just contrary to others and a fence must be built around the grave, that it may thus have the form of a separate burying place." While his decision allowed the burial, Illowy's insistence upon separating the grave away from and opposite to others offended and estranged a sizable segment of the congregation.³⁹

That same month Illowy withdrew certification from a local *shokhet*. Such certification of a kosher butcher frequently became a major issue in that the business was lucrative and competition often arose. The board reprimanded Illowy for his action, informing him "that in future, if he sees any thing wrong done by a butcher, to notify this Board thereof, instead of acting for himself."⁴⁰ As mentioned earlier, congregational lay leaders often invoked their authority over the professional clergy. This was the first time the board invoked its prerogative over Illowy, a clear sign that his religious leadership was beginning to be questioned.

On October 11, 1864, thirteen men, ten of whom were members of Gates of Mercy, who called themselves "A Committee of Israelites of New Orleans," issued a broadside titled "To the friends of Religious Reform."⁴¹ The announcement called for the drafting of

a memorial for the purpose of setting forth their desire for a reformation in the rites and ceremonies of Jewish worship, such as has taken place in most of the principal cities of the world . . . It is not our purpose to entirely subvert the time honored customs of our ancestors . . . but as much as we revere those sacred rituals, we yet deem them far too orthodox for the present day, and consequently, inconsistent with the spirit of progress and enlightenment which is fast superseding those obsolete ideas. What we design will give to the coming generation a form of worship pure and sacred, one bereft of all superfluities and untrammelled by many ceremonies with which it is at present burdened.

Illowy did not immediately respond. Two weeks later, however, he interdicted the three local *mohelim* from performing circumcisions on children of Jewish fathers and gentile mothers.⁴² He ruled that these children could not become Israelites by circumcision alone (emersion also would have been required) and believed that these children of unconverted mothers would not be educated as Jews. Whether or not his action was taken in a fit of pique with the potential reformers, the incident contributed to the growing alienation between the traditional and reform camps.

Two miles upriver in the suburb of Lafayette City was Congregation Shaarey Tefillah, or Gates of Prayer, the third Jewish congregation founded in the New Orleans area. After Illowy's interdiction Charles Goldenberg, the congregational *mohel*, claimed Illowy lacked authority over him or the responsibilities and titles conferred on him by Congregation Gates of Prayer, and therefore he would continue to perform circumcisions as he had in the past. Illowy's response was to declare Goldenberg "unfit for the holy office of mohel." In his letter of explanation to Gates of Prayer, he wrote:

We are . . . sufficiently convinced that of all of these non-Israelitish mothers in the city, who consented that their children be entered into the covenant of circumcision, there is not one who has done so from the pure motive, to see her child worship one day the One and only God of Israel, a religion which she herself denies. . . . Be sincere and say would it not be much better

for the poor children to let them be what their mothers are, Christians, then convert them for appearances sake into Jews, which they will never be, and enjoin upon them heavenly duties, which as you yourselves know, they will never fulfill.⁴³

In the *Occident*, Isaac Leeser offered his view of the matter, one that vividly illustrated the orthodox rabbi's dilemma in the United States. Leeser argued:

Although the decision is undoubtedly strictly legal, we doubt whether it is wise for a Rabbi in this country to give an order, which he has every reason to believe will be disregarded. Dr. I's authority in New Orleans extended only to the Shaagaray Chassed; the Shaaray Tefillah, to which Mr. Goldenberg belongs, owed him no obligation, being a perfectly independent body of the author. If, then, he is ever so right, it is useless to issue an edict which will not be heeded.⁴⁴

While the controversy raged a rumor was printed in the January 1865 issue of the *Jewish Messenger* that Illowy was "about to vacate his office." However, Leeser's *Occident* discounted the rumor, pointing out Illowy's commitment to the community, that he had purchased property in the city, and owned "some houses." Meanwhile, opposition to Illowy within the congregation mounted.⁴⁵

In March 1865 a constitution was written for a proposed reform congregation, to be named "Temple Sinai."⁴⁶ Sponsored by the same committee that published "To the friends of Religious Reform" five months earlier, the new constitution was tabled. The dissidents felt confident they could reform Gates of Mercy from within.

On May 4, Gates of Mercy members elected a new board of directors.⁴⁷ The city, relatively unscathed by the ravages of the Civil War, had become a refuge for scalawag southerners and carpet-bagging northerners. Some twenty to twenty-five men, most of whom were recruited by the reformers, joined Gates of Mercy in the months before the election. The newcomers and the older members who either preferred reform, despised Illowy, or both, joined together to oust Illowy's orthodox associates from the board. The newly elected president, Frederick Hollander,

*Title page of the 1828 Constitution of Gates of Mercy.
(American Jewish Historical Society, New York,
New York, and Newton, Massachusetts.)*

immediately appointed a committee to “look for a minister,” since Illowy’s contract was scheduled for renewal later that summer.

Bad blood spilled throughout the congregation. Just two weeks after the election of the new board, Samuel Friedlander refused a “*mitzfa [sic]*” during the Sabbath morning service, stating that “he would accept none from the President.”⁴⁸ Similar disrespectful incidents occurred over the next several months as tempers flared and positions hardened.

In early June, with his reelection improbable, Illowy informed the board of his resignation. The Reverend Gutheim, highly respected, inclined toward reform, and expected to return to the city any day, was much preferred. Gutheim had left the city soon after the arrival of federal forces in April 1862. The following month the commanding General of the Army of the Gulf, Benjamin Butler, ordered all foreign nationals to take an oath of allegiance to the Union. Gutheim refused on two counts: first, his religious convictions would not allow him to swear an oath, and second, even if allowed to invoke an oath, he would not pledge his allegiance to the Union. Accordingly, he left the city and spent the remainder of the war in Montgomery, Alabama, and Columbus, Georgia.⁴⁹

By the first week in August 1865 Illowy had left New Orleans for Congregation Shearith Israel in Isaac Wise’s stronghold of Cincinnati. Just days before his departure, thirty-five members presented Illowy with a proclamation in which they wished “to show our worthy Rabbi our appreciation of his firm religious character and unfeigned piety” and that “his memory and noble doctrines will forever abide in our hearts.”⁵⁰ No official appreciation came from the board of directors. On August 6, ten Illowy loyalists requested a special meeting of the entire congregation to air charges against the president for “acting contrary to our by-Laws,” and also charged the hazan, Solomon Mosche, with insulting the congregation and the “dignity of our Rabbi Dr. Illowy.” The board rejected the request.⁵¹

In the last week in August the Reverend Gutheim returned to New Orleans as minister of Dispersed of Judah. But Gutheim

preached in a virtually empty synagogue. Many members had left the city with Gutheim rather than take the oath of allegiance. Even more had become less observant, with many having married out of the faith. Gates of Mercy, the largest congregation in the city, called, and on September 3, 1865, after an absence of twelve years, Gutheim was once again elected minister. He remained at Dispersed of Judah through the High Holy Day season before returning to Gates of Mercy in late September.⁵²

Shortly after Illowy's departure, the reform-minded board at Gates of Mercy unanimously resolved, contrary to Jewish tradition, to allow a "mixed" choir of men and women, "to be stationed at the most suitable place of the Synagogue," between the *bimah* and the ark. The congregation eagerly awaited the premier of the new choir, which was to occur on Rosh Hashanah. But the debut did not take place. Just as the choir and cantor were to begin, the sheriff burst into the synagogue, walked through the stunned worshippers, and handed President Hollander a summons ordering him to appear before the court the following Monday. After Hollander read the summons, he immediately ordered the women of the choir to remove themselves to the women's section. In a letter that appeared in *Der Israelite*, Illowy reported incorrectly, but with undisguised venom, that the president "is not very familiar with reading no matter what the kind of writing, especially when his secretary is not readily available, " and so he immediately obeyed, for he "could only suppose it was a court order directing him to silence the choir."⁵³

Within the month a broadside, written in German, was delivered to the homes of every Gates of Mercy congregant. In this diatribe the author described the recent events within the congregation and then insulted four of the leaders of the orthodox party: Samuel Friedlander, the former president, Moritz Stiemel, a board member for ten years, Simon Newberger, the congregational secretary, and Jacob Dreyfus, an Illowy confidant. Mr. Friedlander, the assailant claimed, "in Europe held the office to clean the chamber-pot of one Madame Parnes" and called him "the very image of a Brazilian ape." Mr. Stiemel was referred to as "Cheap

John an infamous fool," who had "received discipline in a house of correction or Prison in Europe." He said of Simon Newberger, "about 6 months ago you begged of every member of the Society to vote for you, saying you had a house full of children, and no means to make a living, or earn the daily bread." Jacob Dreyfus, according to the author, exemplified "personified piety," but "in Europe enjoyed for a considerable time the pleasures and delights of a Prison house, and even here in this country he received the same honors, having been fitted with one years [*sic*] lodgings in the Penitentiary in Baton Rouge for committing the crime of larceny." The essay continued with a plea for the reformation of the congregation and asked the members "not to serve your God in a mysterious manner, as has been the case some time past, but that you will make your church a house of Progress. All nations shall unanimously declare that the Hebrew Church (Synagogue) [*sic*] is a house of pure devotion. All of this you can bring about if you proceed on the way accepted to purify and reform this society."⁵⁴ The references to "your church" and "Hebrew Church" were typical of the reformers' attempts at assimilation and Christian acceptance.

Detectives were hired to find those responsible for the publication. As Illowy wrote in a *Der Israelite* article, "Who is the monster responsible for bringing this wretched monstrosity into the world? Mr. Mosche, previously cantor in Speier, currently cantor in this new reform congregation in New Orleans." Mosche was sued for libel, and, although several witnesses testified that Mosche had not been in New Orleans long enough to gather such intimate knowledge of the community, he was nevertheless found guilty and sentenced to "ten days imprisonment in the Parish Prison, to pay cost of prosecution, and a fine of one hundred and fifty dollars."⁵⁵ Upon the petition of influential friends the governor commuted the sentence to the payment of the fine.⁵⁶

Twice the traditional faction resorted to the civil courts for redress instead of calling for a *beth din* to hear their grievances. However, in August 1863 such a religious court had convened in New Orleans. Rabbi Illowy and his allies, Samuel Friedlander, Lion Cahn, and Abraham Lehmann, served as judges. The case

involved the widow Mrs. Lowenthal versus Mr. Meyer Goldman. When Mr. Lowenthal died his friend, Mr. Goldman, promised to help the widow and her three children. Goldman told Mrs. Lowenthal that friends had donated money to help the poor family meet its needs. Goldman sold what little Mr. Lowenthal had left and kept the proceeds in trust. Eighteen months later, after receiving money from Mr. Goldman each month, Mrs. Lowenthal asked Goldman for the money he had been holding from the sale of her late husband's goods. Goldman explained that that was the money he had been returning over the previous months and that the monies donated had run out some time back. Mrs. Lowenthal now appeared before the *beth din* seeking the money Goldman supposedly had been holding for her. Testimony revealed that Goldman had continued to receive donations for the Lowenthal family, and he was ordered to return the entire amount to Mrs. Lowenthal.

Now the traditional party was willing to go to court to air the Jewish community's dirty linen in public. This indicated both their confidence that the court would decide the case fairly as well as their feelings of security within the broader community. It also revealed the seriousness of the discord and their inability to work together within the congregation.

Illowy ended his article with a parting insult about his successor, James Gutheim. Illowy described Gutheim as originally a "journeyman furrier" whose "lovely voice aided him in finding the nobler if not better work as cantor." According to Illowy, throughout his career Gutheim had always proved agreeably pliant, exchanging the Ashkenazic ritual for the Sephardic, and then back again. Sarcastically, Illowy claimed:

to admire the greatness of our beautiful country . . . for the same Mr. Gutheim is no longer a furrier, no longer a cantor, but rather, a Rabbi and teacher of the law in a congregation of more than 300 members. . . . However, in a country where Rabbis dare to declare oysters kosher for Jews, while they themselves eat pastries from non-Jewish bakers, while here nothing is prepared without pork fat, . . . here ancient Talmudic principles are no longer observed.⁵⁷

Aftermath

By fall 1865 Illowy was in Cincinnati and Gutheim had returned to Gates of Mercy. Reform was in the air. While the first attempt to liberalize Gates of Mercy had proven disastrous, the board was undeterred, and in April 1866 they asked Gutheim if it was permissible to install an organ. Gutheim ruled that "the case of an accompanying instrument does not conflict with the *Minhag Ashkenaz*, but is simply a matter of taste and expediency."⁵⁸ An organ was installed soon thereafter. The reformation of Judaism in New Orleans now proceeded in earnest. Two years later Gates of Mercy declared itself the first Reform congregation in the city, and just two years after that Temple Sinai evolved out of Gates of Mercy.

Meanwhile, in Cincinnati, Illowy, his health beginning to fail, wrote vindictive, vicious articles as he attempted to vent his disaffection with the new Judaism flowering in New Orleans and throughout the United States. He died on June 21, 1871, from injuries sustained from a carriage accident the preceding day.⁵⁹ At his funeral his associates and opponents, rabbis Isaac Mayer Wise and Max Lienthal, eulogized him. The symbolism of this stalwart of an aging and seemingly dying orthodoxy being buried by these two leaders of the vigorous, forward-looking Reform movement could not have been lost on the mourners.

Illowy's movement from congregation to congregation, his conflicts over power and ritual with congregants and fellow rabbis, and his rearguard defense of a modified tradition were more typical than unique. Isaac Leeser's career followed a similar trajectory. He, too, fought for the independence of the rabbinate, opposed modifications that, to him, went too far, and stridently attacked more radical reformers. But unlike in New Orleans, in a more conservative, more religious Philadelphia, tradition enjoyed stronger staying power and continued after Leeser's death three years prior to Illowy's.⁶⁰ Perhaps the city itself was more conservative, the inhabitants more religious. Be that as it may, the stories of Bernard Illowy, Isaac Leeser, and similar individuals tell us much about roads difficult to tread during the mid-nineteenth century, pathways that remain pitted with debate even today.

NOTES

¹ Timothy F. Reilly, "Parson Clapp of New Orleans: Antebellum Social Critic, Religious Radical, and Member of the Establishment," *Louisiana History* 16 (Spring 1975): 167-191, and, John Betterworth, "Protestant Beginnings in New Orleans," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 21 (1938): 823-845.

² A. W. Parker, *A Journey to the West and Texas*, (Boston, 1836), 191.

³ Bertram Wallace Korn, *The Early Jews of New Orleans*, (Waltham, MA, 1969), 193-194. The spelling of the name of the congregation has been a source of controversy. The spelling of "Shanarai" in the original constitution resulted from Solis misspelling the Sephardic word for "Gates." In the revised Charter of 1842 the name was spelled "Shanari." In the renewed Charter of 1852 the spelling of both names was changed to "Shangarai Chassed." This remained the official spelling until the name was changed to "Touro Synagogue" in the 1930s. On the early history of the Jews and synagogues in New Orleans, see also Leo Shpall, *The Jews of New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1936); idem., "The First Jewish Synagogue in New Orleans," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 21 (April 1938): 518-531; Samuel Proctor, "Jewish Life in New Orleans, 1718-1860," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 40 (1957): 110-132; Bobbie S. Malone, "New Orleans' Uptown Jewish Immigrants: The Community of Congregation Gates of Prayer, 1850-1860," *Louisiana History* 32 (Summer 1991): 239-278.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁵ *Acts of Louisiana*, 1828, 162-164, Louisiana Supreme Court, New Orleans.

⁶ Anny Block, "Mercy on Rude Streams: Jewish Emigrants From Alsace-Lorraine to the Lower Mississippi Region and the Concept of Fidelity," *Southern Jewish History* 2 (1999): 103-105; see also Elliott Ashkenazi, *The Business of Jews in Louisiana, 1840-1875* (Tuscaloosa and London, 1988); idem., "Jewish Commercial Interests North and South: The Case of the Lehmans and Seligmans," *American Jewish Archives* 43 (Spring/Summer 1991): 24-39.

⁷ M. Weiner, *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, 6, (Leipzig, 1841), 294; Korn, *Early Jews of New Orleans*, 240-245.

⁸ Korn, *Early Jews of New Orleans*, 247-253.

⁹ Max Heller, *Jubilee Souvenir of Temple Sinai, 1872-1922*, (New Orleans, 1922), 5.

¹⁰ Gary P. Zola, "Gutheim, James Koppel," in John H. Garrity and Mark C. Carnes, eds., *American National Biography* (New York, 1999), 736-738; see also Leo Shpall, "Rabbi James Koppel Gutheim," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 22 (January 1939): 166-180.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 737.

¹² Karla Goldman, "In Search of an American Judaism: Rivalry and Reform in the Growth of Two Cincinnati Synagogues," in Jeffery S. Gurock and Marc Lee Raphael, eds., *An Inventory of Promises: Essays On American Jewish History In Honor Of Moses Rischin*, (Brooklyn, 1995), 140.

¹³ Bene Jeshurun Minute Book, 1841-1849, July 8, 1849, and September 23, 1849, Congregation Bene Jeshurun (Isaac M. Wise Temple) Ms. Coll. #62, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

¹⁴ Heller, *Jubilee Souvenir*, 48-49.

¹⁵ *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, 9, 1851.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

¹⁷ Touro Synagogue Records, v. 56, January 28, 1856, 45–46, Tulane University Special Collections, New Orleans.

¹⁸ Henry Illoway, *Sefer Milchamot Elo-him; Being the Controversial Letters and the Casuistic Decisions of the Late Rabbi Issachar Ben Illoway* (Berlin, 1914), 11–15; Moshe D. Sherman, *Orthodox Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook* (Westport, CT, 1996), 101–103. There has been some confusion over the spelling of the family name. Bernard's son, Henry, changed the spelling of the family name, adding an "a."

¹⁹ Moshe D. Sherman, "Bernard Illoway and Nineteenth Century American Orthodoxy," (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1991), 12–114.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

²¹ *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (New York, 1971), 1433. The *maskilim* were the members of the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment. Begun in the mid-eighteenth century in Germany, the *Haskalah* called for the assimilation of Jews into modern life through the adoption of language and education. Over the next century the movement spread east into Russia. Illoway's split with the *maskilim* over the maintenance of religious traditions was a harbinger of his disagreements with the Reform movement in the United States.

²² Leon A. Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820–1870* (Hanover, NH, 1976), 132.

²³ Marc Lee Raphael, *Profiles in American Judaism: The Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist Traditions In Historical Perspective* (San Francisco, 1984), 9.

²⁴ Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in American Judaism* (New York, 1988), 240.

²⁵ Jick, *Americanization of the Synagogue*, 154.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

²⁷ Sherman, "Bernard Illoway," 156.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 167–168.

²⁹ *Occident*, 8, November 1855.

³⁰ *American Israelite*, 4, July 21, 1857.

³¹ *Occident*, 16, February 1859.

³² *Ibid.*, 92–93.

³³ *Ibid.*, 18, January 24, 1861.

³⁴ Touro Synagogue Records, v. 56, October 13, 1861, 117.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, April 13, 1862, 128.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, August 21, 1862, 132.

³⁷ *Jewish Messenger*, 12, December 19, 1862, 187.

³⁸ *Occident*, 21, August 1863, 235. *Jewish Messenger*, 14, July 3, 1863, 6–7.

³⁹ Touro Synagogue Records, v. 56, July 11, 1864, 154.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, July 21, 1864, 155–156.

⁴¹ Heller, *Jubilee Souvenir*, 135–137.

⁴² Touro Synagogue Records, v. 56, October 25, 1864, 160.

⁴³ *Jewish Messenger*, 17, February 3, 1865, 35. For a more complete review of this controversy see David Ellenson, "A Jewish Legal Decision by Rabbi Bernard Illoway of New Orleans and Its Discussion in Nineteenth Century Europe," *American Jewish Archives* 69 (December 1979): 174–195.

⁴⁴ *Occident*, 23, December 1864, 429–430.

⁴⁵ *Jewish Messenger*, 17, January 13, 1865, 12; *Occident*, 22, January 1865, 480.

⁴⁶ Temple Sinai Records, Box 1, Tulane University Special Collections.

⁴⁷ Touro Collection, v. 56, May 4, 1865, 175.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, May 28, 1865, 175.

⁴⁹ *History of the Jews of Louisiana* (New Orleans, 1905), 29–31; see also William Warren Rogers, Jr., “In Defense of Our Sacred Cause: Rabbi James K. Gutheim in Confederate Montgomery,” *Journal of Confederate History* 7 (1991): 112–122.

⁵⁰ *Jewish Messenger*, 18, September 1, 1865, 69.

⁵¹ Touro Collection, v. 56, August 6, 1865, 179.

⁵² *Ibid.*, September 3, 1865, 183–184.

⁵³ *Der Israelite: A Central Organ for Orthodox Judaism*, 7, supplement, Mainz, January 31, 1866 (5626).

⁵⁴ *State of Louisiana v. S. Moshe*, First Judicial District Court of the State of Louisiana Records, December 11, 1866, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library. The original broadside was written in German. An English translation was made a part of the court record.

⁵⁵ [*New Orleans*] *Daily Picayune*, December 8, 1866, 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁷ *Der Israelite*, 7:5, supplement, January 31, 1866 (5626).

⁵⁸ Touro Collection, v. 56, May 3, 1866, 209–211.

⁵⁹ Sherman, “Bernard Illowy,” 271–273.

⁶⁰ Lance J. Susman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit, 1995); see also Joshua Stampher, *Pioneer Rabbi of the West: The Life and Times of Julius Eckman* (Portland, OR, 1988).