

Jewish Chaplains During The Civil War

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The American tradition of the military chaplaincy is as old as the United States itself. Clergymen served with the armies of the individual colonies almost from the first battle of the Revolution, and provisions for the payment of chaplains were enacted by the Continental Congress as early as 1775. The first regular army chaplain was commissioned in 1781, immediately following due authorization by Congress in its legislation for a second regiment to supplement the small national military establishment. From then on, post and brigade chaplains were an accepted feature of the army table of organization.

These chaplains were all Protestants, though of varying denominations. The possible service of Roman Catholic chaplains received no official attention until the time of the Mexican War, when President Polk held several conferences on the subject with members of the American church hierarchy. Polk's suggestion that the bishops appoint two priests to serve with the army in a *civilian* capacity was adopted, but he apparently had no intention of recommending them for military appointments. During the 1850's Catholic priests served several military posts in the capacity of chaplain, but their official status is open to question. It was actually

not until the Civil War that Catholic priests were explicitly granted the right to serve as army chaplains.¹

There is no evidence that the legal status of Jewish chaplains was ever discussed prior to the Civil War, but once that fratricidal conflict had begun, with thousands of Jews enlisting in the Armies of both the Union and Confederacy,² it was inevitable that these members of a minority faith would press for their right to be served by clergymen who could truly minister to their spiritual needs. The personal liberties and civil rights of members of all religious minorities had been safeguarded by a Constitution which carefully separated church from nation, although states like North Carolina lagged far behind in their application of this principle to their internal politics. The chaplaincy was, however, another realistic test of the equality which the Federal government theoretically accorded to all American citizens.

In the Confederacy, this equality was apparently recognized immediately upon the outbreak of hostilities. The acts providing for the appointment of chaplains in the Confederate military establishment merely stipulated that they should be "clergymen," with no denominational specifications.³ There was probably not a suffi-

1. See *The United States Army Chaplaincy*, (War Department Pamphlet 16-1), Washington 1946, for a detailed study of the historical development of the Army Chaplaincy.

2. See statistics and lists of Jews in the Union and Confederate armies and navies in Simon Wolf, *The American Jew as Patriot, Soldier and Citizen*, Philadelphia 1895.

3. *Journal of the Congress of the Confederate States of America 1861-1865*, Washington 1904, II, pp.

160, 196. Ella Lonn (*Foreigners in the Confederacy*, Chapel Hill 1940, p. 265) erroneously refers to the Rev. Jacob Frankel, who will be discussed later in this essay, as a Confederate chaplain. Miss Lonn obviously misread a vague phrase in the authority which she cites, Mrs. Townes R. Leigh, "The Jews in the Confederacy," *Southern Historical Society Papers* XXXIX, p. 178, where it is not clearly stated that Frankel was a Union chaplain. No rabbi is known to have served as a chaplain in the Confederate Army.

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cient number of Jews in any one Confederate regiment to warrant the election of a Jewish chaplain, but at least there was no *legal* barrier to such an appointment.

In this instance the Confederate Congress was more liberal and tolerant than its Washington counterpart, and it was in the North that the storm broke over the right of Jewish soldiers to chaplains of their own faith. The original Volunteer Bill, as reported to the floor of the House, required that regimental chaplains, who were to be "appointed by the regimental commander on the vote of the field officers and company commanders present," be "regularly ordained minister[s] of some Christian denomination."⁴ On July 12, 1861, in a discussion of this proviso, an Ohio Congressman moved an amendment which would substitute the phrase "religious society" for the objectionable words "Christian denomination." The Congressman was Clement L. Vallandigham who was later to become notorious for his leadership of the Copperhead movement and who was eventually arrested by military order and exiled across the Confederate border. Apparently on his own initiative and without any Jewish prompting, he spoke out clearly in defense of Jewish rights. "There is a large body of men in this country, and one growing continually, of the Hebrew faith," he said, "whose rabbis and priests

are men of great learning and piety, and whose adherents are as good citizens and as true patriots as any in this country." Amplifying his remarks, he denounced the underlying implication of the bill that the United States is a Christian country, in the political sense, and branded the law as entirely unjust and completely "without constitutional warrant."⁵ Vallandigham's appeal failed to move his fellow members of the House, or perhaps they paid no attention to his comments. At any rate, they rejected his amendment and passed the bill with its discriminatory clause intact.

This brief episode attracted very little notice. But perhaps because he also was an Ohioan and a member of the Democratic Party, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise did grasp its significance. He labeled the qualification clause an "unjust violation of our constitutional rights" and applauded Mr. Vallandigham for his staunch advocacy of the American conception of equality. But Wise was more furious than imaginative and had no constructive suggestion to offer to remedy the situation. His fear of dictatorship and of militarism ran away with his confidence in democratic action, and he could only urge his readers to remember this deliberate act of injustice and to hold their indignation in check until the end of the war, when surely they would be free to "square accounts."⁶

4. *War of the Rebellion: . . . Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Washington 1880-1901, III, I, p. 154. (Hereafter abbreviated as *WROK*).

5. *Congressional Globe*, Washington 1861, 37th Congress, First Session, p. 100. Vallandigham later took pleasure in reminding his fellow Congressmen that he had called the injustice of this measure to their attention months before they were deluged with protests from their constituents: *ibid*, Second Session, Part I, pp. 156-7.

6. *The Israelite* VIII, No. 3, p. 23, July 19, 1861. Perhaps this was yet another reason for Wise's unabating opposition to the Republican administration and his mounting loyalty to the Democratic Party. Wise was willing to stand as Democratic nominee

for State Senator in Ohio in the same election of 1863 in which Vallandigham was narrowly defeated for the gubernatorial office. See this writer's essay on "Isaac Mayer Wise on the Civil War" in *Hebrew Union College Annual* XX, Cincinnati 1947. An editorial in the *Jewish Messenger* (X, No. 9, p. 68) on Nov. 1, 1861, indicates that its editors were not oblivious to the problem, but had failed to comment upon it because they were convinced that it was an oversight and that "no discrimination against our co-religionists, was in any way intended, and . . . that Congress, at its next session, will modify the act." Obviously the father and son editorial team, Samuel M. and Myer S. Isaacs, were either ignorant of the facts or blind to their meaning: Vallandigham's motion was defeated — the House had acted deliberately.

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For all that Vallandigham, Wise, and the few others who were interested, knew, the question of the Jewish chaplaincy would remain a theoretical one. Wise himself had no inclination for personal military service since he was totally antagonistic to the purposes of the war. Fortunately for America and the Jew, however, the question did not remain a theoretical one and was not permitted to die for lack of excitement and interest.

In September, 1861, less than three months after the House had refused to sanction the service of Jewish chaplains, a YMCA worker happened to visit the military camp in Virginia where the 65th Regiment of the 5th Pennsylvania Cavalry, popularly known as "Cameron's Dragoons", was temporarily stationed. He was horrified to discover that a Jew, one Michael Allen of Philadelphia, was serving as the regimental chaplain, and promptly began such an agitation in the public press that ultimately the Assistant Adjutant General of the Army, George D. Ruggles, was forced to state in writing his official warning that "any person mustered into service as a chaplain, who is not a regularly ordained clergyman of a Christian denomination, will be at once discharged without pay or allowance."⁷ Allen felt so humiliated that he resigned his commission on the excuse of ill health rather than suffer the dishonor of dismissal from the service, but the clamor raised by the zealous YMCA worker brought the issue before the public once again.⁸

7. Philadelphia *Sunday Dispatch*, October 20, 1861. There were undoubtedly many other cases in which the appointment of chaplains of minority faiths was attacked publicly. Carl Sandburg, in *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, New York 1939, II, p. 230, records the visit to Washington of a delegation of Philadelphia clergymen to urge Lincoln not to appoint a certain Universalist minister as chaplain, because "he believes that even rebels themselves will be finally saved."

8. His resignation was accepted on Sept. 26.



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Obviously, Allen had been elected without any deliberate intention on the part of his regiment's colonel and officers to disobey the law. They were probably ignorant of the Congressional bill which forbade them to designate a Jewish chaplain for their regiment even though the Commanding Officer, Colonel Max Friedman, and a large proportion of his officers and 1200 men were Jewish.⁹ And Allen had been a very fitting choice for the office. Born in Philadelphia, November 24, 1830, he was, from

Special orders No. 79, Headquarters, Army of the Potomac, in *Records of the War Dept., Office of the Adjutant General, Volume 403. Orders and Special Orders*, in the National Archives.

9. Wolf, *op. cit.*, pp. 484-5. The law was passed only a few days before Allen enlisted (July 18, 1861, according to *Records of the Veterans Administration*, WO 1204831, in the National Archives). The officers could hardly have known of the prohibitory clause. *New York Tribune*, Oct. 31, 1861.

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childhood, a pupil of the Rev. Isaac Leeser, the leading spokesman of American traditional Judaism, and for a time he undertook to follow, under his rabbi's guidance, a regular course of study for the Jewish ministry. Even after he abandoned this ambition, and unlike many other erstwhile rabbinical students, he remained close to Jewish affairs and preserved his relationship with Leeser. He taught classes for the Philadelphia Hebrew Education Society, and substituted for Leeser as *Hazan* (Cantor) in the conduct of services, when that frequent traveler was out of town. The Rev. Samuel M. Isaacs, editor of the *Jewish Messenger*, wrote a few years later that Allen was "the only gentleman not actually a minister, accustomed and able to read the entire ritual according to the *Portuguese minhag* [rite]. He really deserves credit for the alacrity with which he has always responded to . . . calls [to act as *Hazan*], having frequently officiated at the *Franklin* street and *Seventh* street Synagogues of Philadelphia, and occasionally at the 19th street Synagogue of N. Y."¹⁰ As a layman, Allen took a further leading role in Jewish communal affairs, and served as secretary to both the United Hebrew Beneficial Society and the Hebrew Education Society.¹¹

Surely there was no one in the entire regiment better equipped by training as well as inclination to serve as its chaplain. During the two months of his service, Allen was not a Jewish chaplain, but the regimental chaplain for men of all faiths. On the New Year,

the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles, as well as on the Jewish Sabbath, he went to Washington or Philadelphia to attend services. But on Sundays, he held his non-denominational services, consisting of brief Scriptural readings and a hymn or two, as well as a sermon. An entry in his diary for Sunday, September 8, 1861, reads:

"Arose at 5½ am. Very cool, pleasant and invigorating. 'Fast of Gedaliah.' Did not fast, not feeling able to do so. Had service at 8 o'clock. LECTURED on 'Peace and Harmony.' All the officers and companies were present under command of Lieut. Col. Becker, and they all in their uniform looked very well."¹²

On that Jewish holiday, filled with remembrances of the pain of exile and the destruction of Jewish statehood, the chaplain preached a message about friendship and consideration to his men, without a single indication of the meaning of the day in his own religious thinking!

Indeed, one who reads over the manuscript copies of his sermons, preserved by his family, would never know they were written by a devout Jew. Of course, there is no reference to Christianity or its central figure, but neither is there any reference to the most pivotal of Jewish concepts. Theologically, his sermons approached the various aspects of religion; immortality, ethics, faith, from a general and common Judaeo-Christian background. They were realistic, practical, down-to-earth talks, designed to touch the most basic problems of men stationed only a few miles from the battle-front: fear, restlessness, doubt, and homesickness.



10. *Jewish Messenger* XIX, No. 23, p. 4, June 15, 1866.

11. *Ibid* X, No. 7, p. 52, Oct. 4, 1851; Henry S. Mora's, *The Jews of Philadelphia*, Philadelphia 1894, p. 245.

12. P. 5 of an eleven page diary kept by Allen

during the weeks his regiment was encamped near Washington, in the possession of Mrs. Clarence Michael Allen of N. Y., daughter-in-law of M. M. Allen. Dr. David de Sola Pool of Congregation Shearith Israel of N. Y. will present a paper on the diary as a whole at a future meeting of the American Jewish Historical Society.

Chaplain Allen spoke of faith in God, "our shield and our buckler . . . in the hour of battle, of danger, and of tribulation." He urged them to prepare for the strife by learning the arts of the soldier as conscientiously as they could, because theirs was a "good and just cause . . . to save our country from the hands of the spoiler;" but he also pleaded for a spiritual preparation for the death that surely faced some of them. Never discussing political issues as such, he nevertheless took care that they came to have some understanding of his conviction that the Union was in danger, that the Confederacy was a rebellion against the Constitution, and that their erstwhile fellow-Americans were now their deadly foes. He never avoided the most difficult subjects: desertion, sex, obedience to superiors, the evils of camp life, but tried as best he could to impart a reasonable, loyal, and high ethical attitude to his men. Reverence for Deity and love of Scripture infused every sermon with a warmth and humanity which must truly have "endeared him to all." Those were words used by his friend, Alfred T. Jones, who gave an address when the regimental colors were presented to Col. Friedman by a group of Philadelphia Jews in a formal ceremony on September 10. Jones said further, in the ornate fashion of his day, that Allen "taught the Word of God with pure unadulterated piety; he breathed into the ears of his hearers no sectarian hatred toward others, but labored zealously for their moral and spiritual welfare."¹³

In a passage of one sermon, Allen presented his own conception of some of the duties of the chaplain:

"I [must be] as one of you . . . I must share with you, the pleasures and privations of a soldier's life, and I trust that I shall be able to gain the esteem and confidence of each and every one of you . . . [Since] there are many of you who are good and loyal adopted citizens of this our country, and as there are amongst you those not very well conversant with the English language, I wish you to consider me as your Teacher, and during your leisure hours in camp, should you wish to perfect yourself in the vernacular language of this country, I will be glad and willing to impart all the necessary information which my time and abilities will permit."

To teach, to inspire, in his own humble way—this was Allen's purpose in serving as substitute Rabbi, and as military chaplain. The "Cameron's Dragoons" were deprived of a sincere and superior religious mentor when Michael Mitchell Allen was forced to resign his office.

On the other hand, we must not overlook the fact that Allen was disqualified from serving as chaplain for two reasons: he was not a Christian, it is true, but neither was he a "regularly ordained clergyman." Even under the revised provisions of the following year which permitted rabbis to enter the military service, Allen would still have been ineligible. An unknown Philadelphian, writing a "letter to the editor" in an effort to clarify the issue which he felt had been unjustly confounded by accusations of intolerance, insisted that Allen's appointment had been called into question not because of his faith but because he was "a liquor dealer . . . doubtless a very worthy man, but no clergyman."¹⁴

This editorial correspondent was not attempting to white-wash the War Department. Great as their excitement about Allen had been, the original letter from the Y. M.

13. In a letter to the Phila. *Sunday Dispatch*, Oct. 20, 1861.

14. Philadelphia *Sunday Dispatch*, Oct. 27, 1861.

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C. A. had not complained about him but about "a number of Chaplains in our Pennsylvania regiments [who] are entirely disqualified . . . for the high and important position to which they have been raised;"¹⁵ and Ruggles' letter nowhere specified the Allen case, although it undoubtedly included it. Indeed, the election of non-clergymen to the office of chaplain plagued War Department officials and thoughtful Protestant leaders all during the war. It was a subject which obtained recognition and reference in many investigation reports and exposes. The Paymaster General of the Army, for instance, wrote to Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts on Dec. 5, 1861 that:

"I regret to say that very many holding this position [of chaplain] are utterly unworthy . . . I think none should be appointed who did not come recommended by the highest ecclesiastical authority . . . It is said one regiment employs a French cook, and musters him as chaplain to meet the expense . . ." ¹⁶

Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise took great delight in quoting the assertion of a Presbyterian journal that "two thirds of the chaplains in the army are unfit for their place,"¹⁷ and offered his own personal testimony that at least two professed atheists of his acquaintance were serving as chaplains.¹⁸ One of Lincoln's private secretaries, W. O. Stoddard, charged that military chaplains were, for the most part, "broken down 'reverends,' long since out of the ministry for incompetency or other causes, men who could not induce any respect-

able church to place itself under their charge," and quoted Lincoln's angry comment that "I do believe that our army chaplains, take them as a class, are the worst men we have in the service."^{18a}

Colonel Friedman and his officers were undoubtedly distressed by this valid legal objection which complicated their determination to be served by a Jewish chaplain. They now realized that Allen would have had no right to serve as chaplain even if the law could be stretched to permit Jews to be elected to that position. So they resolved to try again. This time they would elect an ordained rabbi, but they would also take the precaution of electing a civilian who would not so easily be frightened into resigning, and who would have to apply directly to the Secretary of War for a commission. This would indeed be a test case which would determine whether discriminatory legislation against the Jews was to be enforced with the full knowledge and consent of the government and the people. Colonel Friedman lost no time in selecting the Rev. Arnold Fischel of New York City as the regiment's chaplain-designate. This was Mr. Fischel's introduction to the *cause celebre* in which he participated for many months. His service in the Potomac area as a civilian chaplain, and his lobbying activities in the nation's capitol as the representative of the Board of Delegates of American Israelites, have been known for a long time, but the motivation behind his application for a commission has

15. Philadelphia *Enquirer*, Oct. 12, 1861, p. 8.

16. *WROR* III, I, p. 728.

17. *Presbyterian Banner*, cited in *The Israelite* IX, No. 2, p. 14, July 11, 1862.

18. *The Israelite*, VIII, No. 6, p. 45, Aug. 9, 1861; No. 9, p. 70, Aug. 30, 1861.

18a. W. O. Stoddard, "White House Sketches," *New York Citizen*, Oct. 6, 1866, quoted in David R. Barbee, "President Lincoln and Doctor Gurley," *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly*, March 1948, p. 7.

never been explained before.¹⁹ The simple truth is that he sought the commission after his election by the officers of the regiment, in order to test the law and to secure a public statement about Jewish rights in the matter. His application was denied, of course, and, ironically, the letter of rejection (warm and friendly as it was) was signed by the very same Simon Cameron, Secretary of War, in whose honor the "Cameron's Dragoons" was recruited and named.²⁰ To be fair to Cameron, we must understand that he had not dictated the law and that he had no choice about obeying it—but now there was no possible doubt of the interpretation of the law, and American Jewry had to recognize it.

These, then, are the circumstances: The illegal election of Allen; the expose by the YMCA; Allen's chagrined resignation; then the election of Fischel as a test case; and, finally, the rejection of his application on the basis of the discriminatory clause. This was the chain of events which confronted American Jewry in late 1861 with the first instance of outright discrimination and legal inequity in the nation's history. It was a realistic situation, not a theoretical one, and it demanded a realistic solution. We shall not take the time here to chronicle and evaluate the lobbying campaign which lasted for almost a year and involved political pressures and techniques of every known variety, (and which also revealed the alarming degree to

which anarchy and indifference prevailed within American Jewry). Suffice it to say that, in July of 1862, Congress finally modified the chaplaincy requirements so that any "regularly ordained minister of some religious denomination" might, with the proper recommendations and qualifications, seek appointment as a chaplain.²¹ This was, to the writer's knowledge, the first major victory of a specifically Jewish nature won by American Jewry in a matter touching the Federal government. But it was more than a Jewish victory and certainly more than the recognition of a blunder by Congress and the erasure of a mistake. Because there were Jews in the land who cherished the equality granted them in the Constitution, the practice of that equality was assured, not only for Jews, but for all minority religious groups. And Michael Allen, an innocent victim of national carelessness, was the direct cause of that democratic victory.

II

In July of 1862, then, it was permissible for rabbis to apply for commissions in either of two categories; as regimental chaplains, or as members of the newly organized hospital chaplaincy. And, as might be predicted, it was not long before President Lincoln received a communication in this regard—a month later, to be explicit. It was a petition from the Board of Ministers of the Hebrew Congregations of Philadelphia, requesting

19. *Jewish Messenger* X, No. 12, p. 93, Dec. 13, 1861, and various items in the Board of Delegates of American Israelites correspondence files in the library of the American Jewish Historical Society (notably Letter No. 37 from Myer S. Isaacs, Secretary of the Board, to the Rev. Fischel, Nov. 27, 1861) established the authenticity of his appointment by the officers of the regiment. Some of Fischel's activities are chronicled in the mis-named article by Myer S. Isaacs, "A Jewish Army Chaplain," in *Publications of the American Jewish His-*

torical Society No. 12 (1904), pp. 127-137. The Rev. Fischel's contract as lecturer at the Shearith Israel Synagogue in N. Y. was about to expire on Oct. 31, 1861, and was not expected to be renewed. He was, therefore, seeking a new position. *Shearith Israel Trustees' Minutes* VI, p. 477, passim.

20. *Jewish Messenger* X, No. 12, p. 93, Dec. 13, 1861.

21. *WROR* III, I, p. 154 III, III, pp. 175-6.



the appointment of a Jewish hospital chaplain for the Philadelphia area. This representative body had met on August 19, the letter said, and discussed the hospital problem. Two soldiers of the Jewish faith had already died without the consolation of prayers by a Jewish clergyman, and, since Philadelphia

was increasingly becoming "a central depository for sick and wounded soldiers," more and more Jewish men would be sent to those hospitals. Although the Board had now contacted the hospital officials and were assured that their Secretary, the Rev. Isaac Leeser, would be notified of the admission of



Jewish wounded, they nevertheless believed it advisable that a Jewish chaplain be officially appointed, and they suggested further that he be assigned not only to the Philadelphia hospitals but also to those located in "York, Harrisburg, Chester, and other towns at not too great a distance."²²

John Hay, Secretary to Mr. Lincoln, wrote Leeser on September 6 that the President "recognizes the propriety of your suggestion, and will appoint a chaplain of your faith if the Board will designate a proper person for the purpose." The Board of Ministers was called to conference again, and after deliberating on the relative merits of their varied membership, selected the Rev. Jacob Frankel, minister of Rodeph Shalom Congregation of Philadelphia, then fifty-four years old, as their nominee for the commission. The President was informed of this action, and Frankel's commission arrived a few days later, duly signed by the President, together with all the requisite papers and directions.²³ Thus, on September 18, 1862, Jacob Frankel became the first American rabbi to be appointed a military chaplain.

The Rev. Frankel was a native of Grünstadt, Bavaria, where he was born on July 5, 1808. His family was one with a long musical tradition, and, at an early age, he set out on his first concert tour, through the Alsace-Lorraine district, with two brothers. His first position as cantor was in his native town. He next went to Mainz, where he remained for a number of

years. In 1848, he applied for and was elected to, the position of Minister of Rodeph Shalom Congregation of Philadelphia. A pleasant and popular man, blessed with a stirring voice and a kindly disposition, the Rev. Frankel was greatly beloved by his congregation, and served it well until his retirement from the active ministry a year before his death on January 12, 1887. Contemporary descriptions of his gentle character and mild manner render it easy to understand why his fellow rabbis selected him from among their number to be honored with the chaplaincy assignment. Further evidence of his popularity can be discovered in the results of a good-humored election, in 1866, for the most popular rabbi in Philadelphia, incidental to a raffle to raise money for the new Jewish hospital. The Rev. Frankel's friends bought so many tickets that he had more votes than all the other ministers combined.²⁴

Frankel's service as a chaplain extended for almost three years, until July 1, 1865, when the war had ended.²⁵ It was, of course, only a part-time activity, and his fellow rabbis assisted him in visiting the various military hospitals.²⁶ A small fund was placed at his disposal for purchasing inexpensive gifts and necessities for the men he visited, but the men were most grateful for the gift of his voice. Frequent were the occasions when they asked him to sing during his rounds in the hospitals; and many were the men, wounded and well, who came to his synagogue when-

22. *The Occident* XX, No. 7, pp. 325-28, Oct. 1862.

23. *Ibid.* The appointment was signed by the President on Sept. 10, and forwarded by the Surgeon General on Sept. 15. *Records of the War Dept., Office of the Adjutant General*, in the National Archives. The commission printed on p. 13 was sent to Frankel two years later when his appointment was renewed.

24. Morais, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-4; Edward Davis, *The*

History of Rodeph Shalom Congregation, Philadelphia 1802-1926, Phila. 1926, pp. 61, 98-100.

25. *Records of the War Dept., Office of the Adjutant General*, in the National Archives.

26. See the Rev. Leeser's pass, addressed to "Surgeons in Charge of USA General Hospitals, Department of the Susquehanna," requesting that he be permitted to visit sick Jewish soldiers, signed March 30, 1864. In Dropsie College Library, Leeser Collection.

ever they could to hear his inspired chanting of the service. As best he could, Chaplain Frankel arranged for religious furloughs for ambulatory cases during the High Holy Days and at the Passover. In his typical summarizing style, Leeser wrote, after Frankel was mustered out, that the latter had "faithfully discharged the duties incident to the office, and the Jewish soldiers in the hospitals in this vicinity were properly cared for under his supervision."²⁷ Frankel so cherished this war-time experience that he framed his commission, signed by Lincoln and Stanton, and had it hung on the wall of his home, where it remained until his death. It has been a treasured possession of his family ever since.

Frankel and the other Jewish hospital chaplain who served during the Civil War have all but been ignored by writers who have somehow assumed that because it was different, the hospital chaplaincy was inferior to the regimental chaplaincy. This is a historical error completely unwarranted by the facts. Both hospital and field chaplains were enrolled in the volunteer army and were appointed to office on temporary commissions. Indeed, all hospital chaplains were commissioned by the President and the War Department, whereas many regimental chaplains were appointed by governors and other state officials. Equal remuneration was provided for both types of service by Congressional law—the pay of a cavalry captain—but neither was responsible for the military duties of that rank. The same

uniform regulations were applied to the chaplain in the field and the chaplain in the hospital: neither wore a military uniform; they were both instructed to wear their customary civilian garb.²⁸ Hospital chaplains were subject to the same type of military discipline as regimental chaplains, and were equally responsible to their military superiors. For purposes of centralized efficiency, all hospital chaplains were subordinate to the Surgeon General of the Army, and assigned by him to hospitals in the cities of their residence, where, in turn, they were supervised by the Surgeons in charge.²⁹ Regimental chaplains, on the other hand, were subject to the orders of their colonels. It was a fortunate decision to place all hospital chaplains under a single authority, for they could never have successfully fulfilled their essential role within the complicated and often contradictory structure of state and national military authority.

Much of the confusion regarding the two types of appointments has resulted from the very history of the hospital chaplaincy itself: it was new for the entire country as well as for the American-Jewish community. No such office had existed prior to the Civil War, and Congress alone might never have created it even then. The urging of various Protestant ministers and of Archbishop John Hughes of New York³⁰ was necessary to convince President Lincoln of the desirability of such a new departure and then he did not wait for Congressional action; instead he requested certain clergymen to act as hospital

27. *The Occident* XXII, No. 5, pp. 234-5, Aug. 1865. Other details from miscellaneous clippings in the possession of Mr. Joseph Frankel, N. Y., grandson of Jacob.

28. *General Orders of the War Department, 1861-1863*, New York 1864, I, p. 177. Allen wore a uniform (see p. 8), as did certain other chaplains,

because he had enlisted as an officer of the line before his election as chaplain.

29. For the military orders concerning the appointment and assignment of hospital chaplains, see *WROR* III, II, pp. 67, 222, 276; IV, III, p. 496.

30. See Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, II, p. 44, for pertinent quotations from Lincoln's correspondence on this subject.

chaplains, and pledged that at the first opportunity he would press Congress to legalize their appointments. He fulfilled his promise in his Annual Message to Congress on December 3, 1861, and such a bill was finally enacted in May 1862, (without any denominational provisions), a short time before the bill was passed which revised the regimental chaplaincy qualifications.³¹

III

In his report to the readers of *The Occident* informing them of the steps taken to secure a commission for the Rev. Frankel, Isaac Leeser had urged his colleagues in New York, Baltimore, St. Louis, and Cincinnati, to organize themselves as the Philadelphia rabbis had, and to apply in a similar fashion for Jewish chaplaincy appointments for the benefit of the Jewish soldiers in their areas.³² This suggestion was never adopted by those rabbis, but another representative Jewish body did make application for a hospital chaplaincy. The Board of Delegates of American Israelites, through its President, Henry I. Hart, petitioned the President on October 6, 1862, for an appointment as hospital chaplain for the Rev. Arnold Fischel, who had, from December of 1861 to the following April, carried on such duties in the Potomac area as the civilian representative of the Board, in much the same capacity as Jewish Welfare Board workers during World Wars I and II. Fischel richly deserved such official recognition for his noteworthy and unique activities. His work had come to a halt only because the member congregations of the Board failed to contribute adequate funds

to pay his expenses. But now that chaplaincy appointments were obtainable it was more than fitting that the Board should recommend him to Mr. Lincoln and ask that he be assigned to the hospitals in Washington and vicinity with which he was already so familiar. This letter of application³³ was endorsed by John Hay, Lincoln's secretary, in these words: "The President directs me to refer the enclosed to the notice of the Surgeon General and to inquire whether a Jewish chaplain is needed here." No other notation was made on the letter and there is no answer to it in the files of the Board of Delegates' correspondence which have been carefully preserved.

At any rate, Fischel never received a commission and never served as a military chaplain. The noteworthy service he performed was as a civilian. Our knowledge of his later career is extremely hazy, but it is reported that he returned to Holland shortly after this episode, although the date is uncertain.³⁴ This was a disappointing conclusion to the war career of a rabbi who should, by virtue of his interest in, and efforts in behalf of, the Jewish soldiers of the Union Army, have been privileged ultimately to serve as an officer of that Army.

There were not enough rabbis in Louisville, Kentucky, to form a Board of Ministers, but the entire Jewish community of Louisville was conscious enough of the Jewish war wounded in Kentucky hospitals to initiate a public movement to secure the appointment of a Jewish chaplain for that area. Prominent non-Jewish citizens joined together

31. *WROR* III, I, pp. 712, 721.

32. *XX*, No. 7, pp. 325-28, Oct. 1852.

33. No. 18878-9 of the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

34. Myer S. Isaacs, "A Jewish Army Chaplain," in *PAJHS*, No. 12 (1904), pp. 130-1. *The Jewish Record* reported several times that Fischel intended to return to America, but these expectations were never fulfilled. See, for example, *V*, No. 22, p. 2, Feb. 24, 1865.

with Jews, and urged Robert Mallory, a Kentucky member of the House of Representatives from 1859 to 1865, to seek a commission for the Rev. Bernhard Henry Gotthelf, the rabbi of Adath Israel Congregation of Louisville. This public movement coincided with the furore over General Grant's anti-Jewish General Order No. 11 which had so many repercussions in the state of Kentucky — indirect evidence that the majority of non-Jews in this area where Jews were accused of disloyalty did not share the suspicions of Grant's staff officers. The petition met with success and the Rev. Gotthelf received his appointment on May 6, 1863, although his commission dated his rank from February 16.³⁵

The Rev. Gotthelf, born in Bavaria on February 5, 1819, had come to the United States at the age of twenty-one, and served congregations in the East, including Keneseth Israel of Philadelphia, of which he was the first cantor and preacher, prior to his call to Louisville in 1851. After the Civil War he moved to Vicksburg, Miss., where he ministered to Anshe Chesed Congregation until his death in 1878, a victim of the yellow fever epidemic which swept the whole Southland that year. The inscription on his tombstone records his life and character in these laudatory terms: "a wise teacher, a faithful minister, a tender husband, a devoted father, a good man."³⁶

So successful had been the campaign to convince the American public of the right of rabbis to serve as military chaplains, that the news of Mr. Gotthelf's appointment was noted in the public



BERNHARD H. GOTTHELF

press, although chaplaincy appointments (for Christians, at least) were by that date quite commonplace. The editor of the *Louisville Journal* celebrated the occasion in these words:

"An Excellent Appointment. — We are gratified to announce that President Lincoln has appointed the Rev. B. Gotthelf, the minister of the German Jewish Congregation of this city, as Hospital Chaplain, to be stationed here. The fact that a very respectable number of Jewish soldiers have been and still are receiving medical treatment at our hospitals having been brought to the notice of the Hon. Robert Mallory, he made an application for the appointment of Mr. Gotthelf, which we took pleasure, with other citizens, in endorsing. These invalids can now enjoy the instruction and consolation of a minister of their own faith, and we are, therefore, convinced that the appointment was as timely as it is well merited."³⁷

35. *The Israelite* IX, No. 45, p. 357, May 15, 1863; *Records of the War Department, Office of the Adjutant General, Vol. XI, Officers of Signal Corps and Hospital Chaplains*, in the National Archives.

36. Letters from Rabbi Stanley Brav, Vicksburg,

Oct. 23, 1947, and Mr. Harold Gotthelf (grandson of the rabbi), Vicksburg, Nov. 18, 1947; *Keneseth Israel 90th Anniversary Booklet*, Phila. 1937.

37. Cited in *The Israelite* IX, No. 45, p. 357, May 15, 1863.

A careful search for family papers and examination of contemporary periodicals has disclosed only one interesting detail of the Rev. Gotthelf's twenty-eight months of chaplaincy service (he was mustered out of the Army on August 26, 1865). Since the responsibility of the Civil War chaplain towards his men included the provision of various items of comfort and entertainment, the Rev. Gotthelf was eager to obtain reading matter for his men, most of whom were German-Jewish immigrants. During January and February of the final year of the war, he made a tour of the larger Jewish communities of the midwest to secure donations in cash, and in books, to establish German language libraries in the various military hospitals under his jurisdiction. An editorial in *The Israelite* endorsing the purposes of this trip conveyed the information that "there are almost always from 2,000 to 3,000 sick and wounded German soldiers in [the Louisville] hospitals, among them from 200 to 300 Israelites."³⁸ Undoubtedly the libraries were to be assembled for the use of all German-speaking patients, non-Jews as well as Jews. Perhaps this was the first example of that type of non-denominational service which Jewish chaplains and war service agencies rendered so frequently during the subsequent wars of the United States.

In Cincinnati, at least, Rabbi Wise's assurance that "Mr. G., well known to our readers, will find the encouragement this matter deserves," was not disappointed. Beth El Lodge of B'nai B'rith appointed a special committee to assist Mr.

Gotthelf in the project, as did other Jewish lodges in the community. There is no record of the other cities which Gotthelf visited, or of the general success of his tour,³⁹ but the whispered word of criticism, which seems to make the lives of so many rabbis miserable, pursued even this meritorious mission of beneficence. One William Kriegshaber of Louisville was compelled later to send a public letter of retraction to *The Israelite*, apologizing for some bitter reflections on the character of the Rev. Gotthelf and of his mission which he had written to friends in Cincinnati.⁴⁰ This episode marks the sum total of the information available concerning Gotthelf's military career. It was unfortunately typical of Jewish interests during the Civil War that once Jewish chaplains were appointed, their work was all but ignored by the Jewish press, and the more glamorous military exploits of individual Jews received the greater amount of publicity.

IV

So incomplete has our knowledge of the Civil War chaplaincy been that no notice has been taken of the one rabbi who did serve as a regimental chaplain. On April 10, 1863, the Rev. Ferdinand Sarner enlisted in the Army at Brooks station, Va., for three years, and was immediately elected chaplain of the 54th New York Volunteer Infantry.⁴¹ On the same day, he sent off notes to the editors of *The Israelite* and *The Occident* telling them of his appointment and change of address. They lost no time in passing on the news to their readers.⁴²

jutant General, in the National Archives, and the Records of the Adjutant General of the Division of Military and Naval Affairs of the State of New York, Albany.

42. *The Israelite* IX, No. 43, p. 338, April 31, 1863; *The Occident* XXI, No. 2, May 1863, p. 96.

38. XI, No. 30, p. 237, Jan. 30, 1865.

39. *Ibid.*, No. 34, p. 269, Feb. 17, 1865.

40. *Ibid.*, No. 39, p. 309, March 24, 1865.

41. *Records of the War Dept., Office of the Ad-*





FERDINAND L. SARNIER

Who was Ferdinand Leopold Sarnier—this rabbi who has never even been mentioned in our standard American Jewish history texts, and who yet achieved, without any great influence, that appointment over which all American Jewry had been aroused only a year before? A year-long search for descendants led the writer to Mrs. Martha Sarnier Levy of Bradford, Pa., his seventy-six year old daughter, who has generously contributed various documents and reminiscences which help to outline his life-facts.

Ferdinand Sarnier was born in Lissa, Posen, on February 8, 1820,⁴³ the son of a humble tanner. Bent on securing a modern academic training, he first studied at the Gymnasium in Hamburg. In July, 1851, he entered the Royal Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin.

There he remained for three years, undertaking a difficult course of studies particularly in the field of philosophy. In 1854 he proceeded on to the University of Hesse where he studied for four more years, finally passing the examinations in 1858 and achieving the coveted Doctor of Philosophy degree. Meanwhile, in 1856, he had been elected rabbi of the congregation of Battenfeld, and was therefore concurrently student and spiritual leader for two years. He retained this position for a very short time thereafter, and was ready to leave for America by January, 1859, with the blessings of the Mayor of the town inscribed on his travel permit in formal documentary language, and his diplomas and certificates packed securely in his luggage. This was, however, not the first time he had planned a trip to the United States. In 1850, he had secured a passport marked for Pittsburgh, Pa., but evidently changed his mind and decided to remain in Europe at least until he had taken advantage of German academic opportunities.

Almost immediately upon his arrival in the United States, he secured the position as rabbi of Brith Kodesh Congregation in Rochester, N. Y., where he served ably for about a year. Upon his resignation from that post in July, 1860, two formal resolutions were presented to him: one by the officers and members of the congregation, the other by the Board of Trustees. Both paid high tribute to his ministrations. He had conducted himself "in the most virtuous and exemplary fashion," the congregation testified, adding that "his beautiful lectures have been full of instruction and never failed to

43. This is the date on his passport. He told the Army authorities at the time of his enlistment in 1863

that he was then 38! He undoubtedly wanted to avoid any question of his being too old to enlist.

inspire his hearers with a true sense of our holy religion." No doubt in order to preclude any suspicion that he had been dismissed by the congregation, it was explicitly stated that he had "voluntarily resigned his office as our Rabbi, thereby causing his numerous friends and admirers great sorrow." The Trustees' resolutions recorded these same sentiments in other words, but they also added their recommendation of Dr. Sarner "to every Congregation in this Country", expressing their belief that he was "an excellent scholar, an eloquent lecturer, and a good, truly religious man, for whom we shall ever bear the kindest feelings."

Virtually nothing is known of Sarner's activities between 1860 and 1863, beyond the fact that his application for the position of rabbi of the Anshi Chesed Congregation of New York City was tabled by its Board of Trustees on June 2, 1861.⁴⁴ But perhaps he had taken to haunting the government agencies in Washington, for a traveler's report to *The Israelite* mentioned a meeting with him in mid-1861 in the Capitol building. This reporter commented that Sarner was not only a "learned" man, but that he was also "the author of several plays."⁴⁵

At any rate, Sarner was elected to the chaplaincy of the 54th N. Y. Volunteer Regiment, also known as the "Hiram Barney Rifles" and the "Schwarze Yager", on April 10,

1863. The meeting of regimental officers required by law was held on that day, and the assembled officers certified his election.⁴⁶ Strangely enough, only a possible three of the thirteen officers who signed the document were Jews. An examination of the muster-rolls of enlisted men, company by company, reveals the fact that Jews were a small minority in the entire regiment.⁴⁷ Why they should have preferred a Jewish Chaplain is a question which it is impossible to answer with any categorical certainty. Perhaps, since the regiment was composed almost exclusively of German immigrants, the officers deemed the language their chaplain used in his sermons, and his educational background, more important than the faith he professed. Indeed, one of the documents which he had presented when first interviewed by the officers was a letter from the Prussian Ambassador in Washington, certifying to his German academic attainments, and when he was examined by a board of chaplains on May 15, his colleagues seem to have been impressed by the evidence he presented that he was a graduate of "two of the German Universities."⁴⁸ This emphasis might indicate that the regimental officers were more concerned to secure the services of a cultured German, than of a chaplain of a particular denomination.

The 54th Infantry had an active combat career. During the year and

44. *Anshi Chesed Board of Trustees Minutes, 1856-1866*, p. 414.

45. VIII, No. 18, p. 141, Nov. 1, 1861.

46. Copy of the certificate in the *Records of the War Dept., Office of the Adjutant General*, in the National Archives.

47. *A Record of the Commissioned Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Privates of the Regiments which were organized in the State of New York . . . To Assist in Suppressing the Rebellion . . . Albany 1864*, II, pp. 407-427.

48. Both documents are found in the *Records of the War Dept., Office of the Adjutant General*, in the National Archives. Manuscript evidence can be dis-

concertingly erroneous: the board of chaplains also certified that Sarner was "a regularly ordained minister of the Lutheran Church"! Were we not certain that he was a rabbi previous to and subsequent to his service in the Army, and did we not know that he was in contact with contemporary Jewish periodicals (which would surely have received reports of his apostasy if such had been the case), there might be a possibility that the chaplains knew better than we. Perhaps they too assumed that a regiment composed of a majority of German Gentiles would elect a Protestant chaplain. It is barely possible that Sarner spoke such poor English that he could not make them understand he was a rabbi. Whatever the reason for such an error, it is enough to make a researcher shudder for the accuracy of other "certified" evidence.

a half of Sarner's service, the regiment saw action at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, and in the invasion of South Carolina. Of all the details of his chaplaincy experience during days of battle and weeks of rest and then intensified preparation, we know only that he himself was wounded at Gettysburg. A single line to that effect was printed in *The Jewish Record* of New York on Jan. 15, 1864, with the hypothetical guess that "Dr. Sarner is probably the first Rabbi who voluntarily took a part in a fight since Rabbi Akiba." A more elaborate report of the incident appeared in the French-Jewish monthly, *Archives Israelite*,⁴⁹ stating that during the battle, Sarner's "horse was killed under him, and he himself received a dangerous wound, from which he subsequently recovered; this was the result of the very courageous manner in which he conducted himself during that terrible battle." Although he would undoubtedly have served out his period of enlistment, or at least have seen the end of the war with his regiment, the wound apparently did not heal for a long time, and he was ultimately discharged on October 3, 1864, to date from July 31, for physical disability.⁵⁰ But we have not yet finished with the wound, although it is the only single shred of detail which has been ascertained about Sarner's military career.

After his discharge, the ex-Chaplain returned to New York City and delivered guest lectures in various pulpits. It was not long, however, before he was engaged in a new venture. Jointly with the Rev.

Jacob Levi, rabbi of the Society of Concord Congregation of Syracuse, he undertook to edit and publish a new German-Jewish monthly, *The Rebecca*, and to travel in its behalf for funds and subscriptions. Leeser, in his review of the first number of this periodical, noted that part of a drama was included in its contents, that it was obviously more of a literary journal than a religious one, and that what there was of a religious nature smacked too much of religious liberalism to suit his taste.⁵¹ Another contemporary went into the more practical details of its publication, affording us a valuable insight into its problems which we would otherwise not possess, since no single copy of *The Rebecca* has survived the neglect of the intervening years:

"... Notwithstanding the attractive features of the paper, however, and the ability with which it seems to be edited, still there seems to be some difficulty in the way of its continuation. For, in the second number the publisher informs us that the appearance of the third number of 'The Rebecca' is postponed until Dr. Sarner returns from a journey, which he is about to make in search of subscribers. He says that each number of the paper costs the sum of \$92, and that it will be useless to continue its publication unless the subscription lists are increased. This is but another example of the difficulties that await those who attempt to publish Jewish periodicals in America. For it is an undeniable fact that, however generous the Israelites may be in other matters, they always seem loth to encourage the establishment of Jewish newspapers."⁵²

It was during this trip which might mean life or death for *The Rebecca*, (and which did mean its demise, since no further issues are recorded), that Dr. Sarner's war-



49. XXV, p. 135, Feb. 1, 1864.

50. Headquarters of the Army, Adjutant General's Office, Special Orders No. 330, Paragraph 36, October 3, 1864. Dr. Sarner apparently left camp before this order had been transmitted to him, under the impression that it would be forwarded. This made him technically absent without leave, and in March, 1869, the Adjutant General's Office finally

compared its records of his service, revoked the order for his honorable discharge on account of disability, and listed him as discharged for being absent without leave. Adjutant General's Office, Special Orders No. 63, March 18, 1869, in the National Archives.

51. *The Occident* XXII, No. 9, p. 420, Dec. 1864.

52. *The Jewish Record* V, No 15, p. 2, Jan. 6, 1865.

wound became the subject of a scandalous accusation. In Cleveland, where he attempted to secure new subscribers, he apparently secured a few especially vicious enemies instead. One of them, B. Dettelbach, Secretary of the Board of Trustees of the Anshe Chesed Congregation, wrote an open letter to *The Israelite*, denouncing the traveling rabbi-editor as a liar and a slanderer. Part of the evidence concerned the Gettysburg wound: "On his last visit to our city, being requested to state the cause of his lameness, he [Sarner] very piously remarked, to have been wounded in a battle in the service of the United States. Unseen by him, though, he has been observed walking as erect as an arrow! Why this deception? Why this denial of truth? . . . Does he think that such malicious expressions of falsehood will either benefit him or his sheet?"⁵³ Undoubtedly Dettelbach's comments were the malicious, slanderous ones; a few weeks later, another Anshe Chesed Trustee, Abraham Bloch, wrote that the meeting out of which the letter (signed "by order of the Trustees") had proceeded was an illegal one, and that if there was any quarrel it was only between Rabbi G. M. Cohen

(of the congregation), Mr. Dettelbach and Sarner, and, furthermore, purely of a private nature.⁵⁴

The further details of Sarner's post-war career are not altogether in order. His daughter remembers that he taught languages at various schools in New York, and there are indications that he continued preaching from time to time in various synagogues. He became rabbi of the Beth-El Emeth Congregation in Memphis, Tenn., sometime during 1872 and ministered there until his death on August 18, 1878, when he fell victim to the same yellow fever epidemic which took the life of B. H. Gotthelf.

Little remains of Rabbi Sarner's career: some faded documents; the memories of a loving daughter; typical rabbinical souvenirs of the period: a silver butter dish, a gold headed cane and a large water service, presented to him on special occasions and engraved in his honor. But the hundreds of rabbis who served with United States combat units during World War II may remember with pride their predecessor—the first of a long and honorable line who have served their nation and their faith with courage and blood—Chaplain Ferdinand Leopold Sarner.

53. XI, No. 31, p. 244, Jan 27, 1865.

54. *The Israelite* XI, No. 34, p. 269, Feb. 17, 1865.

