

Simon Wolf Esq
With the compliments of
Moses A. Dropsie

PANEGYRIC

ON THE

LIFE, CHARACTER AND SERVICES

OF THE

Rev. Isaac Leeser,

PRONOUNCED BY

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MOSES A. DROPSIE,

BEFORE THE

HEBREW EDUCATION SOCIETY OF PHILADELPHIA,

On February 19, 1868, (5628.)

PHILADELPHIA:

JONES & CO., PRINTERS, 104 HUDSON STREET.

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LIFE AND CHARACTER OF REV. ISAAC LEESER.

IF the life of a good man were the only source of benefit to mankind—if the sphere of his usefulness was limited only to his contemporaries or to the age in which he lived, or if perishable, like the transitory things of life, his death would be an irreparable loss, and our grief would be inconsolable. But fortunately, the good man lives forever. The muse of history, in gathering the fragments which she records, blots out the interval of time, and makes the past and the present but one. The great and the good of the many centuries that have rolled on in their course, live now fresh in our recollections. We share their hopes and fears, we rejoice in their gladness, and grieve in their sorrow, and the wisdom that fell from their lips has all its original freshness and vigor. It would be deplorable, indeed, if man's usefulness were circumscribed by the short span of life; for it is not till the tongues of those envious of his fame have been silenced, the passions of his antagonists have been stilled, and the ambition of his rivals has been gratified or lost its zest by his death, that the clouds that obscured his name are dispelled, and his worth and his merits shine out in all their brilliancy. For we do not properly appreciate him whom we meet in the daily walks of life, "familiarity breeds contempt," we see the petty faults and foibles common to humanity, specks on the character that our weakness oft magnifies to colossal proportions, but when the career of a good

man has been impressed with the seal of death, the recollections of his virtues through the memory, and we discover, oft too late, our great loss.

My friends, we have met to pay a tribute to the memory of Isaac Leeser. But a few brief hours have passed since his death, and our people, by their manifestations of grief, show that they have suddenly risen, as if from a stupor, to a consciousness of their loss. Death has been active in our ranks; within a brief period, he has cut down some of our brightest men; men whose career has conferred honor and renown on our race, but he has taken none brighter or more devoted to Judaism than he.

Mr. Leeser was born in the village of Neuenkirchen, in the province of Westphalia, on December 12, 1806. At the early age of eight years he was bereft of his mother, when his grandmother assumed the care of him. At the age of fourteen he lost his father. Mr. Leeser recently, in speaking of his grandmother, said: "We honor her memory and she deserves it, as she watched over us from our eighth year, when our own mother was early called, till our fourteenth, when both she and her son, our father, were borne to the grave in the course of three weeks, and left us thus orphaned in a double degree, in the wide world. Her instructions and admonitions have never left us, and we trust that we shall be preserved faithful to the end." After some preliminary education in a preparatory school, he entered the gymnasium of Münster, where he remained until the year 1824. We have often heard Mr. Leeser, in speaking of his early education, express his praise for the Catholic priests who instructed him. In February, 1824, he came to the United States at the instance of his uncle, Zalma Rehiné, who resided in Richmond, Va. His uncle being engaged in the mercantile business, employed young Leeser in his store, when it soon became apparent that he was not adapted to such a pursuit; though frequently in after life, he expressed a different opinion. In July, 1828, there appeared an article in the *London Quarterly Review*, attacking Judaism. Mr. Leeser being then a young man, a foreigner, and a resident of this country but four years, single-handed and alone entered

the lists with his unknown and powerful adversary, and defended our cause with such ability as to attract great attention. This defence introduced Mr. Leeser to the notice of the congregation Mikveh Israel, of this city. The readership having become vacant by the death of Mr. Keys, Mr. Leeser was chosen, in the year 1829, to fill that position, which he retained till the year 1850. Some time subsequently, the new congregation Beth El Emeth was formed, expressly for him, by a number of his friends. He was chosen the minister of it. The congregation's pecuniary resources being very limited, the compensation for his services was trifling indeed; but as usefulness was his object, not money, he accepted this position, which he retained till his death.

In the year 1839 Mr. Leeser again appeared before the public, in a series of articles addressed to the editor of the *Philadelphia Gazette*, in reply to unfounded and illiberal strictures on our religion in the *London Quarterly Review* of 1839.

Mr. Leeser's literary labors, for their variety, number, character, and extent, are surprising; in this, few men of our age have surpassed him. In the year 1830 he published a work entitled "Instructions in the Mosaic Religion," translated from the German of Johlson, of Frankfort on the Main.

In the year 1833 he published an original work entitled "The Jews and the Mosaic Law," in the preface of which he stated that "This book, now for the first time published, was composed more than four years ago, whilst I was engaged in pursuits quite ungenial to literature. Many a time, after a day of active application to business, have I spent the hours of night in writing. Books for reference I had but few, and the reader will therefore excuse the brevity with which many of the points are treated, which no doubt would have received more attention could I have had authorities to refer to." In the years 1836 and 1838 he published a collection of sermons in two volumes.

In the year 1837 he published the Portuguese Form of Prayers in Hebrew, with his English translation; and in the same year, he published a Hebrew spelling and reading book.

The Hebrew Sunday School of this city having been formed, in a great measure through his exertions, there was no book for imparting instruction in our religion to the young children, which he deemed adapted to that purpose. To supply this want, he published his Catechism in the year 1839.

In 1841 he published another volume of his sermons, to which he appended a series of his articles which had appeared in the *Philadelphia Gazette*.

In the year 1842 he edited Grace Aguilar's Spirit of Judaism.

In the year 1845 he published the Pentateuch in Hebrew with his English translation, in five volumes. A short time subsequently, he published the Daily Prayers in Hebrew and English, for the use of the German Jews; and in the year 1853 he published, in quarto form, his translation of the Bible. Of this Mr. Leeser said, "That it is not a new notion by which he was seized of late years, which impelled him to the task, but a desire entertained for more than a quarter of a century, since the day he quitted school in his native land to come to this country, to present to his fellow-Israelites an English version, made by one of themselves, of the Holy word of God."

If Mr. Leeser had done naught else, this work alone would entitle him to the gratitude of every English reader. Prior to this edition, the only English versions of the Bible were that of King James and the Douay, the imperfections of which were deplored by biblical scholars. Mr. Leeser availed himself of the great ancient commentators, Rashi, Redak, Aben Ezra, Rashbam and others; and of the labors of Mendelssohn, Wessely, Zunz, Herxheimer, Philippsohn, and of that host of illustrious modern commentators, who, devoting their erudition to the proper interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, have shed a flood of light over them. To these Mr. Leeser added his own critical knowledge, in which he at that time, perhaps, had no superior in America.

In the year 1857 he published this Bible in an 18mo form.

In the year 1864 he published Miss Grace Aguilar's religious works and poems, and at the time of his death, he was engaged in

publishing his sermons in ten volumes, eight of which had appeared previous to his decease, and the remaining two of which will shortly be published. In the year 1843 he began the publication of the *Occident* magazine, which he continued till his death.

In addition to these literary labors, Mr. Leeser translated and published a number of other works, such as Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, catechisms, and primary educational books, and when it is remembered that he faithfully attended to his labors as minister of his congregation; that in his literary, as well as all other labors, he was unaided by an amanuensis or other assistant; that he was his own proof-reader, that he had to teach printers to compose in Hebrew; that frequently he was compelled to set up Hebrew type, we can have some conception of the immensity of his labors and the indefatigability of his industry.

When Mr. Leeser arrived in the United States, the number of Jews was small, and they were scattered over our broad expanse of territory. The little learning they possessed was confined to a few persons. Most of our people, having fled from the oppression practised on our race by Europe's political tyrants or religious bigots, came here with but few of the world's goods, and in their struggles against the pinchings of poverty, could give but little time or attention to their religious culture, and many, who possessed both knowledge and pecuniary resources, were indifferent to their religious duties.

The means for instruction in the Hebrew were very limited and inefficient. The knowledge of those who were born here did not greatly exceed the rudiments of the language in which our prayers were printed, and some elementary principles. Mr. Leeser soon saw the deplorable state of affairs, and his first efforts were directed to our improvement; and with his characteristic ardor, by his writings and addresses, he infused vitality into the inert Jewish body. His earnestness, devotion and purity attracted around him the true Jews, who lamented their destitution; though but a youth, they hailed him as a leader; his agitations extended over our entire land, and were felt even in Europe.

His labors accomplished a two-fold purpose. They not only instructed us, but they contributed in an eminent degree to eradicate those prejudices respecting our people, which ignorance and bigotry had engendered. Immediately on accepting the ministerial office, he commenced to teach and exhort by public addresses. He may be said to be the originator in this country of the delivery of sermons among our people. His fame soon became extended; he received numerous invitations for his services from various parts of the Union, which he always cheerfully accepted, and in many places his addresses and sermons were the first delivered in English by a Jewish divine. In the accomplishment of his purpose to elevate Judaism, his magazine, the *Occident*, was an important aid; in its pages, as well as by his other literary labors, there was unfolded to the new world, some account of the names and writings of those illustrious men, who by their learning contributed to preserve, and protect our existence, religion, and name, through that long period of suffering and tribulation, which stained the historic page with the bloody record of man's inhumanity.

Mr. Leeser's learning was not profound; that is, he had not devoted himself to some especial subjects, and exhausted or attained the highest degree of knowledge of them, but he possessed a great fund and variety of learning. There were but few subjects on which he had not some information; his mind was perspicuous; he saw at a glance, and from all sources, absorbed knowledge which became indelibly fixed in his wonderful memory. He knew Hebrew, Chaldee, Greek, Latin, French, German and English. He had a natural adaptation for philology, and thoroughly understood the philosophy of the structure and grammar of languages; it was this knowledge which enabled him to translate with great fidelity, without losing the spirit of the original.

His traits of character were strongly marked; his idiosyncrasy unmistakably distinguished him from his fellows; with an indomitable will, he had but few negative qualities. His industry was marvellous. After transacting the multifarious duties of the day, he curtailed the hours allotted for rest, by his incessant toil.

His perseverance was untiring, his energy was inexhaustible, his determination was unflinching. By the combination of these qualities he accomplished those great results which will render his name immortal.

The practices of his life strictly accorded with his professions ; of the highest purity, he neither said nor did that which could produce a blush on the cheek of chastity.

His charity was as broad and expansive as that of the religion which he taught ; he was neither avaricious nor sordid ; with many opportunities for the accumulation of pecuniary wealth, he rejected them with disdain ; he had higher and holier aspirations, and at his death left but few worldly goods.

He regarded life as a period of obligations and duties ; impressed by its stern realities, he rarely indulged in those amusements or enjoyments which lighten our burdens and invigorate mind and body.

But in this recital of the traits of this truly noble man, it must not be forgotten that justice requires "*De mortuis nil nisi verum.*" He was human. In his ardor for the accomplishment of some good purpose (he had none other), he sometimes forgot that all were not gifted with his quick perceptions, and, in urging them on, was impatient and impetuous, and at times he would wound tender sensibilities by his frank and outspoken manner ; for he had never learned the art of disguising his thoughts. If these be frailties, they are too infinitesimal to dim his name.

Mr. Leeser was connected with the various Jewish charitable institutions of this city ; in these he exhibited his customary restless activity ; he strove to make them permanent, and not dependent on spasmodic efforts for their existence.

He was the founder of the Hebrew Education Society of this city, the Society that I am now honored in addressing. For years he endeavored to establish schools wherein Hebrew should form one of the leading branches of education. The result of those endeavors, was the establishment of this Society and its school, which was the

precursor in this country of all schools of a similar character. Subsequently, he directed his efforts to its permanence, and at his instance, the late Judah Touro endowed it with a liberal bequest. To the school he devoted much time and attention; it was his favorite scheme. He regarded it as a powerful instrument in the advancement and elevation of Judaism, but his ambition did not rest here. In the draft of the Act for the incorporation of this Society, he inserted a provision authorizing a higher institution of learning, and Maimonides College sprang into being but a short period previous to his death, an appropriate closing act of his life.

In recognition of his services, he was chosen the Provost, and in the distribution of the duties among the faculty, he had no ambition beyond that of serving in a capacity in which he could be most useful. He entered on his duties, but death had already marked him for his victim. The sands of life had nigh run out, and ere he could witness the fruition of his hopes, death closed his earthly career.

Mr. Leeser dedicated his life to Judaism, of which he was the embodiment and type; it was the subject of his reveries by day, and the theme of his dreams by night. He sympathized with its sorrows and rejoiced in its gladness. Not having the cares of a wife or family, he watched over it with the fond solicitude of a husband and parent. He was a vigilant sentinel; when desecrating danger threatening it, he became its valiant champion, and, clad with the panoply of truth, defended it with his power and strength. No soldier rushing against the blazing cannon's mouth, in his country's defence, or martyr writhing under the tortures of the Auto-da-fé for conscience' sake, exhibited greater devotion than he. It was the object of his creation, the purpose of his life.

Within a brief period, Israel has mourned for the loss of illustrious children, but none greater than he. What a void his death creates! Upon whom shall his mantle fall? Let not our grief be heartless lip-service. Let our actions attest our truthfulness and earnestness. Let us build up as an imperishable monu-

ment to his fame, an edifice on the deep and broad foundations which he planted. Isaac Leeser is dead, but the memory of his public services and private worth, will live through the ravages of time, and his name will be enrolled among those who have conferred honor and renown on our race, and who recognized no earthly distinction equal to that conferred on us by the great Creator.

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