Wise, Stephen S. Encyclopedia Article

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WISE, STEPHEN S. (1874–1949), American rabbi, Zionist leader, and social activist. Scion of a family of European rabbis, Stephen Samuel Wise was brought to America as an infant from Budapest to join his father, Aaron Wise. Educated at Columbia University, he received private rabbinic training and was ordained by Adolf Jellinek of Vienna. From service as assistant rabbi at the Conservative synagogue B'nai Jeshurun in New York, he moved to the pulpit of Reform Temple Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon, and returned to New York in 1907 to found and head the Free Synagogue. Its pulpit would be free, said Wise; its pews would welcome all; its purpose would be to make its congregants more "vitally, intensely, unequivocally Jewish."

A religious liberal and social activist, Wise used the pulpit and lecture platform to promote both liberalism and social justice. As an American clergyman he involved himself in civic affairs and social and economic issues, helping to found both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1909) and the American Civil Liberties Union (1920); as a rabbi he made the plight of brethren abroad, Jewish rights at home, and the democratization of Jewish communal life his central concerns. Above all was his lifelong devotion to the cause of Zionism. He was a founder of the Federation of American Zionists in 1898, and he twice served as president of the Zionist Organization of America (1913–1920; 1936–1938).

To help democratize the structure of the American Jewish community, Wise took leadership in the organization of the American Jewish Congress. He was its president from 1921 to 1925 and honorary president until his death. In the wake of the rise of Nazism, he organized the World Jewish Congress in 1936 and served as its president. To bring greater unity to American Jewry, he founded a nondenominational rabbinical seminary, the Jewish Institute of Religion, in 1922. Wise was acclaimed as one of the most stirring of pulpit orators and platform lecturers of his generation.

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