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Interview Transcript

Sacred Spaces of Greater Cincinnati

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Senior Rabbi, Isaac M. Wise Temple

Interview conducted by Meg Hanrahan, Producer, Voyageur Media Group, Inc.,
at Plum Street Temple 2007

The first Jewish residents came here in the early part of the 1800s: they settled, they were merchants, they were in trade. The first thing they did, actually before congregation, was establish a cemetery, because you have to have consecrated ground for a Jewish cemetery. And from there, a benevolent society to give loans to new people coming in, to get them started in businesses. The first congregation preceded ours by about 15 years and was a congregation of were German Jews. And ours began about 1842; actually 1840, but incorporated in 1842.

The first people here were people who were familiar with German-Jewish life. They came here from Germany, some were English, it was a mixture early on, many of them looking for economic possibilities, most of them young. Cincinnati was a bustling new city, and their work was in commercial trade, in retail. Later, many of them would be peddlers and ultimately build up stores. That would be a little later on. And they flourished fairly quickly here; and although they lived somewhat separately, somewhat apart from everyone else, they were still a part of the larger society and certainly the economic society of Cincinnati.

In religious practice, those that started this congregation wanted something a little different from the other Jewish congregation that existed. Not that their philosophy at the time was so radically different from what the existing congregation, but rather, that some of the customs they knew were slightly different. The music might have been different from what they were used to from where they had come. And I think it was some of those social mores, and mostly just that the worship was a little unfamiliar to them. And so, they wanted something a little bit more familiar. And that's why they started the congregation. The actual name is "Kehilat Kedushah B'Nai Yeshurun", The Holy Congregation of the Children of Israel.

Isaac Mayer Wise was a fascinating character, from everything we know about him. He came to America, first landing in New York. He had grown up in a traditional Jewish home in Bohemia. He had been taught a bit by his father and grandfather, but then he had gone and received his own education, Jewish education and secular education, beyond that. And in his 20s, as a young man learning, he became familiar with Reform Judaism and that expression of Judaism that was just emerging in Germany and Central Europe at that time. When he came to America, he brought that with him; and there were very few congregations, certainly even fewer with Rabbis in America at the time. He ended up working in Albany, New York where he remained for some years. He was trying to promote those kinds of changes away from traditional Judaism into this Reform Judaism that he knew and had fallen in love with in Germany. He encountered difficulties in the congregation there, and he was dismissed from his position, while he remained in Albany a few more years with a new congregation that formed, revolving around his approach, Reform Judaism. And in the 1850s, when the leadership of this congregation, K.K. B'nai Yeshurun had determined that they wanted to embrace Reform Judaism as their practice of their faith, they contacted Isaac Mayer Wise who had already gained a reputation nationally. They invited him to come and preach a sermon here. And his response was that he would become the Rabbi here if he were elected Rabbi for life. This is before he had met them or they had met him. So it was a bit of what we call in Yiddish "chutzpah", otherwise translated as unmitigated gall. But in fact, it was really an instant marriage. And when he came here, to move here and become the Rabbi of this congregation, he found a soil, an environment, here among the leadership that embraced not only Reform Judaism for themselves but also embraced his dream of establishing this new kind of Judaism and establishing a seminary, an American Rabbinical Seminary, which became the Hebrew Union College.

It's fair to call Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise the founder of American Reform Judaism. It would not be accurate to call him the founder of Reform Judaism. It was an idea he already knew and which was in existence 30 years before he met that idea in Europe, but certainly institutionally, he was the founder of Reform Judaism in America.

He had a profound influence on this building. First of all, he knew of an emerging synagogue-style of architecture in Central Europe in the 1830s. He probably brought that image with him in his mind. Similar buildings were built in many cities in Europe, but most of them were subsequently destroyed a century later in the Holocaust. There are a couple that still exist. He brought this idea here, not only from what he knew in the past, but I think also the vision he had for American Judaism in general and Reform Judaism in particular. He believed that in this Age of Enlightenment and of inevitable progress that America would be the home of the next Golden Age of Jewish life, just as Spain had been until the 15th century and in that regard, his vision was really quite accurate. When he came here, the congregation, of course, was only 20-plus years old. When they built this building, they were only a couple of hundred families and they built a sanctuary for 1100 people. So, clearly he had a grand sense in his mind, both in what we see in the scope, the size of this building and the majesty of it.

I don't know that we have any real records of why they chose the architect or for that matter, the organ builder who was a Cincinnati, as well. What we do know is that Rabbi Wise must have been involved in many, many of the details of the building. He had a close relationship, a friendship that emerged from that, I think, with the organ builder that we're aware of and with the architect as well. And most of the artisans that did the work here were local craftsmen. Most of the material was locally produced.

The Byzantine Moorish style, as I said, was known in Europe. I think, in part, it was deliberately wanting to evoke the style that would have been in synagogues that existed when Jewish life flourished in Spain. Originally, when the building was built, not all the decorative elements that you see here were part of it. It took a few years until some of that was added. But the vision from what he knew was to create exactly this. You can see it in the arches. You can see it in the decorative appearances all throughout. And what most people don't know is that it was for some years sort of a work-in-progress. The interior took some time to complete.

One of the things that occurs in a synagogue is the prohibition of any kind of human or animal form, lest it be misconstrued as a graven image, as an idol, or representation of God. So, it's a great challenge in synagogue architecture when you have that limitation imposed on you.

We can really have a good idea of the stenciling because we reproduced everything in our restoration that took place in 1994-1995. And that was fascinating to watch. There were a number of stencils that were produced. The paint was all mixed. When we did the restoration work, the plaster had horsehair in it to keep it, I'm told, affixed a little better, more securely to the wood. Everything in the building is wood and plaster.

This would be a very unique architectural style even in its day. To build something on this scale and with this complexity would simply not have been in the reach of many congregations. Most congregations were much more modest and, I think, that this style really, in large measure, reflects a statement and a vision, much more than it reflects a trend. Most synagogue architectural styles were somewhat simple and relatively modest. This is quite the opposite. And again, I think, it reflects that vision and that belief of Isaac Mayer Wise and of the lay people who supported that vision that this would be a grand place and a grand new chapter. And so, they built for that.

The Plum Street Temple has great significance for Reform Judaism and American Judaism today, both historic significance and symbolic significance. First of all, it is one of our oldest buildings in American Jewish life. That alone would make it important. Its beauty is really is unparalleled and the style of architecture, there's really only one other synagogue built a couple of years after the Plum Street Temple in the same style of architecture and on the same scale and that's in Manhattan. There was also one built in San Francisco that was destroyed in the fire and earthquake of 1906. So, there's uniqueness to it. Beyond that, it represents as does Cincinnati, the fountainhead of Reform Judaism. Ordination takes place here of the rabbis from Hebrew Union College every year. Large gatherings and events that would take place in Cincinnati wouldn't even be considered complete without some part of it taking place here. So, it has great significance and even beyond that, I think, that it's something that Reform Jews know about and American Jews in general know about. I remember as a child living several hundred miles from here and studying the origins of Reform Judaism in my own religious education and seeing the picture of the Plum Street Temple in the textbook.

We regard this sanctuary as the gem of Jewish life and our gem to safeguard and to protect and to enjoy like any precious gem that you may be fortunate enough to inherit. It takes a tremendous amount of work, as you can imagine, to maintain, and preserve this sanctuary. We undertake that as our complete responsibility. There's really no assistance from any other source. So, that I think gives some measure of a sense of the love that we have for the historic obligation and privilege that we feel this building to be. But we also use it quite extensively. Most of our life cycle events take place here. We worship here, although we have two buildings. Because we have multiple rabbis,

we're often using both buildings. We are here weekly. Our children celebrate their life cycle events as they grow up, from when they're in Kindergarten and began their religious school and we have a great celebration here, through Bar and Bat Mitzvah at age 13 and confirmation at 16 and beyond. People are married here. Our holidays are celebrated here. So, while I studied it as a child living in a different city in a textbook as a place of history, my children who have grown up here, our children in this congregation see it as their home and their sanctuary.

I'll never tire of watching people when they come in. Most people are completely surprised. Very often, we'll see the simultaneous movement of the head going up and the jaw dropping as they walk in and see something. Not only may they never have seen something like this before, they probably would have never even imagined it. Even Jews coming from other places and who have been in many synagogues before have never seen anything like this.

I started here when I was 25, so I suppose I've kind of grown in my rabbinate here. I would say that it's a very special place. And I think it makes the same worship that we might do even at our other building a little different when we celebrate it here. There's holiness and an awe-filled kind of sense of perspective for the worshipper and probably for the officiant, for the rabbis as well. But, I also have to say that large as grand as this building is from the bimah, from the pulpit, it's really rather intimate. And I can see and connect with every face even in a filled sanctuary on an occasion such as the High Holy Days. And so, I'm struck with the feeling of grandeur and the majesty of the place but also the intimacy as I know so many of these people through the years have been connected with them in their lives.

[Before restoration,] the building looked somewhat like it did now, not as vibrant in color. The color had certainly been a little more muted as it aged through the years. But, it looked the same and we were utilizing the building until the day we shut it down for the restoration. What we discovered was that all the electrical wiring in the building was compromised. We have to remember Plum Street was built pre-electricity and the electrical wiring was added in the early years of the 20th century. What we learned when we did an examination of the building, with ultrasound of sorts, is that the wiring were all frayed. And in some places, there was no insulation as it is set on wood beneath plaster. So, we shut the building down in a day's time, cancelled all the events that were here, did our research as to who we wanted to do the restoration, since obviously you don't just turn a project and a building like this over to anyone. That was October 1994 and by June 1995, the job was complete. And it was a fascinating process; we learned a great deal. And there was never any question for us that the job simply had to be done and done to the full extent that was necessary. They built scaffolding all the way up to the domes. The dome over in the far right corner was the paint studio and they went through as a restoration process would do. Anything that could be cleaned with something akin to a dry cleaning solution, they would keep. Any place that needed to be repainted, they would repaint. They made the stencils and did the repairs that were necessary and then did the painting over that. So, a good part of the building, most of the building, was repainted but there are large sections that were good enough to leave as they were.

An organ is not traditionally a part of worship services in Judaism in part because any musical instrument would have not been permitted. One of the innovations of the early Reform leaders was to reinstate musical instrumentation, mixed choirs, et cetera, as a part of our worship. And it became a defining element of Reform Judaism. So, when Isaac Mayer Wise built this building, for him, it was also a statement and the organ, which was probably the most popular instrument culturally of the day and something that emerged into Reform Judaism, became part of the building. In fact, the façade of the pipes is designed as the exterior of the building. So for us, the restoration which we undertook just a couple of years ago was a significant endeavor. For some years, the organ had not worked and for about 10 years, we had to utilize an electric organ. We could never live with that and be true to the vision of Isaac Mayer Wise. So even though our instrumentation is more varied now, the Rockwern organ is still a central part of it and we undertook that project and really lovingly watched all the thousands of pieces and components of this organ be taken out and repaired and restored and brought back in.

I'm here often, several times a week, and yet I think my favorite part of the building, architecturally, is that every time I look around, something else catches my eye in a new way. So in a way, the building sort of continually renews itself. I'm always noticing, even years into it, some new detail that I really hadn't seen or fully appreciated before. You never tire of it.

The texts were all chosen by Isaac Mayer Wise. They are from the Prophets and from the Psalms and our best understanding of it is they simply reflected some of his favorite sayings or expressions from the Bible that he wanted placed within the building.

Judaism is both a religion, a culture, a peoplehood and they're intertwined so inextricably that it would be impossible to separate them out. You know, there are certainly some religious features, the ner tamid, the eternal light, which has been burning here continuously, is a part of every synagogue. That's a religious and, I would say, somewhat cultural feature as well. Certainly the ark, which every synagogue has, is a religious feature although this has sort of that cultural sense of the architecture that goes with it and again, represents both, if you look at it, the façade of the front of the Plum Street Temple but also the crown that adorns the top of the ark. And that crown represents the idea in Judaism that the Torah and the way that it leads us in our lives and in the choices and decisions that we make is really for us, our Ruler, which is in direct contrast to every culture in which we may have lived before, where you were supposed to have allegiance to the king of that particular land or country.

When people who are not Jewish come here, I want them to feel the awe and the grandeur that can be a part of spirituality in general. That tends to get lost in today's world where things are much more informal. I want them to also see dignity and grandeur, not only to this place, but also the words of our worship and of our texts and of our tradition because it is something that survived 4000 years. It's something that's spawned two great religions in addition to our own and influenced much of the world in its history, in its culture and its thought. So I want them to have a taste of that and a wonderful sense of respect; not as a history, not as the past but also something that's a part of the present living history.

There were large periods, centuries in Jewish life in which there were actually laws on the book that a synagogue could not be taller, in some of the Muslim countries, than a Muslim walking by on the streets. So, often synagogues were at a basement level and very, very modest. I don't think it was really competition, I think it was really more of that vision and that unfettered sense of freedom and possibility and the 19th Century optimism that, I think, spawned the grandeur of this building and across the street, of the cathedral as well. I think it was more of that than really a competition.

In congregations around the country, when migration patterns, residential patterns shifted, congregations that had been in older, historic places would often sell their old building and move with their congregation. Our first uniqueness was that we never thought about that in 1900. We did establish a second building that was mostly a religious school and maintained this building. And then in the 1930's, established in Avondale a building that had not only a religious school but an auditorium and sanctuary as well. Since it was right there where people lived, and it was a time before cars, people would walk to it in their neighborhood. The move to Amberley Village in 1976 just reflected a further move of the Jewish community towards the north and northeast but each time holding on to this building. Our worship space in our Amberley building is much more modest. We call that worship space our chapel and this is our sanctuary. And I think it is reflected in what we choose to celebrate in which space as well.

I think I could answer the question of the value of preserving historic spaces by watching our kids. Just last week, we brought our confirmation class here to begin rehearsal for their service in a few weeks' time. And we began by just talking about this place in which they've grown up. And there was a difference in their feeling. There was a difference in their outlook when we really began to place what they were doing not just as a service because they happen to be turning 16 and in 10th grade but really placed it in time and talked about all those who had been here before them and did the same thing and all those who would come after them and do the same thing. And I think that sense of rootedness, that continuity in space and in time, is an incredible value that we miss in a throwaway society. More than anyone, I think we know what it takes to maintain a historic building. It's been worth every measure of time and effort and we see it in the faces of our kids and we see it in the faces of our young adults who want to come back here to be married and we see it in the affection that people have. I think it's a wonderful statement about Cincinnati. I grew up in Atlanta, which didn't preserve its history very much as it grew and exploded in its growth. I think it's a wonderful statement about Cincinnati that we have done a better job with that. And if we can be a city that keep its feet in the past but its gaze in the future, then this is the way to move forward into progress; I think the religious community can play an important role in that.

There had not been ever a seminary of any kind in the western hemisphere or in the new world, I should say. Isaac Mayer Wise believed that the needs of American Jewry would be completely different than those of European Jewry. And he also believed that European-trained rabbis trained in a more traditional approach and trained in the old country ways would not be able to relate to the people and their needs here or to be able to advance the agenda of Jewish life here as he saw it. So for him, it was essential to start a rabbinic school not just as his own dream but as a way of promoting this vision that he believed was so right for American Jewry. He actually had tried to do that one time before, but unsuccessfully. He didn't have enough funding, enough support for it. So in 1873, he founded the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, an umbrella organization of Reform Congregations, primarily for the

purpose of creating support institutionally for what would be then his successful endeavor, the Hebrew Union College in 1875. And he served as president of both of those organizations subsequently as well the rabbinic organization of which I'm still a part, Central Conference of American Rabbis that he founded in 1889. In addition, Rabbi Wise was the editor of the "American Israelite," today, our local Jewish paper, but at the time, a national platform from which Isaac Mayer Wise could bring that vision of Reform Judaism to the rest of the country. So he was very busy guy.

The plan was for Plum Street to be built and then the Civil War came along. So, all the plans were put on hold. Shortly after the war, the construction began. It was less than a year's time from beginning to end of construction. We have a wonderful ledger book of the handwritten beautiful calligraphy of every transaction from hauling dirt to when the organ was delivered and every payment that was made. I really marvel at the fact that it was built so quickly. Because it was post Civil War with great inflationary pressures at the time, the cost escalated so it was more than had been originally intended. And that's why some of the interior work that I mentioned earlier took a little bit longer, because of the cost overruns from that post Civil War inflation.

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