

**A VOICE
THAT SPOKE
FOR JUSTICE**



*The Life and Times
of Stephen S. Wise*



Melvin I. Urofsky

A Voice That Spoke for Justice

SUNY Series in Modern Jewish History
Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, Editors

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THE LIFE AND TIMES OF STEPHEN S. WISE

Melvin I. Urofsky

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Albany

*For my family, with love and appreciation:
Susan, Philip, Robert, and, of course, Cuz*

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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For information, address State University of New York
Press, State University Plaza, Albany, N.Y., 12246

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Urofsky, Melvin I.

A voice that spoke for justice.

(SUNY series in modern Jewish history)

Includes index.

1. Wise, Stephen Samuel, 1874–1949. 2. Rabbis
—United States—Biography. 3. Zionists—United
States—Biography. I. Title. II. Series.

BM755.W53U76 296.8'346'0924 [B] 81-5676

ISBN 0-87395-538-2

AACR2

ISBN 0-87395-539-0 (pbk.)

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Introduction

In the first half of this century, a talented and charismatic leadership restructured the American Jewish community to meet the demands and opportunities of a pluralistic, secular society. To match the dynamics of the nation, men and women like Louis Marshall, Jacob Schiff, Henrietta Szold, and Louis D. Brandeis created new organizations and refashioned others, often in their own image. This generation of titans is now gone, but their work still guides the current modes of American Jewish life. Among them none articulated the belief that the destinies of the Jewish people and of the United States were inextricably intertwined as did Stephen Samuel Wise.

A progenitor of American Zionism, creator of the American and World Jewish Congresses, founder of the Jewish Institute of Religion and, above all rabbi of the Free Synagogue, Wise carved a unique niche for himself at the interface of Jewish communal affairs and those of the broader society. His battles for a free pulpit, for a living Judaism responsive to social problems, for the right—indeed, duty—of rabbis to enter the lists of secular reform, set a pattern from which all American rabbis, those of his generation and their successors, have benefited.

Wise's life, however, is more than a chronicle of an ethnic community's adjustment to the host society. He had a singular vision in which the ethical teachings of the ancient Hebrew prophets merged with the Jeffersonian ideals of an egalitarian society. Jewish communal life could prosper in this land only if it adopted democratic practices, while the promise of America demanded that it adhere to the high standards of social justice elaborated so eloquently in Isaiah and Micah. For Wise, therefore, the battles for democracy in Jewish affairs and against antisemitism were part and parcel of his struggles in progressive and liberal reforms. A free pulpit, an enlightened rabbinate, a socially responsive religion went hand in hand with civic reform, wage and hours legislation, and fair treatment of minorities.

To characterize Wise as a reformer, the friend of Wilson and Roosevelt, Smith and LaGuardia, or as a leader of liberal Judaism and Zionism, the colleague of Heller, Hirsch, and Brandeis, is to fail to see the man whole. One can only understand his Americanism through his passionate Judaism, and his Judaism through his fervent Americanism. This wholeness is best exemplified in his fight against fascism, in which he denounced Hitler as a foe of both the Jewish people and of American ideas. It is this Stephen Wise, an American Jew, whom I have tried to portray in the following pages. As with any historical figure, however, some portions of his life proved easier to illuminate than others, and in at least one area, the evidentiary record is practically nonexistent.

A controversial figure in his lifetime, Wise has remained the victim of rumors for more than three decades after his death. Three accusations in particular, because of their gravity, demand serious attention. First, Wise allegedly took his doctorate at Columbia under fraudulent circumstances, using another man's work as his own. Fortunately, the contents of a recently discovered box of letters between Wise and Richard Gottheil should establish Wise's sole authorship of his thesis.

A second accusation grew out of the friction between established Jewish organizations and the radical Bergson group during the Second World War, and has been amplified by revisionist historians dealing with the American response to the Holocaust. According to this school, American Jewish leaders in general, and Stephen Wise in particular, collaborated with the Roosevelt administration to cover up evidence of Hitler's Final Solution and thus thwart meaningful efforts to save European Jewry. That Wise was guilty of errors of judgment is certain, especially in his trust of Franklin D. Roosevelt, but the political realities of those years foreclosed many of the options which these critics, with the clarity of hindsight, so forcefully and confidently urge. This matter is explored at length in the chapters on fascism and the Holocaust.

The final set of accusations have, despite all efforts to secure conclusive evidence one way or the other, remained unsubstantiated rumors. Several years ago, Helen Berenson detailed in her memoirs sexual liaisons she allegedly had with Stephen Wise. Many of Wise's colleagues confided that they believed her story to be true; one in particular described Wise as "a womanizer—he loved the girlies." But not one of them could say he had knowledge of an affair, either with Berenson or any one else. Carl Voss, whose joint biography of Wise and John Haynes Holmes proved so valuable to my own work, related that he had heard these same rumors, and in attempting to trace them down had run into the same dead end—much smirking, but no proof.

Interestingly enough, every one of these people testified to the deep love Wise had for his wife, Louise. From the day they met, Wise adored her and

daily sent her notes, gifts, and flowers, a pattern from which he rarely deviated through nearly fifty years of marriage. Such evidence does not, of course, preclude the possibility that Wise loved his wife yet nonetheless engaged in extramarital relations. If this were true, then Wise would indeed be guilty of hypocrisy, especially in the light of his numerous sermons and articles on the sanctity of marriage.

The historian, to use Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s phrase, must at times make a "leap of faith." After marshaling all the available data, one must use critical judgment and informed imagination to fill in the voids of one's knowledge. But if the chasm is too great and the evidentiary blocks too small, the "leap of faith" may prove no better than the rumor-mongering one is trying to overcome. In this case, training as well as intuition protests against labeling Wise a philanderer. Without proof, it seems best to ignore snide whisperings, and to tell Wise's story on the basis of more substantial documentation.

That story first attracted me during my research on Louis D. Brandeis and American Zionism. Brandeis, who also combined a devotion for prophetic idealism and Jeffersonian democracy, found his perfect lieutenant for the Zionist and Congress battles in Stephen Wise, and I determined that, at some later date, I would learn more about Wise's life. In 1974 Dr. Emil Lehman of the Herzl Institute invited me to deliver an address on the centennial of Wise's birth. The Hon. Justine Wise Polier and James Waterman Wise later read that paper, and urged me to undertake a full-scale biography of their father. In the years since then, they have been continuously helpful and informative, answering numerous questions, digging up old letters and photographs, and arranging interviews with men and women who had known or worked with Wise. Both read the first draft of the manuscript, and made many helpful suggestions, but they insisted from the start that I alone would have final say over content and interpretation. I will be eternally grateful to them not only for their help, but for their determination that filial piety had no place in a scholarly biography. Judge Polier's late husband, Shad Polier, was also extremely supportive of this undertaking during the last years of his life.

Among those who shared their memories of Stephen Wise, I would like to thank Gertrude Adelstein, Rabbi Morton M. Berman, the Hon. Eliahu Elath, Dr. Nahum Goldmann, Rabbi Israel Goldstein, Dr. Alfred Gottschalk, Professor Milton Handler, Rabbi Edward Klien, the Hon. Moshe Kol, the Hon. Arthur Lourie, Rabbi Meyer Passow, Dr. Gerhardt Reigner, Dr. Arya Tartakower, and Mr. Jacques Torczyner. I was also fortunate to interview before their deaths Mrs. Rose Halprin, Rabbi Edward I. Kiev, the Hon. Louis Levinthal, the Hon. Golda Meir, Dr. Emanuel Neumann, Mr. Ezra Shapiro, and Mr. Meyer Weisgal. A very special thanks is due Dr. Carl Hermann Voss, who not only worked with Wise and was his first

biographer, but who generously shared with me much knowledge of the man, and consistently encouraged me in my own work. Jacques Torczyner, head of the Herzl Institute, not only provided me with lively interviews, but arranged for a travel grant from the Institute. Research was also facilitated by a grant-in-aid from the American Council of Learned Societies, and I wish to thank the Council and its directors for their faith in this project. The manuscript was typed with care and tolerance by my secretaries at the History Department of Virginia Commonwealth University, Janie L. Ghee and Wanda P. Clary.

The main body of the Wise Papers is in the Library of the American Jewish Historical Society, and my work there truly became a pleasure thanks to the librarian, Dr. Nathan M. Kaganoff, and his assistants, Nehemiah Ben-Zev and Martha B. Katz-Hyman. I value the Society's director, Bernard Wax, and assistant director, Stanley Remsberg, not only as friends but for the hospitality they inevitably showed in my often frenetic descents upon the premises. A secondary body of Wise materials is in the American Jewish Archives, and Mrs. Fannie Zelcer made my trips there both profitable and enjoyable. Mrs. Sylvia Landress, head of the Zionist Archives and Library, and her assistants, Esther Togman and Rebecca Sherman, have been so helpful to me over the last several years that my debt can never be repaid. My thanks also go to Dr. William Emerson and his staff at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Mrs. Miriam Leikind of the Abba Hillel Silver Archives, and the many people who make the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress absolutely the finest research library in the world.

In Israel, I had the research assistance of Ms. Rachel Gershuni in Jerusalem, and I also want to thank Dr. Michael Heymann, director of the Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, and his colleague, Dr. I. Phillipp, as well as the head of the Weizmann Archives, Mrs. Nehama A. Chalom, and her assistants, Rhonda Epstein and Shoshana Kafri. The late Meyer Weisgal and his wife Shirley opened their home to me, and in between regaling me with Yiddish jokes and stories about Wise, Weisgal permitted me to examine his private papers. Similarly, Dr. Israel Goldstein and Rabbi Morton Berman also allowed me to examine their personal papers relating to Wise. The staff of the Interlibrary Loan Division at VCU once again tolerated incessant demands, and I am grateful to Janet Howell and Eileen Meagher for their help. At the State University of New York Press, Robert Mandel and Nancy Sharlet were most helpful, while Mary Miles did an outstanding job copyediting the manuscript.

It is my good fortune to have friends who are too polite to refuse requests to read my work, such requests usually arriving several weeks after the manuscript. The valuable comments they made justified, at least in my mind, my behavior, and the final product is far better for my having had the

benefit of their knowledge. Jerome Eckstein of the State University of New York at Albany, Susan Estabrook Kennedy of Virginia Commonwealth University, David W. Levy of the University of Oklahoma, and Stephen Whitfield of Brandeis University contributed far more than they can ever know to whatever merits this book may have; the flaws are mine alone.

Throughout the years I have worked on this and other studies, my family has been more than a source of inspiration. They have been a constant joy, reminding me by their very presence of what I hold most dear. In love and gratitude this book is dedicated to my wife Susan, my sons Philip and Robert, and, of course, Cuz.

Richmond, Virginia
February 1981



STEPHEN S. WISE

Goodly Beginnings

“My grandfather fought with his congregation for forty years,” Stephen Wise would gleefully say, content that his own battles with and for the Jewish people maintained a family tradition that had produced seven generations of rabbis. Wise’s grandfather, Reb Joseph Hirsch Weisz (1800–1881) had indeed carried on a running feud during the many years he served as chief rabbi of Erlau in Hungary. A tall, handsome man with a beard extending almost to his knees, he could be brutal in his fanatical defense of Orthodox Judaism. When he saw a member of his congregation smoking on the Sabbath, he crossed the street and knocked the man into the gutter, shouting, “How dare you offend the Sabbath?” Reb Joseph’s reputation for learning and piety won him the respect of non-Jews as well, and the Catholic primate of Hungary, Archbishop Bertescovitch, was a close personal friend. Ironically, gentile friends came to his rescue when he was in difficulty with the Jewish community of Erlau and again when he faced civil charges of sedition.

Shortly after Weisz’s appointment as chief rabbi of Erlau in 1840, currents of change swept through many of the synagogues of Hungary. Inspired by the liberalizing movement in Germany, religious reformers in Hungary wanted to modernize many of the traditional Jewish rituals and do away with ancient laws and customs that they considered archaic and irrelevant. Reb Joseph set himself firmly against any reform; the word of God, as given to Moses and interpreted by the rabbis, could not be altered to suit the convenience of Jews too lazy to obey the law. For a while, the reformers had the upper hand and forced over twenty rabbis, including Reb Joseph, to resign. The deposed rabbis, led by Weisz, took their case to the civil courts, where it dragged on for almost twelve years. To their aid came Reb Joseph’s Catholic friends, including several bishops, and even Emperor Franz Joseph expressed his sympathy for them. In the end, the orthodox group won its case, with the courts ordering their congregations to reinstate them

and to pay them back salary. Weisz returned in triumph to the Erlau synagogue with a regiment of soldiers escorting him. The Oberkomandier of the district posted a detachment of guards at the door, and warned the rebellious congregation that he would shoot any person who opposed the rabbi. After accepting apologies, Reb Joseph returned the money to the synagogue, a gesture made more in disdain than as a peace offering.

This special treatment for Weisz derived from the fact that during the Revolution of 1848, he had remained loyal to the crown. After the failure of the Revolution, several Jews in Erlau who bitterly opposed Reb Joseph and his ultra-orthodoxy charged that he had aided the liberals, and at the trial, Catholic leaders once again testified to his loyalty to the emperor.

The strife over reform, both political and religious, left Reb Joseph and his congregation permanently at odds. Even though he retained the post of chief rabbi in Erlau until his death, he went to the synagogue only four times a year on the major holidays. Otherwise he studied and prayed with a group of his followers at his home. It was there that he taught his son Aaron.¹

Born in Erlau on May 2, 1844, Aaron Weisz inherited his father's brilliance and the gentleness of his mother, Rachel Theresa. As a child he studied Hebrew with his father, and then took rabbinical training in Hungary's finest seminaries, receiving his *s'micha* (ordination) in 1867 from Reb Israel Hildesheimer in Eisenstadt. After pursuing secular studies in Berlin and Leipzig, he received a doctorate from the University of Halle for a dissertation on angels and demons in rabbinic literature. While he was at Leipzig word came of the assassination of the American president, Abraham Lincoln. Weisz reportedly turned to his comrades and quietly said: "Some day I am going to live in the land of Lincoln; I want my children to grow up in freedom." Before he could keep that promise, however, he returned to Erlau, where he served for several years as superintendent of schools; he also met and married Sabine de Fischer Farkashazy.

Sabine would have been an extraordinary woman in any era, but she was especially strong-willed for a Jewess in nineteenth-century Hungary. She belonged to the aristocracy, her father having been titled for developing the great Herend porcelain works. Moreover, she happened to be already married and the mother of two children, Ida and Wilma, when she fell in love with the gentle, handsome, but very impecunious Aaron Weisz. She insisted on getting a divorce so she could marry the young rabbi, and her horrified father quickly took her on a grand tour of Europe, hoping to divert her from this nonsense. But Sabine had determined to marry Aaron Weisz, and the baron finally relented, on condition that Aaron leave the rabbinate and enter the porcelain business where at least he could earn enough to support his family properly.

Aaron and Sabine were married in 1870, but the baron's scheme came to naught. Appalled at the horrible working conditions and tyrannical treatment of the factory workers, Weisz helped organize a strike of the workers against his father-in-law which, if it accomplished nothing for the laborers, terminated his short career as a businessman. His family, in the meantime, had grown with the birth of a son, Otto Irving, in 1872, and then of a second son, Stephen Samuel, on March 17, 1874. Despite these obligations, Aaron determined now to keep the promise made nearly a decade earlier; one month after Stephen's birth, Aaron Weisz left for America by himself, traveling as did so many other immigrants in the overcrowded steerage. Once safely landed in New York, he took a job laying bricks on the new Tribune building until he found a synagogue in Brooklyn, Beth Elohim, delighted to have the son of the famous Reb Joseph Weisz as its rabbi. He stayed there several months improving his English, and then accepted a call to become rabbi of Congregation Rodeph Sholom in Manhattan, the post he held until his death in 1896. In August 1875, fifteen months after he had left Erlau, he finally felt able to bring his wife and children to join him in America.²

Sabine and Aaron Wise (an immigration inspector had convinced Aaron that in the United States "Weisz," pronounced "vice," was not a proper name for a rabbi) now set out to make a new life for their four children and the two sons and a daughter who would be born to them in America. Although he had been an ally of his father in defending ultra-orthodoxy in Hungary, Wise considered such a stance inappropriate in the New World. Some of the younger members of Rodeph Sholom already showed a decided preference for reforming, but their new rabbi carefully steered them onto a middle track, a course which ultimately would merge into the Conservative movement. He agreed to modernize the liturgy, edited a revised prayer-book, and even accepted changes in some of the minor rituals, but he insisted on a strong Hebrew component in the Temple's religious school and the preservation of the more important customs. In 1886, he and other "moderate" reformers founded the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, destined to become the cornerstone of Conservative Judaism in the United States.³

Where Reb Joseph had been feared by his congregants, Aaron Wise was as equally loved. Within the growing New York Jewish community he was soon known as a scholar as well as a popular and effective speaker, and under him Rodeph Sholom prospered and grew, moving from its original building near the corner of Clinton and Houston Streets to a larger and more imposing edifice on Lexington Avenue at 63rd Street. The Wises made their home on East 5th Street, and there Sabine ruled as if she were still a member of Hungary's titled nobility. Her husband did not earn a large salary as a rabbi, but she managed their income well; occasionally, if cir-

cumstances grew too strained, she would quietly sell a few pieces of the fine porcelain she had brought over with her from Erlau. Years later Stephen Wise wrote of her: "She tempered my Father's idealism with understanding. She was the perfect balance-wheel in the life of the family. She had great strength of character and all of us found inspiration in her. . . . She had to be a little firmer than she would have liked to have been, because my Father was just a little too kind, as ministers are apt to be in their homes. She was a real influence, a great help and a high inspiration all her days."⁴

With his father, Stephen Wise developed a particularly close relationship. His earliest memory was that of Aaron taking him, as a toddler, on a walk to the synagogue: "I remember walking with him and holding his hand as we walked and thinking it was quite the most wonderful thing that ever could be that I could walk and accompany him." He adored his father, and throughout his life frequently talked about him and what he had learned from him. Most important, though, Aaron Wise recognized that his second son was given to much self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. Although a robust and healthy lad, he had a cast in one eye, leading other children to call him "Cross-Eye Dick." Moreover, while of above-average intelligence, he stood in the intellectual shadow of his older brother Otto. A mature Stephen Wise wrote in 1931:

Whatever may be held with respect to the validity of the postulates of modern psychology, I know that I was a younger brother, and that to a most gifted and attractive being, who inevitably, though always compassionate, outshone me in every way. At school he was brilliant despite his effortlessness, while I plodded on, as best I could, with distinctly mediocre talents withal never-ending effort. He won all hearts, and our Mother, as often happens, diverted to him not a little of the adoration of her Father whom my elder brother was fancied to resemble. A deep and withering sense of inferiority would have overcome me—in truth it came very near to blighting my life—had it not been for my Father's understanding, compassion, and, in the end, love.

Aaron, as Stephen put it, "sensed and pondered over my need of something to help me overcome a feeling of inferiority which, if left unchecked, was bound to have a disabling effect upon my personality."⁵ What Aaron provided was trust, companionship, and constant encouragement. "When you feel life is too much for you," he told his son, "remember to say: 'Always do what you are afraid to do.' " This advice, and above all the love that abounded in the large and noisy Wise family, eventually resolved the difficulty. The youth who was so unsure of his worth and ability grew to become a hurricane of energy, his overachievement compensating for the doubts of his early years.

But if the unsure youth gave few hints of future greatness, his childhood does provide signs of lifelong interests. The young Wise already found

himself fascinated by two worlds, and he would move and join these two areas throughout his more than fifty-year career. On the one hand, of course, lay Judaism and the Jewish people, the rich heritage he received from his father. Every night over the dinner table Aaron Wise would talk with his family about the glories and sufferings of Jews, of the stories of distress he heard from new immigrants arriving each day. From the age of seven, Stephen Wise claimed, he knew what he wanted to be: a rabbi, the seventh generation in a line stretching back more than two centuries.⁶

But the life of the secular world, especially politics, also fascinated him. In 1880, only six years old, he carried a torch in parades for General Winfield Scott Hancock, and came home crying over Republican James Garfield's victory. Despite the image of cloistered, aenemic *yeshiva* scholars, Wise was a vigorous lad with more than average strength, which he indulged in wrestling, running, and climbing, as well as dodging carriages and delivery wagons on the crowded asphalt streets. He and his friends walked for miles exploring the bustling city, often winding up at one of the many docks on the East River, where they watched in fascination as longshoremen unloaded cargoes from all over the world. He also learned about a less attractive aspect of the city, the corrupt ward politics of Tammany Hall, with its stuffed ballot boxes and purchased votes. All this took place with little effort at concealment in the Eleventh Ward where the Wises lived.⁷

His education also reflected these twin stands of his life. He entered public school at age six, and walked with his brothers and sisters each day the one block from their home on East 5th Street to P.S. 15. There a teacher named Nathanael Beirs often sent him out after class to fetch hot water for his tea; then they would sit and talk. In his will, Beirs left his favorite pupil a portrait of his grandfather, who had been a professor of surgery at King's College.⁸

The New York schools at that time offered a six-year course of study with an additional year of preparation for those students going on to college. A comprehensive program, it covered everything from arithmetic to zoology, with a special emphasis on writing and speaking the English language. This suited young Wise well, for English literature and language were to fascinate him all his life. He had already learned German, which was spoken in the Wise household, and read Lessing, Schiller, and Goethe. In public school he mastered English, and developed an appetite for reading which provided him great enjoyment all his years. He devoured the classics, Shakespeare, Milton and Locke, Arnold and Wordsworth, memorizing long sections of sonnets, plays, and essays; his later writings and speeches reflected this early training. He also cultivated a taste for theater, and skipped school one day to see Edwin Booth play Hamlet, shortly before the great actor's death in 1888.⁹

Soon afterward, Wise published his first article, an essay on Abraham Lincoln, in which he extolled the “Moses of the Negro race” for rising not through genius but through “perseverance, honesty and unflinching patriotism.” The piece overflowed with schoolboy enthusiasm and rhetoric, but the editor of the *Literary Review*, Otto Irving Wise, undoubtedly felt that it had some intrinsic merit.¹⁰ Printing as well as writing fascinated Stephen. He regularly delivered articles his father had written to the office of the *American Hebrew*, and there struck up an acquaintance with the foreman of the print shop, a Scotsman named Cameron. At times Wise would accidentally mix up some of the type, and the paper’s owner and editor, Philip Cowen, would grab the boy to send him on his way. Cameron often stopped Cowen, saying “Don’t punish the lad; he’ll be heard from some day.”¹¹

At age thirteen, Wise entered the City College of New York, where he stayed for four years. He first took a year of sub-freshman preparation, and then the first three years of the regular course of study, with a concentration in Greek and Latin. His earlier lack of confidence evidently gone, he consistently received high ratings in nearly all his work, and in his junior year he earned several medals for superior work in Latin and Greek. At City College he also received his first opportunity to develop speaking skills. Every morning he and his fellow students gathered in the chapel to listen to or participate in the various student declamations and orations. Wise joined the Clinonian, the college literary society which debated similar groups at other schools. Several of his classmates recalled his oratory as excellent, delivered in a booming voice that impressed all who heard him.¹² By now he had developed a rich baritone voice and a speaking style that gave more than a hint of unusual ability. Here again his father’s advice proved useful. At first the would-be orator tried to imitate the “Episcopalian sing song” so prevalent among the city’s preachers. “*Sprich wie der Schnabel gewachsen ist*,” Aaron told him, “Talk the way your beak grows.” Although there have been several attempts to analyze Wise’s speaking style and explain his oratorical power, in the end this simple rule is the only one he ever followed consistently, and it was enough.¹³

Simultaneously with his secular studies Wise pursued Hebrew and Jewish topics. Even before entering public school he had learned enough Hebrew from his father to participate in Rodeph Sholom’s services. As the boy grew older, his father sent him to study with his good friend, Alexander Kohut. Like Aaron Wise, Kohut had been in the midst of the battle between Reform and Orthodoxy; trying to steer a middle course, he had helped found the Jewish Theological Seminary and taught Talmud there. Now he had a private class of three youngsters who would each achieve exceptional fame in their careers: Stephen Wise; Joseph H. Hertz, Biblical scholar and

later Chief Rabbi of England; and his own son, George Alexander Kohut, a leader in the field of Jewish education and bibliography.

George Kohut became Stephen Wise's closest friend, and the relationship lasted until Kohut's death in 1933. Rebecca Kohut, George's stepmother, became almost a foster mother to the young Wise, who spent much time in the Kohut household. She described the two, one to be a man of the world and the other a scholar, as perfect complements to each another. George had, she recalled, "a protective, fraternal solicitude" for his friend, and the two thrived on each other, spending long hours talking and making plans for the future.

Wise, Kohut, and Hertz, although not regularly enrolled students, took a number of courses at the Jewish Theological Seminary. They studied Hebrew under H. Pereira Mendes, Bible with Bernard Drachman, and also took courses with other faculty members. But their work with Kohut remained special, involving love as well as learning. Even after Wise returned from studies in Europe and held a pulpit, he and his two friends continued studying Talmud with the elder Kohut. In 1894, as Alexander Kohut lay dying, he insisted that "his boys" should not be deprived of their lessons. His wife later recalled the old teacher in bed, too weak to hold the volume they were studying and the young men taking turns holding the book for him as he gave them their lessons.¹⁴

To prepare himself more thoroughly for the rabbinate, Wise left City College at the end of his junior year and transferred to Columbia, so that he could study with Richard J. H. Gottheil, the son of another of his father's friends, Gustav Gottheil, rabbi at the prestigious Temple Emanu-El. Richard Gottheil had singlehandedly built up the Semitics Department at Columbia, and taught Hebrew, Arabic, and Syriac. Wise took all of these, and also wrote his senior thesis under Gottheil on "Judaea Capta," the battle of the ancient Hebrews against Rome. During that year at Columbia, Wise continued his extracurricular interest in oratory and debate, and received several invitations to speak at synagogues around the city. Congregation Beth-El in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, sent out a formal notice that "Mr. Stephen S. Wise, the Great Orator of Columbia College and aspirant for the Ministry" would speak at the synagogue on "Why Am I a Jew?"—all of which must have been heady indeed for the seventeen-year-old would-be rabbi.¹⁵

As he prepared to graduate from Columbia College in the spring of 1892, young Wise had to decide where and how he would complete his rabbinical training. He had already begun to drift toward Reform, or as he preferred to call it, Liberal Judaism. While remaining sympathetic to more traditional customs, he believed that in the West "Jews could not be expected to maintain the practices and the rites which were a natural part of their life when

they were shut out of and away from the world.”¹⁶ The logical place for him to study, therefore, would have been the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, then as now the citadel of Reform Judaism in America. Wise wrote to the aging founder-president of the college, Isaac Mayer Wise (to whom he was not related), about the possibility of working under the direction of HUC faculty but not in Cincinnati; he wanted to begin a doctorate in Semitics at Columbia with Gottheil. Later in the summer, Isaac Wise reluctantly agreed to so register him, but urged that it would be better if he did his doctorate from afar and joined his classmates at the school. “But as your father seems to think otherwise and your taste runs in the same direction, I submit.” Following this letter, the faculty at the college began outlining work for Wise to take.¹⁷

Before starting his studies, however, Wise prepared to accompany his father to Palestine. Reb Joseph had died in 1881, and his widow had declined Aaron’s repeated invitations to join him and his family in New York. Instead, she chose to go to the Holy Land, and wrote her son: “I go not to live there but to die there. There I wish to pray; and there to die, to be laid to rest amid the sacred dust of Jerusalem; to be buried on the slope facing the Holy of Holies.” She had settled in Jerusalem in 1882, and for a number of years the Wise family received news of her from Simon Judah Stampfer, a *meshullah* (messenger and alms-gatherer) from the Hungarian Jewish community in Palestine. Aaron Wise wanted to visit her, bringing with him the grandson she had not seen since infancy. Stephen secured a commission from the New York *Sun* to write a series of articles on Palestine, plans were made and tickets purchased, when on the eve of departure a telegram arrived bearing the sad news “*Mutter gestorben*”—“Mother dead.”¹⁸ The trip to Palestine was canceled; instead Stephen Wise boarded a train for the Adirondacks to take up an invitation to spend the summer with Thomas Davidson at Glenmore.

Thomas Davidson is an unusual figure in American intellectual history, a wandering scholar or “knight-errant,” as William James termed him. Disdainful of material possessions or status, he appeared to his friends and disciples as a modern Socrates, devoted to a rigorous search for truth. What distinguished Davidson from other truthseekers is that he insisted on applying knowledge to practical problems; as Morris Raphael Cohen recalled, Davidson taught “that it is only sheer sloth and cowardice that can urge us to declare certain problems insoluble.” The search for truth should not be restricted to so-called intellectuals; every person had the right and the obligation to pursue knowledge. At Davidson’s instigation, the Education Alliance began the Breadwinners’ College, which provided instruction for working people in the evening and featured, besides Davidson, Morris Cohen, Joshua Frank, and David Muzzey.¹⁹

In 1882 Davidson had purchased a few acres in the Keene Valley in the Adirondacks and there, at the foot of Hurricance Mountain, built Glenmore, a "summer school of the cultural sciences." In his house and the adjoining cottages and farm buildings he provided lectures and discussions from early April until late November, surrounded by friends and young people whom he invited to participate in a mutual search for knowledge. At Glenmore, Davidson's enthusiasm proved contagious, as he led his disciples in long walks over the hills, singing Scottish songs or reciting poetry and talking with them long into the night before the fireplace.²⁰

For Stephen Wise, the summer of 1892 was a time he would remember all his life. The philosopher's practicality appealed to the recent college graduate, but even more than that, it opened a new world of reason and idealism. While Davidson was not a specifically "Christian" philosopher, much of what he advocated approximated the views then expressed by Walter Rauschenbusch and other leaders of the Social Gospel movement. For them the true church did not reside in a cathedral but in the shops and factories and markets where people lived and labored. In short time Wise would become the leading advocate of a Jewish version of the Social Gospel, and he would later recall how potent an influence Davidson had been in this direction, how he had made "knowledge and wisdom not idols or fetishes to be worshipped, but instruments to be used for the weal of others." It was Davidson who urged Wise to remember that "Judaism like all living things changes as it grows; that while the letter killeth the spirit keepeth alive. You will devise a twentieth century Judaism fitted to meet the needs of the present day."²¹

That summer passed quickly and happily for Wise, and laid the basis for his close relationship with Davidson until the latter's death in 1900. The Adirondack air proved as beneficial for his body as Davidson's lectures had been for his mind, and his family marveled at his vigor and robustness. But now a decision had to be reached as to where he would study, and following his father's counsel, Wise opted for Europe over Cincinnati. In the fall he boarded a steamer for Bremen, and from there took the train to Vienna, where he would begin work under the great Adolf Jellinek.

Jellinek, then at the pinnacle of his fame, was the chief exponent of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the scientific study of Judaism. He introduced his new student from America to commentary and exposition, to research of a kind and intensity Wise had never experienced at either City College or Columbia. Beyond that, Jellinek articulated a concept which, while not original with him, now took on new meaning for Wise. The "community of Israel," the ancient Hebrew idea of *klal Yisroel*, bound all Jews everywhere together, made each one responsible for the well-being of the others. Throughout his life, when explaining why he felt he had to create

this organization or fight that battle, why he had to defend German Jewry against Hitler or attack the *shtadlanim* (court Jews) of the American Jewish Committee, Wise would answer in terms of responsibility and community, terms Jellinek would easily have recognized.

Jellinek also showed Wise that a rabbi's sermons need not be limited only to Jewish themes. Aaron Wise had spoken on contemporary social and economic problems to his congregation, but Adolf Jellinek possessed a knowledge and sophistication regarding public affairs far beyond that of Stephen's father. Whenever Jellinek announced that he would speak on current issues, the Great Synagogue of Vienna would be packed, with many non-Jews coming to hear his exposition.

The ties between the elderly scholar and his young pupil soon grew close. Jellinek made Wise his private secretary, and every afternoon dictated letters to him. Afterward, teacher and student conversed in German as they walked slowly along Vienna's spacious boulevards. In the spring of 1893, Wise received *s'micha* personally from Jellinek, and prepared to return to the United States. Before he left, his master gave him a message for American Jewry: The preservation of Jews everywhere would depend upon the strength and courage of Jews in the United States; they would have to fight, with the help of God, to save their brethren. What at the time might have seemed melodramatic rhetoric would in later years appear prophetic.²²

Thanks to his father, Wise returned to America not only with his rabbinic ordination, but with the possibility of a pulpit awaiting him. The large B'nai Jeshurun congregation on Madison Avenue needed an assistant rabbi to help their aging pastor, Henry F. Jacobs. Wise preached a trial sermon at B'nai Jeshurun in March 1893, on Shabbat Hagadol, the sabbath before Passover, the Jewish holiday celebrating freedom and the delivery of the ancient Hebrews from bondage in Egypt. He took as his text Malachi 4: 5-6, and spoke about the divine whispers each person hears amid the silence of Sabbath peace and rest.

Years later Wise delighted in telling the story of the reaction to this trial sermon. It had deeply impressed the congregation, but one of the trustees protested to the president that the talk must have been written by Aaron Wise, since it was so good, and all Wise had done was deliver it. The president replied that if the young rabbi had sense enough to preach one of his father's good sermons instead of one of his own bad ones, this only proved how fit he was for the post. Wise was elected as junior rabbi, and in April 1893 occupied the B'nai Jeshurun pulpit for the first time as one of the congregation's pastors.

Wise found the saintly Jacobs not only a friend, but a mentor and guide to the daily routine of ministering to a large congregation. But barely had Wise begun to settle into that routine when Jacobs died, throwing the burden of numerous congregational duties onto a rather inexperienced

nineteen-year-old junior rabbi. Wise now became a candidate for the vacant position of senior rabbi in the Madison Avenue synagogue, and again his sermons won over the congregation and the trustees. Despite some grumbings that he was much too young for so prestigious a post, an overwhelming majority of the congregants elected him to be their rabbi.²³

Now he had a pulpit and a congregation of his own, and he set out to prove to the doubters, and to himself, that he was fully worthy of the position. He performed his first wedding, the first of thousands, on September 6, 1893. He helped the women of the congregation organize a Sisterhood, with the task of providing relief for some of the destitute during that harsh depression winter. In order to encourage young adults to participate in synagogue activities, Wise took the lead in founding a "Society for Religious Study" in December 1893, which in the years to follow heard a variety of Jewish scholars and communal leaders talk on topics of interest. His responsibilities included representing B'nai Jeshurun to the community, and this he did with increasing prominence over the years. He took part in a multitude of memorial services, dedications, and annual meetings, and recognition of his abilities came in election to directorships and offices in a number of communal agencies. He was the leading spirit in the organization of the Jewish Religious School Union in 1896 and its first secretary; he served as a director of the Hebrew Free School Association, and for a while belonged to the advisory board of the Jewish Theological Seminary. In 1899 he was elected secretary of the State Conference of Religions, the only Jew on the executive committee.²⁴

Some of the patterns that marked Wise's later ministry were already evident at B'nai Jeshurun. In the religious school he brought in speakers from all walks of Jewish life to meet with the students. He himself now spoke widely in the New York area, frequently exchanging pulpits with rabbis of other congregations. While the majority of his sermons dealt with such standard subjects as "The Spirit of Elijah," the example of his father and of Jellinek, as well as his own inclinations, soon brought current affairs to the pulpit of B'nai Jeshurun. A large streetcar strike in Brooklyn in 1894 led to prolonged violence in which several strikers were killed. Wise went out to Brooklyn to speak to the workers and find out their grievances and what they wanted in order to settle the dispute. The following Sabbath, he spoke on "Strikes and Strikers," and condemned the evil of shooting people who sought nothing more than the right to live decently. After the service Wise saw a small group of the congregation's officers in animated discussion. The treasurer of the temple, a member of an important banking and investment firm, approached the young rabbi and demanded, "What do you know about conditions in that strike?"

Wise responded that he had informed himself as well as he could about the facts and about the living conditions of the strikers. "They are grievously

overworked and underpaid.” When the banker mumbled that he wanted religion, not strikes, in the synagogue, Wise immediately declared, “I shall continue to speak for the workers whenever I come to feel that they have a real grievance and a just cause.” At that moment, and not a decade later, the Free Synagogue was born.²⁵

A portrait of Stephen Wise at this time would have shown a young but impressive figure, leading services in a gown, mitred hat, and a High Church turned collar. He was already a master of ritual and form and knew how to use his deep resonant voice to full advantage. His days were busy, beginning with an early walk to his synagogue study at the corner of Madison Avenue and 65th Street, dressed in a Prince Albert coat and stiff shirt. He spent the morning hours planning services, arranging events, preparing schedules and bulletins, seeing visitors, and representing B’nai Jeshurun at a variety of charitable and service meetings. Then, in the afternoon, sometimes skipping lunch, he hurried across town to Columbia University for his graduate courses in Semitics.²⁶

During the decade he also labored on a translation of Solomon ibn Gabirol’s eleventh-century treatise on ethics, *The Improvement of Moral Qualities*; about this study a controversy has swirled for decades on the question of whether or not Stephen Wise actually did his own work in earning the doctorate which Columbia University awarded him in 1902.

According to the preface Wise wrote, the original idea came from Alexander Kohut, and for a while he utilized a photographic reproduction of the manuscript in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. During the summer of 1895 he journeyed to England and took up residence in Oxford to work with the original Arabic text. In addition, he consulted four Hebrew manuscript versions, one in Paris, two at the Bodleian, and another at Jews’ College in London. The dissertation consisted of a twenty-eight page introductory essay, an English translation of seventy-six pages, two brief appendices, and a reproduction of the Arabic text.²⁷

There is no doubt that Wise took graduate courses at Columbia, including several in Arabic, or that he spent the summer of 1895 at Oxford. He also was influenced by his father, who hoped that his son would pursue a scholarly career alongside his rabbinic duties. Wise himself often declared that he would like to have devoted himself to a life of scholarship, “but events turned me in other directions.”²⁸ Many of Wise’s colleagues and opponents, few of whom bore the heavy burdens he did, were able to produce scholarly works but considered Wise incapable of serious intellectual pursuits.²⁹ As early as the 1920s rumors were rife that Wise’s dissertation had been ghostwritten. New names were put forth from time to time as the “real author” of the translation, but no hard evidence ever confirmed these suspicions.

The most persuasive case for a ghostwriter has been made by the noted Hebraicist, Professor Jacob Kabakoff. In 1966, Kabakoff published a study of Zvi Gershoni (Henry Gersoni), who had been one of Wise's early Hebrew teachers.³⁰ In the course of his research he found a letter from Gershoni reported that he was finishing a translation of ibn Gabirol from Arabic into Hebrew, and was also writing a lengthy thesis in English on the treatise. "All this I have sold to a pupil of mine who will publish it together with an English translation of the book in his own name and take the Ph.D. for it next month. I believe it will be a good piece of work."³¹

While the Gershoni letter is certainly interesting, it is far from conclusive and definitely not a "smoking pistol." It is dated more than six years before Wise turned in his dissertation to Columbia, and the final product is an English, not Hebrew, translation of the Arabic. Moreover, the introductory essay of twenty-nine pages hardly constitutes the "lengthy thesis" Gershoni claimed to be writing. Far more convincing evidence favoring Wise's own authorship of the thesis is now available in recently discovered letters between Wise and his mentor, Richard Gottheil. These are letters that could only have been written by a student in the throes of hard work, laboring to master an exceedingly difficult subject.

The first letter in this series is dated July 3, 1894, written in New York amidst a sweltering hot spell. "The Hebrew version," Stephen wrote, "is, Steinschneider to the contrary, quite obscure. Difficult as the Arabic version may prove, I fancy that the two texts will elucidate each other. At all events, within a fortnight my translation of the Hebrew, such as it is, will be finished and then the reading of the Arabic will be facilitated. Occasional expressions wholly baffle me." He then went on to enquire how long it would be until the photographic reproduction of the Arabic text in the Bodleian would be available. At the end of the month, Stephen could report that he had completed a tentative translation of the Hebrew texts, and a comparison of the few pages of the Arabic that had arrived made him believe that his work with the Hebrew would expedite the final translation from the Arabic.³²

The following summer, 1895, Wise spent at Oxford, and in early July he sent Gottheil the first eighteen pages of the English translation, based on his work of the preceding year and his opportunity to examine the Arabic text. He also began the preparation of plates of Arabic to accompany the English translation, and a number of letters report his progress in finding a printer in Leipzig who was able to do the job.³³ At times he almost despaired of his shortcomings. "I am compelled to realize how much beyond my strength this task is. Much of the text is simple but there are *many* obscure passages. . . . Occasionally I have gone to [Professor Adolf] Neubauer for help, but his eye failing renders him almost useless. . . . And so I grind and

grind away, patiently endeavoring to cast some light upon passages whose darkness is nothing less than Egyptian.”³⁴

Wise’s schedule that summer sounds all too familiar to those who have at one time or another taken a doctorate—long hours poring over obscure and at times illegible texts, working until the early hours of the morning or until thrown out of the library so that the staff could go home, trying to master an endless list of books relating either directly or indirectly to the thesis. By the end of August, as he prepared to leave England, he could report that despite all these difficulties, much had been accomplished. “The translation is finished, subject of course to a revision at your hand. The [Arabic] text is all in type and all the proofs have been revised by me—the first half twice. . . . I have in addition brought my notes into some order. In the essay, introductory to the work, I shall endeavor to give a clear account of the principles of ibn Gabirol’s *Ethics* and as far as I can his sources. This latter task will be hard because he had none, i.e. . . . no one has thus far been able to carry his ethical principles to any definite authority.”³⁵

Shortly after the publication of the book in 1902, Ignaz Goldhizer, a noted Orientalist, wrote a scathing criticism in *Hamazkir*, pointing out what he considered to be numerous errors and literary defects. A more recent evaluation by Dr. Noah Braun suggests that many of Wise’s errors noted by Goldhizer may have resulted from working off a Hebrew translation, which magnified the original corruptions of the Arabic text.³⁶ It would appear, then, that Stephen Wise did do the work himself, but first translated the *Ethics* from Hebrew into English. It is possible that he utilized Gershoni’s Hebrew translation, believing his former teacher’s work to be superior to older Hebrew texts available. He then went to Oxford and laid out the original Arabic text, the Hebrew version (whether Gershoni’s or another copy), and his own English rendered from the Hebrew, and proceeded to revise the English following the Arabic which, with its many defects, made the job very difficult. The criticisms of Goldhizer and Braun both indicate that Wise improperly transliterated some Arab words into Hebrew, and thus misread the meaning. A Hebrew text was indeed used, and it resulted in errors; but Gershoni did not write the thesis, Wise did. At worst, he stands guilty of poor scholarship, but not of fraud.

The question of Wise’s scholarly ability, however, is even more muddled. About this time he agreed to write articles for the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, which Gottheil edited.³⁷ But his name also appears as the translator of the Book of Judges in the 1917 Jewish Publication Society edition of the Bible. At the turn of the century the Society decided to publish an entirely new English translation of the Old Testament which would be free of the Christian biases inherent in the King James and other English versions of the Holy Writ. The preface to the work clearly states that Wise was assigned the translation of Judges, and lists those responsible for the

other books, including many leading American Jewish scholars, such as David Philipson, Bernard Drachman, and H. Pereira Mendes.³⁸

However, it appears that not only did Wise not do the translation of Judges, but none of the other luminaries did their parts either. According to Dr. Solomon Grayzel, the longtime editor of the Society, the entire translation, with the exception of Psalms, was done by Max L. Margolis, then checked and emended by the editorial committee of the Society. Evidently not one of the invited contributors followed through on his commitments, but their names were nevertheless listed, both as a courtesy to them and to avoid embarrassment to the Society, which had widely publicized that fact that so many noted scholars would be participating in this great undertaking.³⁹

Whether or not Stephen Wise had the intellectual abilities to do either of these works is a question that will probably never be completely answered. Despite his oft-repeated wish that he would have preferred a scholarly life, everything in his temperament indicates that the arena of activism and not a scholar's study was his true domain. He was not averse to ideas, nor frightened by them; indeed, his wide range of acquaintances and reading indicate a curious mind, a man eager to learn about new areas.

The period of his first ministry at B'nai Jeshurun can thus be seen as a growing period for Stephen Wise, a time in which he sorted out his ideas and dreams while making himself into an effective rabbi and preacher. These were happy and busy years, marred only by his father's death. On March 30, 1896, while officiating at Passover services, Aaron suddenly complained of not feeling well. The officers of the congregation finally persuaded him to go home, but after a short rest, he returned to the synagogue. Once again he became ill and went home, where he collapsed and died before doctors, summoned from the services, could reach him. Nearly all the rabbis in New York and Brooklyn attended his funeral, at which Kaufman Kohler and Gustav Gottheil eulogized a man truly beloved by the community.⁴⁰

It was a crushing blow for Wise, depriving him not only of parental affection but of the guidance upon which he had so heavily relied. Moreover, much of the responsibility of supporting his mother and younger siblings now fell on his shoulder; his older brother, Otto, now a lawyer in California, contributed to the financial needs, but Stephen had to deal with the daily problems. There was, however, the satisfaction that his father had seen him ordained and established in a pulpit of his own, thus carrying on the family tradition. Stephen had always wanted to emulate his father, and in later years wrote: "I have been moved to feel that my words were little more than the formulation of his thoughts, my acts were in a very real sense the embodiment of his aims, my deeds the fulfillment of his dreams."⁴¹

Shortly after Aaron Wise's death, a number of congregants from Rodeph

Sholom began attending services at B'nai Jeshurun and intimating that they would like to see the son take his father's place. Then in November, a formal invitation arrived to preach in the Rodeph Sholom pulpit on December 4. Wise knew that if he wanted it, the position could be his, and he was sorely tempted. As he wrote to Benjamin Blumenthal, the president of Rodeph Sholom, many ties would always bind him to the congregation: "My earliest religious instruction I gained while a pupil in your school; it was within the walls of your majestic synagogue-edifice that I was first privileged to give utterance to my hopes and plans while yet a mere aspirant for the ministry; and above all Rodeph Sholom has been my dearly beloved father's home for throughout the larger part of my life." But he would not deliver the sermon lest "it might appear to some that I was a candidate for the vacant position and for such a suspicion I must refrain from affording the slightest basis."⁴²

Wise recognized that while there might be a short-term satisfaction in succeeding to his father's place, in the long run the disadvantages would outweigh the benefits. He would be seen as "Aaron's boy" for years to come, his every word and action compared to what his father might have said or done. At B'nai Jeshurun, or wherever else he might go, he would be the rabbi; at Rodeph Sholom the shadow of his father would always be there behind him.

His father's death proved, in many ways, a cleavage in Stephen Wise's life. Behind him now lay his youth, his doubts about his own abilities, his entrance into the world of Jewish affairs. In the years immediately following Aaron's death, Wise entered a new phase of his career, and took several steps that profoundly altered his life.

The Cause and the Lady

A tale is told that a few days before the first Zionist Congress met in Basle in 1897, Professor Joseph Klausner met an American rabbi and asked him if there were any Zionists in the United States. "Yes," came the answer, "there are two. A mad man named Stephen Wise and a mad woman, Henrietta Szold."¹ While the story may be apocryphal, it succinctly captures the status of Zionism in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century.

The movement to recreate a Jewish homeland had at its roots the deep religious yearning for redemption that had been part of Jewish life for nearly two millennia, mixed with the political nationalism that had swept across Europe in the nineteenth century. Both strands had come together in the rather fantastic figure of Theodor Herzl. An assimilated Austrian Jew, Herzl had had little to do with organized Jewish life until as a reporter he witnessed the degradation of Captain Alfred Dreyfuss in 1895. As the army drummed Dreyfuss out of its ranks, the howling mob screamed "A bas les Juifs!" Shortly afterward, Herzl published *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State), which called for the establishment of a Jewish homeland to solve the problem of antisemitism. Within a few months, Herzl's vision had captured the imagination of European Jews, especially those of Russia and Poland, where a proto-Zionist movement, Ohave Zion, had already begun.

Herzl's strategy called for the securing of an international charter to help Jews build their new home, but *Der Judenstaat* was vague concerning where this new Jewish state would be. As Herzl learned more about the Jews of eastern Europe, he quickly realized that only Palestine held the emotional and religious ties that could sustain the dream of return. The first Zionist Congress, therefore, adopted the Basle Programme, which would provide the rationale of the movement of the next fifty years: "Zionism strives to create for the Jewish People a home in Palestine secured by public law." To

this end the movement would assist settlement by Jews in Palestine, the development of local agencies to support the Zionist work, and the raising of a national consciousness among Jews everywhere. At the end of the Congress, Herzl confided to his diary: "At Basle I founded the Jewish state. If I said this out loudly today I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years, perhaps, and certainly in fifty years, everyone will perceive it."²

Not all Jews welcomed Herzl and his Zionism. Those in western Europe had been emancipated from their ghettos and relieved of restrictive laws by Napoleon almost a century earlier. They had worked hard to secure a place in the secular society, to safeguard their right to be seen as German or French or English rather than as Jewish. This newly resurgent Jewish nationalism scared them, and they feared that they would be branded as aliens, as traitors who had turned against their host countries. After all, how could they be loyal to France or England if they worked to create a Jewish state in Palestine? "Whoever disputes my claim to the German fatherland," wrote Gabriel Riesser, "disputes my right to my thoughts and feelings, to the language I speak, the air I breathe." Orthodox Jews condemned Herzl for violating God's will because only the messiah would be able to redeem the Jewish people; Reform Jews denounced the attempted revival of an anachronistic nationalism. Hermann Adler, the chief rabbi of England, called Zionism an "egregious blunder," while the chief rabbi of Vienna, Moritz Gudemann, railed against the "Kuckucksei of Jewish nationalism."³

In the United States the general reaction to Zionism was even more hostile than in Europe. To many American Jews, this country was in fact a new Zion, one which lacked repressive laws against Jews and which had never had any institutionalized antisemitism. In migrating here from Europe, Jews had chosen the United States over Palestine as the land of their hopes and dreams. While life for the new immigrants had been hard, the opportunities for success existed, and within one generation Jews had begun to climb out of tenements and sweatshops into the middle and upper classes. The age-old dream of redemption in Palestine was relegated to a messianic vision, a ritual chant of "Next year in Jerusalem" dutifully recited each year at the Passover *seder*.

For no group was this more true than for Reform Jews. The modernizing movement, begun in Germany in the 1830s and 1840s, reached its peak in the United States in the 1880s. For Reform Judaism, the departure of Jews from Palestine had not been an exile, but a dispersion in order to carry the ethical message of God throughout the world. The mission of Judaism was universal, and should not be shackled by attempts to restore an ancient state, an atavism which had outlived its usefulness in God's grand scheme of history. The United States, a land of freedom, provided the perfect soil upon which a liberal, universal, and modern Judaism could grow. Rabbi

Emil Hirsch, on the 250th anniversary of the arrival of Jews in America, declared: "Our Reform Judaism has come to understand in fullest measure this concordance of its own genius with that of the institutions and goals of America. We feel that if anywhere on God's footstool our messianic vision will be made real, it is in this land where a new humanity seems destined to rise."⁴ This anti-Zionism in the Reform movement would last until the eve of World War Two. Theological arguments were buttressed by the fears of prominent Reform laymen that Zionism would create a dual loyalty among American Jews, and would thus undermine their freedom and security. Zionism, according to Jacob Schiff, "places a lien upon citizenship" and would create "a separateness which is fatal." Publisher Adolph Ochs constantly disparaged Zionism and ordered that the movement should receive little space and no support in the pages of the *New York Times*.⁵

There were, however, a few Reform rabbis who supported Zionism. Bernhard Felsenthal argued that Jews could not be a light to the nation unless there was a united Jewish nation in a country of their own. Caspar Levias and Max Schloessinger urged their colleagues to recognize that Zionism had strong spiritual as well as secular features. "Reform Judaism will be Zionist," prophesied Schloessinger, "or it will *not be at all!*" Gotthard Deutsch attacked as Philistine the contention that Jerusalem had no meaning for modern Jewry, while Maximillian Heller of New Orleans strongly supported the cause. In June 1900, Gustav Gottheil, who had emigrated from Germany three decades earlier, declared: "There is no such thing as an anti-Zionist. A man need not be a supporter of our ethics, but how can anyone in whose veins flows Jewish blood oppose the movement? Every true Jewish heart is naturally Zionist."⁶ But Reform Jews who were Zionists were a tiny minority in the late 1890s, exceptions in a movement that would remain hostile to the cause of Jewish nationhood for decades to come. It was this battle that would occupy much of Stephen Wise's energy and time.

What exactly turned Stephen Wise into a Zionist is difficult to say. As a child, he heard a great deal about Palestine, since his grandmother had gone to live in Jerusalem after Reb Joseph's death. Messengers collecting alms for the Holy Land were frequent in Aaron Wise's house, but the settlers they spoke about were poor, pious Jews who studied Torah in Palestine while living on *chalukah* (charity) gathered in the Diaspora, not the young pioneers who went out to settle the land.

Nor was Wise influenced by the large proto-Zionist Ohavei-Zion groups on the lower East Side. Although he grew up on East 5th Street, the east side of the Russian and Polish immigrants lay further to the south, and by his own admission, Wise knew little of them. Socially his family moved more in the uptown circle of German-speaking Jews, in which the Gottheils were prominent. The elder Gottheil, a close friend of Aaron, had been one of

Stephen's teachers when the youth attended after-school religious classes at Emanu-El. Gustav's son Richard was Wise's teacher at Columbia and supervisor of his thesis; only twelve years older than Wise, Richard Gottheil would become a close friend of his student as well as a colleague in the Zionist movement. In fact in 1897, Richard Gottheil was the leading Zionist in the United States, and Stephen Wise his energetic assistant.

The value of the Gottheils and Wise to the movement was quickly recognized by the eastern European Jewish immigrants who comprised the bulk of the membership in local Zionist clubs. The elder Gottheil was rabbi of prestigious Temple Emanu-El, his son a professor at a leading American university, while Wise ministered to B'nai Jeshurun, another important "uptown" synagogue. These connections to the more Americanized groups within the Jewish community held out hope that the movement could attract other Jews besides the Yiddish-speaking "downtowners." But at the same time Wise and Gottheil differed in an important way from their followers.

The Yiddish-speaking intellectuals who supported Zionism considered political Zionism, the need for establishing a Jewish homeland to provide refuge from persecution, as only one part, and perhaps the least important part, of the cause. If they were socialists, they dreamed of creating a new Jewish society based not so much on religion as on social justice and economic egalitarianism. Even while a state was little more than the utopian wish of the Basle Program, they argued heatedly over its economic organization, over how land would be distributed, about a classless society in which all people—men and women—would be equal. Other Zionists followed the teachings of Asher Ginsberg, who under the pen name of Achad Ha'am saw a home in Palestine as the catalyst in a cultural rebirth of the Jewish people.

The more Americanized Zionists—and they were very few at this time—followed the political philosophy of Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau. Wise's first known Zionist statement, made shortly after the initial Zionist Congress in the summer of 1897, shows how little he either knew about or understood these other elements of Zionism, which in the end would be at least as important as the political component:⁷

Zionism looms large on the horizon of the Jewish outlook. No better testimony can be borne to the just and equitable protection which is accorded to every dweller in our free land regardless of race or religion, than our very inability to understand the necessity for founding a little Jewish principality within the confines of Palestine. The American Jew longs for no Palestine. He gives his individual allegiance to this land which alone can satisfy his very passion for liberty in conviction and freedom of soul.

Why then shall Zion be rebuilt? And, rebuilt it must be, unless the United States raises its voice in the councils of nations so that the Jew may everywhere be permitted to live and labor in safety and peace.

Surely the American heart will sympathize with the unhappy plight of the millions of Jews in Russia, Roumania, Bulgaria—omitting the mention of sundry lands—self-styled *Kulturvolke* who are not permitted to till the soil, lest they eke out a substance and being driven to resort to small barter and traffic by inhuman laws, are reproached because they have the hardihood to gain success.

Wise seemingly believed that it might not be necessary to rebuild Zion if only the nations of the world would allow Jews everywhere “to live and labor in safety and peace.” According to Louis Lipsky, who would be associated with Wise in both the Zionist movement and the American Jewish Congress for the next fifty years, Wise “was never able to rid himself of the overwhelming influence of Theodor Herzl and the prejudices of that early period.” It blinded him to the spiritual and cultural interest of the immigrant masses, but it also provided him with strength, and “gave what he said when he spoke on Jewish subjects a tone and dignity and purpose it could have acquired from no other source.”⁸

Throughout his life Wise rarely engaged in the intricate ideological debates which the East Side Zionists so loved. Like so many American progressives, discussion of means without regard to ends bored him; he wanted to know the problem, how it should be solved, and which methods could best implement the solution. Thus, when Louis Brandeis rose to the leadership of the American Zionists in August 1914, he found Wise a willing lieutenant totally in sympathy with his hard-headed, pragmatic approach. In the 1890's, however, Wise tackled the problem of organization, a morass that plagued American Zionism for years to come.

Gottheil and Wise, following the Herzlian directive at the First Zionist Congress, took the lead in attempting to merge the numerous small Zionist societies into some cohesive and effective pattern. While nearly all the Zionist clubs recognized the need for organization and cooperation, each group—the Uptown East Side Zion Society, the Patriots of Palestine, or the Daughters of Zion—insisted on retaining near-total freedom of action. The first step involved bringing together the several Zionist societies in the New York area. On December 15, 1897, they formed the Federation of Zionist Societies of Greater New York and Vicinity with Richard Gottheil as president, Herman Rosenthal and Joseph T. Bluestone as vice-presidents, and Stephen Wise as secretary. Before they could take the next step, however, the New York federation practically fell apart over a jurisdictional dispute.

Rabbi Bluestone believed a Zionist fraternal order would attract members,

since many Jews seemed interested in joining fraternal societies at the time. He therefore proceeded to organize the Free Sons of Zion. Gottheil and Wise called in Bluestone and tried to point out to him that a new group, outside the framework of the New York Federation, could only undermine their efforts to impose unity and cohesiveness on American Zionism. Bluestone refused to listen, withdrew from the Federation, and set up a rival group, the United Zionists, which, after a short and not very successful existence, died a natural death. While it functioned, however, it hampered the work and prestige of the Federation.⁹

Gottheil and Wise pressed on, however, trying to spread the Zionist idea, extending the movement's activities and organization. They called a conference of Jewish merchants to inform them of the increasing wine production in Palestine at the vineyards supported by Baron de Rothschild near Rishon l'Tzion. More important, they finally managed to convene a conference of American Zionist groups in New York on July 4 and 5, 1898, at the B'nai Zion Club on Henry Street. One hundred delegates attended, twenty from outside New York representing thirteen cities. After much debate, they drew up a constitution for a Federation of American Zionists which endorsed the Basle Programme and submitted to the jurisdiction of the World Zionist Organization, which then had its headquarters in Vienna. The convention chose Richard Gottheil as the president of the FAZ and Wise as "honorary secretary," a term he later jocularly interpreted as meaning "unpaid."¹⁰

The Federation did provide American Zionism with a central organization, or to be more precise, an address, for it had the same structural defects as its New York predecessor. The FAZ had its basic unit of membership the local society, not the individual Zionist. The primary loyalty of each member, therefore, lay not with the national organization but with his or her club. Many of these groups were short-lived, and they were unable to contribute either money or reliability to the Federation, which remained weak and ineffectual.

These weaknesses, however, were not apparent in the glow of comradeship and accomplishment that suffused the convention. Despite the opposition of the Americanized German Jewish elite, despite the indifference of the majority of the Jewish community, despite the factionalism and petty jealousies among the local clubs, a national organization had been forged and three fully accredited delegates, each of course paying his own way, boarded a steamer to journey to the Second Zionist Congress, which met in Basle at the end of August 1898.

The Second Congress proved the most productive of the early Zionist gatherings. On the recommendation of the Executive, the Congress voted to establish the Jewish Colonial Trust, which for the next fifty years would act as the movement's bank, transferring funds, arranging for payment of land

purchase, and in general aiding the development of *yishuv*, the Jewish settlement in Palestine. The Congress also created the General Hebrew Language Society to foster the study and growth of Hebrew as a modern language. Despite opposition to Jewish nationalism especially among the more assimilated communities, the number of recognized Zionist groups had increased in one year from 117 to 913. The 349 delegates cheered wildly when Herzl declared that the movement must "capture the Jewish communities."

Few cheered louder than the young American delegation, particularly Stephen Wise, for whom the Congress and especially Theodor Herzl were a revelation. "For the first time in my youthful life I got a glimpse of world Jewry. There I sought and met for the first time with great men who were great Jews, with great Jews who were great men. . . . Suddenly as if by magic I came upon a company of Jews who were not victims or refugees or beggars, but proud and educated men, dreaming, planning, toiling for their people. Veritably I suffered a rebirth, for I came to know my people at their best. Thrilled and gratified, I caught a glimpse of the power and the pride and the nobleness of the Jewish people, which my American upbringing and even service to New York Jewry had not in any degree given me. I was a Jew by faith up to the day of the Congress in Basle and little more. At Basle I became a Jew in every sense of that term. Judaism ceased to be a type of religious worship. The Jewish people became my own."¹¹

Wise was particularly enthralled by Herzl, to whom he had written earlier in the year about the lack of support for Zionism among American rabbis. He now met Herzl, and would evermore be his disciple. The Zionist founder, wrote Wise, reminded him of an ancient prophet, a Hebrew king. He wrote of Herzl in glowing terms for the *New York Journal*, for which he had agreed to report the Congress. Enthusiastically, he described the final session at 5:00 in the morning; as Herzl finished the closing speech, the day dawned and Herzl shone in the brilliance of the rising sun.¹²

A jubilant Wise returned from the Congress eager to carry out Herzl's command to "capture the communities." In the next two years he spoke frequently at Zionist meetings, writing articles for the *American Hebrew* in the United States and contributing occasional pieces to the *Jewish World* of London and the Viennese *Die Welt*, the official organ of the World Zionist Organization. Herzl urged him to work even more strenuously, for if the large American Jewish community could be won over to Zionism, it would immeasurably strengthen the movement. But as Wise perceived and tried to explain to the European leaders, "the well to do, the rich, the Americanized, more or less educated and cultured [Jews] cannot be won over or stormed at in public meetings"¹³ Only a slow educational process could reach them; how slow that would be even Wise could not imagine.

Given the fact that he ministered to a relatively large congregation, participated in a number of New York Jewish activities, and worked on his

doctorate, Wise still expended immense energy on Zionism during this period. He traveled through much of New England and the Atlantic coastal states selling shares in the Jewish Colonial trust, trying to win new members to the movement, and becoming the most effective Zionist orator in the country.¹⁴ In Boston, an overflow crowd packed the Balwin Place synagogue, and according to one news reporter present, "the large audience was held spellbound by a tall and stately young man with arresting classic countenance, piercing eyes, and a voice that reverberated throughout the auditorium and stirred the emotions of every person present." At another meeting, even the anti-Zionist reporter conceded that Wise's "fine eloquence and manifest great Jewish heart gained for him a place in the affections of his hearers which nothing can efface." Although he was only twenty-five years old, Wise was cited by Herzl himself as the foremost Zionist speaker in America.¹⁵

At least some of this effort bore fruit. At the second conference of the FAZ in June 1899, Wise could report to the one hundred delegates that 125 societies had now affiliated, 100 more than the year before, and that 10,000 men and women had paid the *shekel*, the dues payment. But balancing these gains was the poor financial condition of the Federation, which barely had enough money to pay its bills, and the continued organizational weakness that precluded effective national action.¹⁶

This weakness soon affected relations between the Federation and the World Zionist Organization. The parent body, starved for funds, believed that despite the exertions of Wise and Gottheil, more could be done. Over Gottheil's protest, Herzl sent two of his lieutenants to the United States to spread Zionist propaganda. Both Michael Singer and Joseph Zeff proved singularly inept, insisting on using the rhetoric of a Europe racked by antisemitism in a nation relatively free of that curse. Moreover, the WZO Executive had no hesitation in dealing with strong local societies, bypassing the Federation and further undermining its position.

While Wise maintained good personal relations with Herzl, the deteriorating position of the FAZ constantly frustrated him. Finally, in November 1899, he resigned as honorary secretary of the Federation, but as he quickly explained to Herzl, the release from "that onerous work" would allow him to be of more service to the cause. The fact of the matter, however, was that his enthusiasm had been dampened by the continuous infighting among the Zionist groups. "I am getting pretty tired," he confided to Isidore Morrison, his successor as honorary secretary of the FAZ. "There is so much bickering and dissatisfaction and fault-finding that the best of good nature is put to a severe test. As you know I have sacrificed a great deal in behalf of the cause. I have frequently neglected my personal business, have made a number of enemies, and have otherwise gone to greater lengths than a great many would have done in order to upbuild a respectable Zionist organiza-

tion in this country. And now to see that all these efforts and sacrifices are not only not appreciated but even sneered at and my motives questioned is enough to disgust anybody.”¹⁷

Here it is possible to see one of Stephen Wise’s less admirable traits, the tendency to personalize every battle, every difference of opinion. Perhaps part of his greatness stemmed from his throwing his entire being, body and soul, into every cause he championed; no one could ever doubt his sincerity, his belief, his commitment whenever he took up the fight for Zionism or child labor reform or good government. But he had difficulty understanding why others could not see the light so clearly as he did, and he frequently construed their criticisms of his positions as personal attacks on him.

At the turn of the century there was great opposition to Zionism among many American Jews, and Wise came in for his share of criticism from those who differed with him about the merits of Jewish nationalism. Even within his own congregation few members accepted their rabbi’s Zionism. Jewish nationalism as it was being expounded by its European ideologues and American interpreters such as Gottheil and Wise, had little appeal to those trying to make a new life in America, one free from the prejudices and persecutions of Europe.

Wise, Gottheil and others sought to define Zionism not only in terms of a refuge from tyranny, but as an affirmation of New World idealism. In a speech to a large Zionist rally at Cooper Union in June 1900, Wise exhorted the crowd to be good Zionists and good Americans at the same time. “Say that you are an American Jew,” he declared, “and strive for the best principles of the race, and you will be respected and the Zionist name honored.” He himself swore that there would be no one in this country who would “strive more for the glorious ideals of Zionism.”¹⁸

This would be his last major Zionist speech in New York of several years, because his energies and attention turned to other interests. On a speaking tour of the West Coast for the Federation, he had glimpsed a new and intriguing part of America, one not only geographically but culturally removed from the New York he knew—and loved—so well. A chance now came to learn more about this semi-frontier country, but an even more important change in his life had already begun—the result, fittingly enough, of one of his responsibilities as a rabbi.

In January 1899, a member of B’nai Jeshurun died and the bereaved family asked a cousin to inform the rabbi so that funeral arrangements could be made. Since there was no telephone, the young woman walked from her home on 68th Street to the address she had been given. After being announced, she waited a few moments in the parlor until the young rabbi came downstairs to join her. As Stephen Wise later recalled, the minute he set eyes on Louise Waterman he fell in love with her; it took the lady a little while longer to make up her mind. To his friends and family as well as to

hers, it seemed a most improbable match, yet their love flourished on a commonality of interests and a passion for justice and decency. Their romance continued throughout the nearly five decades of their marriage.

The Waterman family had begun to emigrate from Bruck, near Erlanger in Bavaria, to the New World in the 1840's. Sigmund Wasserman (as they then spelled the name), a talented poet arrived first and became one of the first instructors of German language and literature at Yale College. During the four years he taught there he also studied medicine; he received his medical degree in 1848, the first Jew ever to graduate from Yale. He then moved to New York where he established his practice, served as police surgeon for thirty years, and also taught at a medical school.¹⁹

Sigmund's two brothers, Leopold and Julius, soon followed him to New Haven. Writing home, Leopold described the terrible conditions on board the frigate *Everhard*, but, he added, "no matter what my lot may be, I shall never regret having sought a new home, where only one comes to the recognition of true human dignity, and in free employment of one's own strength can become the master of one's own fortune".²⁰ Within ten years Leopold established a prosperous business, held extensive property, and engaged in a large trans-Atlantic commerce. A business trip to Europe in the summer of 1854 ended in his tragic death, as the steamship *Artic*, on which he was a passenger, sank off Newfoundland after colliding with another vessel.

Leopold's business partner had been his brother Julius, who, as soon as he had been able to earn proper living, had sent for his fiancée, Justine Meyer, brought her to New Haven, and there married her. A craftsman by training, Julius joined Leopold in establishing a highly successful hoop-skirt factory. When his business interest expanded, Julius decided to move to New York, just before the birth of his third child, Louise. There his son and two daughters were raised in comfortable surroundings. Julius enjoyed good music and liked to read; he brought *Don Quixote* and Byron's poems with him from Germany, and the markings in the books show that he had used them to help him learn English. Justine Waterman seems to have been the chief influence in her daughter's youth. At a time when few women were educated beyond the simple necessities of polite society, she knew three languages (which she taught to Louise), and read widely and avidly, another trait she passed on to her children. Most important, Louise admired her mother's passion for truth, her disgust with fraud or deceit.²¹

As a result, Louise Waterman set extremely high standards for herself. Nicknamed "Quicksilver" because of her gay spirits, by her late teens she had matured into a serious, intelligent, and quite beautiful young woman. She was educated at Comstock, one of New York's better finishing schools where she mastered French and German and received some training in

music and art. In later years she would put this education to good use, translating the works of Edmond Fleg and Aimé Pallière into English; she also developed into a fair artist, one praised by critics and whose works would be exhibited in galleries and museums. But there was always that serious streak, those Alpine standards. Her schoolmates married one by one, but Louise waited, spurning beaux who did not measure up to her ideals, declaring it would be better not to marry than to accept someone she could not respect and admire.

As far as religion went, it did not go far at all. Julius was devoutly agnostic, and took out a membership in Temple Emanu-El only for burial privileges. The family rarely attended services, nor did the parents ever force their children to do so. For a time, Louise could be found on Sunday mornings at an Episcopal Sunday School accompanying her best friend. Judaism evidently offered her little, nor did she seek or find solace in it after her mother's death in 1890. Instead, she retreated into her books and art until she met Felix Adler, the founder of the Ethical Culture Movement.²²

A rabbi and the son of a famous rabbi, Adler had come to eschew both formal theology and ritual. He left the rabbinate to seek a Universal Truth based on the insights of man rather than on divine commandments. His moral passion, which derived in large part from Judaism's prophetic teachings, appealed to Louis Waterman's own idealism. Adler induced her, much to her family's chagrin, to give art courses in ghetto settlement houses, to do what she could to help the people living in tenement slums. He not only taught her, but became a friend; years later, when their paths had diverged, she would still write him occasional notes, affirming that he always would hold a special place in her life.²³

But now, suddenly, this woman with impossible standards, with practically no identification or even sympathy with Judaism, found herself attracted to Stephen Wise. They both read and appreciated the Stoics and admired Emerson and Thoreau. Her work at the University Settlement House carried out the precept of the social gospel he preached. Throughout the spring of 1899 Wise wooed her, lending her books, going for walks, contriving to stop in and see her at odd moments.

Louise and Stephen grew ever more oblivious of anything and anybody but each other, and her family, at first annoyed, soon became concerned and then frantic. She came from good Bavarian stock, he from Hungary; she enjoyed all the advantages of wealth, while he was a poor rabbi—not even a banker or lawyer or businessman. Worst of all, he belonged, in fact was a leader, of that crazy Zionist movement. Even Louise and Stephen recognized with some bemusement the ludicrous improbability of their romance; her relatives were not at all amused. With the death of her father, her elder brother and sister, Leo and Jennie, now headed the family, and they told her in all seriousness that she owed it to the Waterman name to

avoid such a misalliance. When such reasoning failed, the family resorted to an old but tested remedy. With almost unseemly haste, she was packed off to spend the summer in Europe with relatives, in the hope that time and distance would put an end to this infatuation.²⁴

The remedy failed. In her trunks Louise carried not only books Wise had given her to read, but a small gold medallion in the form of a six-pointed star, with the Hebrew letters for "Zion" within its border. It was the emblem of the Zionist movement, a token to remind her not only of him but in what he believed. She wore his gift that summer, much to the dismay of her relatives, who could not understand how a girl of otherwise fine sensibilities had chosen a man so far beneath her station, and a demented Zionist at that. One evening an uncle came to take her to the opera, and he beamed with avuncular pride as the lovely young woman came down the stairs to join him. The he spied the medallion, and asked her what it was. Louise explained that it was a gift, and stood for Zionism. He told her to take it off, for he would not be seen in public, and certainly not at the opera, in the company of one flaunting a flag, as it were, of that wretched Jewish nationalism. "I certainly would not want to embarrass you, uncle," Louise said, "but I will not take it off. I do hope you enjoy the opera." And she turned on her heel and went back upstairs.²⁵

With her return from Europe that fall, Wise renewed his courtship, now certain that she loved him in return. But he also had news for her, and how she responded was suddenly terribly important to him.

While Louise had been in Europe, Wise had decided to go west to California. His older brother Otto had established a successful law practice in San Francisco, and had written to the family in glowing terms about life and opportunity on the Pacific Coast. In addition, nascent Zionist groups had been pressing the Federation to send them some speakers, in order to bolster their own programs and attract new members. Rather than suffer through a long hot New York summer pining for his love, Wise boarded a train, intent on discovering a new part of America, spreading the Zionist message, and spending time with his brother.

The trip turned out to be more successful and enjoyable than anticipated. The spectacular scenery of the Rocky Mountains and coast states enthralled him, the audiences at his Zionist meetings responded enthusiastically, and the reunion with Otto proved joyous indeed. And in the crowds of a Zionist meeting in Portland, Oregon were members of Congregation Beth Israel, who determined to secure this dynamic young preacher for their pulpit.

Much to their surprise, Rabbi Wise responded positively to their overtures. His request for a salary of \$5,000 a year did not seem exorbitant, nor did his stipulation that he be free to pursue Jewish and non-Jewish interests provided they did not interfere with his responsibilities to the congregation. By July 22 a guarantee fund to cover the salary had reached \$3,000; a week

later the full amount had been subscribed. The officers of Beth Israel wrote to inform him that at a special meeting of the Congregation on July 30, the members had unanimously voted to offer him a five-year contract as "Rabbi, reader and teacher," commencing in August 1900. "We have known of you for some years as a gentleman of highest standing in the community in which you have so successfully labored, as well also as a man of well-known piety, of learning and of eloquence. . . . With God's blessing, we feel sure, that during the five years of your ministrations among us, [the Congregation] will make such advances as will easily make it the leading congregation on this western coast." They also added their hope that Wise would be able to visit Portland again before going back to New York, both to see the city and explore in person its possibilities, and so that other members of Beth Israel could meet the man they hoped would be their new rabbi.²⁶

Upon receipt of this letter in San Francisco, Wise immediately wrote two responses. The first was highly formal, notifying the officers that he would give "searching and prayerful deliberation" to their offer, and that upon his return to New York, he would consult with the leaders of his present congregation, B'nai Jeshurun, with members of his family and with friends. He regretted that he would not be able to visit Portland *en route* to New York, pleading that his mother, who had come with him to visit Otto, did not feel well enough for the additional journey. All of this was, of course, quite proper, but on that same day he wrote privately and confidentially to Solomon Hirsch, Beth Israel's president, that "if God spares me I am fully and finally resolved to make my future home in Portland. I have considered the matter in its every bearing and now the feeling is become mine that in undertaking to labor among the Jewish residents of Portland, I shall be doing that to which the hand of God points as my nearest and holiest duty." He assured Hirsch that his mother's health was really not up to the journey, but aside from that consideration, "I should hardly deem it wise to come to your City at this time, seeing that in this event I should be obliged to signify publicly my acceptance of the charge, and this step I feel I owe it to my Congregation to defer until after I return."²⁷

Why Wise decided, seemingly so precipitately, to move across the continent, away from the large concentration of Jews in New York where he had already developed a growing reputation, is difficult to determine. He himself referred to the matter only once, nearly a half century later, when he claimed that his "conservative congregation [had failed] to support its youthful, pioneering Zionist rabbi."²⁸ The facts, however, do not give any evidence that B'nai Jeshurun offered the slightest obstacle to his Zionist work, or stopped him from holding Zionist meetings in the building, even if individual members did not rush to pay the shekel. Some people believed he left so that the prestigious cathedral temple of Reform Judaism, Emanuel, would be able to call him to its pulpit, something that would be more

difficult if he remained rabbi of a neighboring Conservative congregation. To Louise he wrote, while in San Francisco, of the great opportunity that existed in Oregon: "A number of cities within 500 miles of Portland have their Jewish communities but no minister and nothing of religious teaching and striving. These I shall try to build up. It will be hard work, but I welcome it." Again, on his return to New York, he declared: "I wish to begin work all over again, in a new (religiously) untilled and explored land, and I am persuaded that with God's help and blessing, I shall be able to further the cause of Israel and spread the gospel of Zion."²⁹

When his Zionist colleague as well as academic sponsor Richard Gottheil expressed fears that Stephen would waste his life in Oregon, Wise responded that "if I do good hard conscientious work in Oregon, I shall not be wholly forgotten by the people who have come to know me during the past six years. As you know, Professor, there are many reasons why I shall seek another field of work. Portland may not be the *ideal* for me, insofar as it may seem too small and too far removed, but it is a good place and certainly more extensive and promising than the limited sphere in which I am now permitted to work. The people . . . will not be adverse to my lending my services in Oregon and surrounding states in the matter of building up and strengthening the half-organized and disorganized smaller Jewish communities, which are to be found in a radius of 500 to 1000 miles of Portland. With all the work which is in store for me in the Northwest, I yet think I shall have abundant time for study, and I mean to study, because even though I cannot be a scholar, I wish to indulge my scholarly taste and read widely and deeply in Jewish and kindred lore. . . . The truth is I am absolutely resolved to leave New York and go to Portland."³⁰

Here one can see the restless ambition and energy that dominated Wise's entire life. Success of a kind had perhaps come too easily in New York, thanks in part to his family connections as well as his native talent. He had helped found the Zionist movement in America, held national office at age twenty-three and had been elected to the Zionist Executive a year later. Had he chosen to stay in New York, to "play it safe," there were few professional rewards that could not have been his for the asking. But Stephen Wise could never rest content with a level of success that would have satisfied others; he constantly needed new challenges, new opportunities that would not only test him to his limits, but that would bring recognition of the heights he had scaled. The frontier, the Jewish frontier in America, seemed to lie in the West.

Word of the Portland offer leaked out even before he returned to New York. The Portland *Hebrew Standard* referred to him in very complimentary terms as the "bishop of Oregon," a term Wise found enjoyable, if not quite appropriate. In September he discussed the matter at great length with the trustees of B'nai Jeshurun and with Louise. Despite the New York con-

gregation's entreaties that he stay, Wise appeared determined to accept the Portland offer, provided Louise would come with him.³¹

Much to his relief and joy, the thought of moving across continent, of giving up family and friends and status, did not faze Louise at all. After all, Wise now had, as he put it, "splendid opportunities for pioneer work," and wasn't this what she has always sought—a man larger than life, a champion willing to face the unknown for just causes? In turn, as Thomas Davidson told him, he had found his Beatrice, one who would be there encouraging him in his tilts at prejudice and injustice, deflating him if his ego got out of hand, bristling at the barbs of his detractors, providing a calm home, a shelter from the storms he created.

If Louise had been won over, Jennie and Leo remained to be convinced. In January of 1900, they began to face the inevitable. After a lengthy meeting in which Wise described his "prospects" as well as his great love for their sister, they still held back on an engagement, but tacitly assented to his courtship.³² In the meantime, they asked Felix Adler to find out what he could about this tall, courteous, and extremely persistent young man. Adler knew that Wise, like himself, had spent a summer at Glenmore with Thomas Davidson, and so contacted their mutual teacher and friend for his appraisal of Louise's suitor. Adler passed Davidson's glowing report on to the Watermans:³³

The fact is, I am so fond of Stephen Wise personally, that I cannot, perhaps, be trusted to judge him impartially. I have known him for the past six or seven years, and my respect and affection for him have grown all that time. He is loyal in his personal relations, and socially attractive. I cannot think of him as doing a mean thing. When roused, he is an eloquent and powerful speaker, with a delightful sense of humor.

He is still young—only twenty-seven, I think—and may have some of the faults of the young and inexperienced, delight in sense of power and perhaps desire for popularity, though the last is not especially prominent.

He is distinctly a stirring man, original and forcible, with great schemes in his mind. I always leave him with the sense that I have been facing a brisk, bracing wind.

At the beginning of July 1900, Louise Waterman and Stephen Wise announced their engagement, and the couple began coping with the innumerable details that precede a wedding. Together they went to the graves of her parents and his father, symbolically beseeching their blessing. Wise would have preferred marriage before leaving for Oregon, but Louise convinced him that in the first few months of his new pastorate, he should be able to give all his time and energy to the demands of the congregation.

While not wishing to be separated from his fiancée, he had to agree that her suggestion made good sense. A lovelorn Wise bade her goodbye, and left by train for Portland at the end of the month.

Wise's West Coast ministry almost ended before it began. His melancholia suddenly gave way to severe physical distress when he was seized by an attack of appendicitis in Duluth. He insisted upon continuing the journey, with the conductor and his fellow passengers tending and comforting him. Finally, the pain almost unendurable, he agreed to enter a hospital in Helena, Montana, where the doctors feared they might have to operate on a patient so enervated by the trip as to make the procedure dangerous. Rest and medication, however, soon reduced the inflammation, and Wise resumed his journey westward. On the train he wrote, only half-jokingly, that he doubted he could wait until November, when their wedding was scheduled. "I really think we will have the arrangements changed," he suggested, "and you, love, come out to me in Portland to be married. In fact I have been seriously thinking to be sick, sending for you as a nurse, and then keeping you with me."³⁴

Upon his arrival, the entire Jewish community went out of its way to welcome the new rabbi. They filled his hotel room with dozens of roses and other flowers, and vied to entertain him in their homes. He wrote to Louise about his reception, and his trip to the temple:³⁵

Last night, I took dinner at the beautiful home of the Hirsch's. After dinner we drove in a blinding rain to the Temple. Dr. Bloch read the Service—I taking no part, because not yet installed, although I was very eager to praise God for his countless loving kindnesses—and I do from out of the silent depths of my heart. The Synagogue interior, which I had forgotten, was a revelation and delight to me—simple and beautiful and commodious. The organ was well-played and the choir exceptionally good. Despite the rain a goodly attendance was present. The Services are very different from those of the Madison Avenue Synagogue, mainly in English, but the English is mouthed and badly pronounced. I shall introduce the Union Prayer Book. It is quite certain that after a time it will be possible for me to induce the congregation to engage Dr. Bloch as my reader and assistant. For the holidays in the absence of Dr. Bloch from Portland, I am to have the assistance of a Jewish lawyer who will read the prayers.

One thing impressed me last night, as I looked at the men and women before me: We feel, and justifiably, that this is an age of materialism. Still there is hope! Does not the gathering of people in large numbers for worship, for worship of *something*, show that these people, though they understand it not, are not satisfied with their gold and houses. They yearn for something—their spirits are in quest of something. We must give it—God and righteousness—a God of righteousness. If we fail now, God pity us. I tremble when I think of

the awfulness of the responsibility—we can and ought to do so much—we are doing so little.

He also assured her that he was taking care of himself. “I am really in good health and absolutely rested. I am very careful about my diet. The doctor, who has gotten to be very chummy, allows me to have fish and fowl but I shall stick to the old regimen eating nothing but bouillon, hominy, rice, chocolate, cocoa, toast or oysters and eggs. I eat nothing else, no meats, vegetable, fruits, fish, etc. I want to finish my work nicely and get back to you, my angel, strong and well enough to begin my task as dictator and Emperor in Rex.”³⁶

After being installed and officiating at the High Holy Day services, Wise hastened eastward at the beginning of November. On the ninth, he went to Tiffany’s to purchase “two plain rings,” one of which he inscribed “30:12,” referring to their favorite verse in Psalm 30: “Thou didst turn for me my mourning into dancing. Thou didst loose my sackcloth and gird me with gladness.” Stephen Wise married Louise Waterman on November 14, 1900 in her family’s home. Two rabbis officiated—Gustav Gottheil, his father’s old colleague and Wise’s teacher, and Kaufman Kohler, a leader of the Reform movement and a longtime friend of the Waterman family. At the reception afterward, Kohler took the bride aside and told her: “My dear, you have married a promising young man who will, I am sure, go far. But he will accomplish much more if you can cure him of his *meshugass*, this lunacy of Zionism. To rid him of that will be the greatest service you can do him—and yourself.”³⁷ Louise smiled sweetly, but said nothing. Soon afterward, Rabbi and Mrs. Stephen S. Wise boarded a train for their new home and new life together in Portland.