

## Website Review

**Gershwind-Bennett Isaac Leeser Digital Repository.** <http://leeser.library.upenn.edu/>. Created and maintained by the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. Reviewed March 2014.

Lionized as the leading Jewish religious leader of the pre-Civil War period, Isaac Leeser was arguably less influential for the potency of his ideas and the suppleness of his pen—others spoke and wrote with more facility than he did—than for his doggedness and adeptness as an organizer and innovator.\* A tireless defender of traditional Judaism against religious reform, Leeser harnessed the revolutionary technologies of his age by publishing and printing reams of new and translated works on the steam-powered printing press and traveling to the furthest reaches of an expanding American Jewish community by rail and steamboat to promote his cause. An assiduous correspondent with connections across the United States and farther afield, Leeser’s letters offer a window into American Jewry during a period of dramatic change. When he arrived in America in 1824, most of the new nation’s six thousand Jews clustered in towns and cities along the Atlantic seaboard. At the time of his death in 1868, the country was home to close to two hundred thousand Jews, many of whom had been drawn westward and southward in pursuit of opportunity.

Given Leeser’s openness to transformative technologies, it seems fitting that the digitization of his own voluminous writings, including letters, sermons, and publications, reveals how a new

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\* The seminal biography of Leeser is Lance J. Sussman’s *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit, 1995).

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set of technologies is transforming scholarly inquiry. This website, part of a broader initiative to create an online *genizah* of accessible historical sources relating to American Jewry, puts the raw materials of historical research within reach of anyone with Internet access. But it does much more than this, offering historians a new battery of tools that will alter the range and type of questions they can ask. For the first time, the researcher is able to search a corpus of 2,100 letters, written to and by Leeser, for individual keywords (*Charleston* yields 158 hits; *southern* yields 23). Scholars interested in the language and ideas of Jewish life can track the emergence of new concepts and rhetoric as well as the frequency

*Website at [leeser.library.upenn.edu](http://leeser.library.upenn.edu).*

of their use. Even a cursory search demonstrates how Jews adopted terminology (“nullification,” “secession”) that was drawn from the public discourse of their day. The technology also makes it possible to more efficiently gather material on subjects that are only discussed obliquely or occasionally in correspondence. For example, historians seeking to write about the impact of the environment on American Jewry—disease, weather, and natural calamities—previously would have had to read vast numbers of letters in the hope of finding the occasional reference. They can

now do so with a simple search. For those seeking historical *scha-denfreude*, references to yellow fever, earthquakes, and snow storms are instantaneously available.

If the letters offer new insights when viewed (and searched) in aggregate, they also promise rich rewards for those willing to patiently sift through the collection letter by letter. Historians, for example, know relatively little about M. N. Nathan, a peripatetic hazan who served congregations in England, the Caribbean, and the United States. His letters to Leeser offer wisps of long-forgotten gossip about congregational matters, asides about Jewish life in the Caribbean (and the economic costs of slave emancipation in the British Empire), and indications of his political leanings. (The “Great General Grant perhaps may not turn out a Ulysses after all,” Nathan wrote hopefully in 1864, “and the south *may yet conquer a peace*. I fervently hope and pray they may. . . . They deserve success.”) Nathan is but one of many figures lost to history and memory who return to life in these letters.

*Letter from Isaac Leeser to Zalma Rehine, 23 Nisan 5596 [April 10, 1836], original and transcription, <http://leeser.library.upenn.edu>.*

The website also points the way forward by supplying an interactive map that enables users to browse the letters by country, state, and city. More than one-sixth of the letters were sent to or received from correspondents in the South. Leeser, who initially joined his uncle, traditionalist Zalma Rehine, in Richmond before taking the pulpit of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, maintained close connections with Jews and Jewish life in the South throughout his career. He traveled extensively in the region to foster fledgling congregations, including the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation ("The Temple") in Atlanta. His newspaper, *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, carried stories about southern Jewish communities, often admonishing them to establish Jewish institutions and to adhere to orthodoxy. His mode of traditionalism tended to dominate in the South during his lifetime, only to be overtaken by Reform after his death. The interactive map, for example, highlights ninety-three letters relating to Charleston, South Carolina, some of which discuss the struggles within the city's Jewish community over the earliest Reform synagogue in the United States.

The map, however, is the only preformulated tool on the site that categorizes the letters by subject. It would be helpful if the site supplied other such interactive tools, collecting all the letters, for example, by author or grouping those that deal with religious reform, Sunday schools, Christian missionizing, and other major themes. This is a petty complaint about an initiative that makes the work of historians easier in so many ways. The interface is uncluttered and straightforward to use. Each letter has been transcribed (and when in Hebrew or German, translated); the transcribed text appears side by side with a digital image of the original. Historians accustomed to straining their eyes to parse meaning from spidery script will rejoice at this. We should also rejoice at the broader purpose it will serve by democratizing access to our shared historical heritage and thus demystifying the historian's craft.

*Adam Mendelsohn*, College of Charleston

The reviewer may be contacted at [MendelsohnA@cofc.edu](mailto:MendelsohnA@cofc.edu).