

New Publication on Rabbi Sabato Morais

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Rabbi Sabato Morais—Pioneer Sephardic Rabbi of Early American Judaism, by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, Mazo Publishers, 2023, 65 pages.

Rabbi Sabato Morais (1823-1897) was one of the leading American rabbis of his time, although largely forgotten today. Born in Livorno to a prominent Italian/Sephardic family, he grew into an impressive scholar, communal leader and activist. He spent formative years serving in London before being invited to become spiritual leader of the historic Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia where he began in 1851.

Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins has published a monograph on the life and work of Rabbi Morais. The study is “designed for teenagers and young families” to spread the legacy of Rabbi Morais. It considers Morais’ early life, his work in London, and his long tenure in Philadelphia.

Rabbi Morais was a staunch traditionalist, but was also a community-minded rabbi who worked with and respected those with different religious viewpoints. He was a great admirer of Abraham Lincoln and was an outspoken critic of slavery and other injustices in American society.

Rabbi Elkins notes that Rabbi Morais does not fit neatly into the religious denominational framework of Ashkenazic Jewry. He was Orthodox in belief and observance; he was highly cultured and open to modern scholarship; his thinking was in line with the “historical school” of Judaism—but not identical with it. In short, Rabbi Morais was representative of a different religious model: a Western Sephardic traditional rabbi.

In 1886, Rabbi Morais, together with Rabbi Henry Pereira Mendes of Shearith Israel in New York, spearheaded the establishment of the Jewish Theological Seminary Association. The Seminary, which originally held its classes at Shearith Israel, aimed to educate youths desirous of entering the ministry to be “thoroughly grounded in Jewish knowledge and inspired by the precept and the example of their instructors with the love of the Hebrew language and a spirit of fidelity and dedication to the Jewish Law.” Morais was the founding President and also taught classes as its Professor of Bible. After his death in November 1897, Solomon Schechter was called from England to reorganize the Seminary. He arrived in 1902. “At that point, the Jewish Theological Seminary, started by Sabato Morais, ceased to exist, and a new institution, called the Jewish Theological Seminary of America was established.” Rabbi Elkins, himself a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, notes that it is generally felt that

the Conservative Movement really began with the arrival of Solomon Schechter. Rabbi Elkins notes: “While some consider Morais to be the founder of the Conservative Movement, in thought and practice he considered himself Orthodox.”

When Rabbi Morais passed away in November 1897, his funeral was attended by thousands. “Historians note that his funeral was the first such mass funeral among Jews in America.” An Orthodox newspaper eulogized him as “without doubt...the greatest of all orthodox rabbis in the United States.” He was mourned by all factions of the Jewish community, a rare testimony to his involvement with and concern for the entire community.

Rabbi Elkins has done an important service in publishing his monograph on the life and work of Rabbi Morais. This publication offers us the opportunity of reconnecting with one of the important religious leaders of American Jewry.