Remembering Rabbi Dr. Sabato Morais

View PDF



Rabbi Dr. Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. This article is published in commemoration of the anniversary of the passing of Rabbi Sabato Morais.

Rabbi Dr. Sabato Morais (April 13, 1823-November 11, 1897) was described by a New York Yiddish newspaper as “without doubt…the greatest of all Orthodox rabbis in the United States.” This encomium was written several years after the death of Morais, when a full picture of his life and accomplishments could be written with historical perspective.

Few today remember this remarkable religious leader; even fewer see him as a model of enlightened Orthodox Judaism whose example might be followed by modern day Jews. Yet, Sabato Morais was a personality who deserves our attention…and our profound respect.

Born in Livorno, of Portuguese-Jewish background, he was raised in the Sephardic traditions of his community. As a young rabbi, he became the Director of the Orphan’s School of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation of London where he served for five years. In 1851, he began service as rabbi of Congregation Mikveh Israel, the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of Philadelphia. He remained with Mikveh Israel for nearly five decades, until his death toward the end of 1897.

Rabbi Dr. Alan Corre, who served as rabbi of Mikveh Israel from 1955 to 1963, wrote an appreciation of his early predecessor. He noted that “in everything he [Morais] writes and does, he comes across as a warm, loving, eminently humane individual, with self-respect, yet remarkably free of egotism for a man in public life who was the recipient of much honor, including an honorary degree from the University of Pennsylvania.” Rabbi Morais sought “to live as a Jew without

qualifiers, one who revered and loved the Jewish tradition and desired greatly to perpetuate it."

Dr. Corre has pointed out that Rabbi Morais is somewhat of an enigma to many, in the sense that he cannot be easily classified according to the ideologies and styles of the major branches of American Jewish life today. "Orthodox as he was in practice, he does not fulfill the role model of the Talmudic sage, and has about him a somewhat assimilated air at which the strictly Orthodox might well look askance. For the Conservative, he is insufficiently innovative, to unwilling to take religious risks. And of Reform, he was a life-long opponent."

Rabbi Morais was a fine representative of the Western Sephardic rabbinic tradition of his time. Western Sephardim valued general culture, refinement, orderliness, social responsibility. They fostered a Judaism that was loyal to traditional ritual, while at the same time being worldly and intellectually open. Personal piety was to be humble, not ostentatious.

Rabbi Morais wrote: "True worship resides in the heart, and truly it is by purifying our hearts that we best worship God; still, the ordinances which we are enjoined to perform aim at this object: to sanctify our immortal soul, to make it worthy of its sublime origin."

He laid great stress on ethical behavior, on compassion, on concern for others. He worked not only on behalf of the Jewish community, but showed concern for society as a whole. He was a vocal opponent of slavery and an avid admirer of President Abraham Lincoln. He supported the cause of American Indians; he spoke against the Chinese Exclusion Acts during the 1880s. He cried out against the persecution of Armenians in 1895. Working together with Jewish and non-Jewish clergy, he fostered an ecumenical outlook that called for all people to respect each other and to work for shared goals to improve the quality of life for everyone. In all of his work, Rabbi Morais did not seek glory or public recognition. He was compassionate, graceful and idealistic. Perhaps it was his self-effacing style that won him so much admiration and respect from so many. They saw him as an authentic religious personality, not as one who was serving his own ego.

Arthur Kiron, in a fascinating article that appeared in "American Jewish History," September 1996, observed that "those who knew and loved Morais repeatedly referred to him in their memorial tributes in idealized terms, as a religious role model, a prophet like Jeremiah, a man of constancy, duty, absolute sincerity, piety and humility."

One of Morais's memorializers described him as follows: "For the critical eye of man [Morais] has left behind no visible monuments of great achievements, but to the eye of God he has reared a monument far greater than any of those famed by man. That greatness was his goodness, which in point of intrinsic merit will compare with the greatest wonders of genius. Were it possible for man to measure the amount of good he dispensed among the sorrowing and afflicted…the historian would not hesitate to enroll his name among the world's truest and noblest immortals.…To do good was the first duty of his creed, to do it in silence always, and in secrecy wherever possible, was his second."

Rabbi Morais and his New York colleague Rabbi Henry Pereira Mendes were co-founders of the Jewish Theological Seminary. They had hoped that this institution would train American-born Orthodox rabbis to lead congregations throughout America. These two rabbis of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregations of Philadelphia and New York worked closely on other communal projects, always in a spirit of devotion to God and community. They both sought to promote a Judaism loyal to tradition, committed to social justice, marked by dignity and gravitas.

Orthodoxy of today is often characterized by increasing narrowness, obscurantism, authoritarianism, and xenophobia. Orthodox rabbis of the ilk of Rabbi Morais are a vanishing breed. The classic Western Sephardic religious worldview is on the verge of extinction. What a phenomenal loss this is for Judaism and the Jewish People!

Yet, as we remember the life of Rabbi Sabato Morais, we know that the memory of the righteous is a blessing. It continues to influence and inspire. The stature and vision of Rabbi Morais will emerge to guide new generations in an Orthodox Judaism that is faithful to tradition, cultured, refined, genuinely pious, humane, and humble. "Happy the man who has found wisdom, the man who has obtained understanding."