

THE AMERICAN CAREER OF RABBI HENRY VIDAVER

By Morris B. Margolies

Rabbi Henry Vidaver, who had been born in Warsaw in 1833,¹ served congregations in Philadelphia, St. Louis, New York and San Francisco over a span of almost twenty-three years. He first came to public notice in 1859:

Congregation Rodef Sholem of Philadelphia. — We hear that during the Day of Atonement and the first part of the Succoth festival, the Rev. Henry Vidaver . . . delivered several sermons, one of which was in English, in the Julianna Street Synagogue to the satisfaction of this numerous congregation.²

Vidaver had studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau, which is now Wroclaw, Poland. Following his studies there he spent some months in England where "he made himself a thorough English scholar."³

At the time of his arrival in America, Vidaver was twenty-six years old. A few weeks later, on October 23, 1859, he was elected for a six-month probationary period as rabbi of Congregation Rodef Sholem of Philadelphia, at the rate of \$1,000 a year.⁴ Shortly afterwards he was one of three rabbis in Philadelphia to hold a Thanksgiving Day service in his synagogue, and he delivered a sermon in English before "a crowded audience to their general satisfaction."⁵

Henry Vidaver was apparently a good public speaker. Rabbi Isaac Leeser praised his pulpit talent, adding that members of his own (Leeser's) congregation were frequently in attendance at Vidaver's sermons. These were given every other week. Leeser wrote: "We have heard Mr. Vidaver speak a few minutes only at a private house, . . . and though he was quite unprepared . . . he acquitted himself with credit and displayed a familiarity with our

1. *The American Israelite*, Cincinnati, September 29, 1882, p. 108.

2. *The Occident*, Philadelphia, XVII, 1859, p. 179.

3. *The American Israelite*, September 29, 1882, p. 108.

4. *The Occident*, XVII, 1859, pp. 186, 204.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

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literature, which cannot fail to render his lectures and sermons both instructive and inspiring.”⁶

Vidaver contributed material to *The Occident*, in particular, correspondence from Berlin to which he went for a brief period, as we shall see below. He was something of a Hebraist. A poem he translated from the German was lauded by Leeser who noted that “the lovers of the sacred tongue will be pleased to notice that we have in this country another who knows how to employ the language of Israel to express the tender emotions of the soul.”⁷

Leeser’s appraisal of Vidaver as a public speaker resulted from a wedding address delivered by Vidaver on February 12, 1860. It was at the marriage of Helena Heidelberg to Moses Abrams of San Francisco. The ceremony was conducted by Rabbi Isidor Frankel.

We were also there as a spectator, and had thus the opportunity of hearing for the first time the Rev. Henry Vidaver delivering a regular address. . . . We would simply state that Mr. Vidaver’s language is remarkably chaste and correct, his speaking slow and deliberate, with sufficient intonation to render listening to him an easy task, and . . . we do not, therefore, wonder that he has thus far succeeded in making so favorable an impression on his flock. . . .⁸

Rabbi Vidaver involved himself from the very start in the affairs of the community. It became evident as his career unfolded that he took his role as a public person earnestly, that he reveled in recognition, especially the approbation of non-Jews, and that he made himself available as a speaker. His first fully reproduced address in *The Occident* was given at the annual meeting of the Jewish Foster Home Society of Philadelphia, February 14, 1860. Some conception of his oratorical style might be formed from the following excerpts:

Respected hearers: Of all the noble sights calculated to cheer the heart of an individual who sympathizes with the sorrows of his fellow-beings, that is surely the most affecting which offers to his view a gathering of men and women who, casting aside their daily cares, their private interests and

6. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

domestic avocations, assemble merely from a holy and religious desire to act the part of a kind Providence to their less favored brothers and sisters of the human family at large. Where is the man whom such a spectacle leaves cold and unmoved? Who would not feel inspired by it to contribute his mite also toward mitigating the asperities of the fate of those whose lot has been to know the dark side of life? . . .

Our heavenly father has planted the seed of compassion in the human breast, which, if fully fostered, produces the beautiful tree of benevolence that shelters the needy and feeds the hungry. . . . It is intimately connected with the very essence of man. . . .

Public charities will come into existence whenever the advancement of society in the career of true morality shall have paved the way for the attainment of that noble goal which is universal sympathy with the sufferings of *all* our fellow beings. . . .⁹

The rabbi's probationary status at Rodef Sholem was supplanted by his election for a three-year term in April, 1860, with an increase in salary.¹⁰ He felt secure enough by then to introduce the confirmation rite, a new and rather bold innovation at the time for traditional congregations, the following Shavuoth.¹¹ In a proposal for the establishment of a Hebrew college in Philadelphia, Isaac Leeser included Henry Vidaver as one of the prospective faculty.¹² Vidaver's place in the Philadelphia Jewish community was manifestly prominent.

By and large, Vidaver remained within the fold of traditional practice. He even had a hand in the supervision of kashruth as is evident from the following item in the "situation wanted" columns of *The Occident*: "Mr. Hayim Palano has been examined lately by Rev. Henry Vidaver, and been found capable to act as a Schochet . . . [and] therefore, offers his services to the community of Philadelphia as such."¹³

In July, 1861, Rabbi Vidaver resigned his position at Rodef Sholem, "on account of ill health."¹⁴ He was to return to Europe and take up residence in Germany. From hints dropped by him in

9. *Ibid.*, p. 293.

10. *Ibid.*, XVIII, 1860, p. 23.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 82

12. *Ibid.*, p. 314

13. *Ibid.*, XVIII, March 14, 1861.

14. *Ibid.*, XIX, 1861, p. 187.

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later dispatches to *The Occident*, as well as from some of Leeser's own comments, it would seem that Vidaver ran into personality conflicts with some of the leadership of the Jewish community in Philadelphia. Another factor may have been Vidaver's anti-Union stance which he adopted upon the outbreak of the Civil War. A series of dispatches from him to the *Hamaggid*, the Hebrew periodical published in Lyck, Poland, demonstrated his utter lack of sympathy with the Abolitionists. He justified slavery on the grounds that the cotton economy could not function without the services of blacks, people of other races being unable to do the backbreaking labor involved in picking the crop, or to withstand "the rays of the harsh sun."¹⁵



Rabbi Henry Vidaver
(1833 - 1882)

15. *Hamaggid*, Lyck, November 28, 1861.

A year into the Civil War, Vidaver was deeply impressed with the bravery, high character and self-sacrifice of the Southerners who, in his opinion, were a superior breed to Americans of the North. He regarded the latter as hypocritical in their espousal of equality for the Negro. In his judgment, they despised Negroes more passionately than the Southerners.¹⁶ Vidaver engaged in acrimonious denunciation of some undesirable elements who made up the population of the Northern states. Those states had been inundated by Irish and German immigrants whom he regarded as a "rabble . . . having arrived like a cloud to bedim the American landscape."¹⁷ With the issue of the Civil War remaining unresolved, the note of bitterness in the correspondence of Henry Vidaver became more marked. He derided the idea that the North was fighting the war out of opposition to slavery, and he was skeptical of the slogan, "to preserve the union." "What right," he asked, "does one nation have to impose an unwanted union upon another nation, thereby depriving it of its right for self-determination?" There could be only one reason for the perseverance of the Union Armies in waging the war: "vengeance."¹⁸

As we shall see, Vidaver was to do a complete about face on the issue of the Civil War upon his return to America in the last year of the conflict. It is not unreasonable to speculate that his pro-Confederate sympathies, both before and after the outbreak of hostilities, were not favorably regarded in Philadelphia and may have contributed to his resignation from the pulpit of Rodef Sholem.

During his three and one-half-year sojourn in Europe, Vidaver sent some rather lengthy dispatches to *The Occident*, describing the status of Jewish religious life in Germany.¹⁹ He was disillusioned with the quality of Jewish commitment with the notable exception of Frankfurt-am-Main where the leadership of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch had placed the stamp of high quality upon the entire Jewish community.

By February of 1865, Henry Vidaver was back in America as the preacher of United Hebrew Congregation of St. Louis,

16. *Ibid.*, June 11, 1862.

17. *Ibid.*, August 21, 1862.

18. *Ibid.*, January 13, 1864.

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Missouri. His success in recharging that congregation with Jewish commitment and zeal was soon reported.²⁰ With his return to this country, he underwent a change in outlook with respect to the Civil War. He delivered an address to his congregation on the occasion of a special day of service proclaimed by President Lincoln for the purpose of expressing thanks for Union victories late in the winter of 1865.

The House of Israel gathered in their respective synagogues, and I too, delivered a sermon in our synagogue on the subject of the Union and the ideal of the emancipation of the slaves. . . . Thank the Lord, some of the elite of our Christian community praised my sermon very highly and thereby I was responsible for shedding glory upon the name of Israel in this community.²¹

By May of 1865, Vidaver wrote with adulation about Lincoln:

The name of the President, Abraham Lincoln, will be permanently engraved on the tablet of world history. It will be remembered eternally with love by all decent people. He was the man who was raised on high at a time of great confusion and chaos in America. . . . Abraham Lincoln was the unique man in these times of trouble who, out of great wisdom, saved America from disaster. For five years he has served as President and has succeeded in all of his undertakings. He has been privileged to see the war won in behalf of the noble principles of humankind for which so much blood has been shed, the blood of hundreds of thousands of people! He has lived to see that his labors have not been wasted and that all of this blood has not been shed in vain, for he succeeded in achieving his purpose. This great man does not give himself airs of vainglory. He desires only the prosperity of his people and its freedom. Such a man deserves praise, honor and glory.²²

Henry Vidaver's dispatches to *Hamaggid* came to a close with his report following the assassination of Lincoln. He wrote:

It should be easy to imagine how this horrible calamity which struck us like a bolt from the blue staggered the hearts of all of the people. There is no limit to the sorrow and to the mourning of this country. There is not a house which does not

19. *The Occident*, XIX, 1861, pp. 377-381; XX, 1862, pp. 359-369; XXI, 1863, pp. 395-401.

20. *Ibid.*, XXII, 1865, p. 526.

21. *Hamaggid*, February 1, 1865.

22. *Ibid.*, May 3, 1865.

display in its windows and gardens tangible signs of mourning. There is not a person who does not weep in the recesses of his heart over the disaster which has befallen the people and the nation. . . . Our hearts go out to Abraham Lincoln, whose powerful spirit and whose magnificent character and love of humanity were the crown of his glory, whose love of freedom and whose powerful advocacy of the principles of emancipation impelled him to persist relentlessly in the battle for the elimination of slavery from our nation.

We Jews, residents of this city [St. Louis], arrived at our synagogue, which was covered with a mantle of mourning from one end to the other. It was filled to overflowing with men and women, gentiles and Jews. I preached my sermon in English and delivered a eulogy over the death of this great man.²³

Vidaver's eulogy for Lincoln, delivered April 19, 1865, was published in *The Occident*, June, 1865. It is included in the book *Abraham Lincoln: The Tribute of the Synagogue*.²⁴

Rabbi Vidaver served the United Hebrew Congregation of St. Louis for three more years following the Lincoln eulogy.²⁵ His success in the post is demonstrated by a tribute accorded him by the congregation, January 14, 1866. It took the form of a letter published the following month in *The Occident*.

To the Rev. Dr. H. Vidaver, Rabbi, United Hebrew Congr.
Dear Sir: At a quarterly meeting of the United Hebrew Congregation, held at the vestry rooms, Sunday, January 7, 1866, it was unanimously

Resolved, That a Committee of three be appointed to draw up resolutions expressive of the congregation's due appreciation of the ministerial services of their rabbi, the Rev. Dr. Vidaver, and at the same time present him with a suitable present in token of their high regard for him as a gentleman and a teacher.

The following is a copy of the resolutions drawn up by the undersigned committee:

Resolved, That in Rev. Dr. Vidaver the United Hebrew Congregation recognizes a staunch defender of Judaism, who combines solid learning with great eloquence.

Resolved, That by his pulpit ministrations, characterized

23. *Ibid.*, May 24, 1865.

24. Edited by Emanuel Hertz (New York, 1927). See *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, Number 17, 1909, p. 146.

25. J. Alexander Patten, *Lives of the Clergy of New York and Brooklyn* (New York, 1874), p. 601.

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by untiring zeal and unflinching energy, he has promoted the cause of truth, and extensively engaged the hearts of his flock in behalf of their holy faith.

Resolved, That the thanks of the congregation are due to him especially for his most eloquent and patriotic lecture at our synagogue on our national Thanksgiving Day, in November last, a lecture which has endeared him so much the more to us, because of the wholesome lessons of patriotism it inculcated and the honor it procured us among our Christian neighbors.

Resolved, That by the gentleness and persuasiveness of his manners he has won the hearts of his flock, and endeared himself to people generally with whom he came in contact in the walks of private life.

Resolved, That a present be made to Dr. Vidaver in the form of a golden watch and chain. . . .²⁶

The letter was signed by the committee consisting of J. A. Hart, R. Keller and M. Spiro. A year and one-half later, in the summer of 1867, "it was resolved among the members of his own congregation, and others also, to serenade him and at the same time to present him with a silver set. . . ." Mr. A. Bloch addressed the rabbi for the group, which came to the rabbi's residence with a "band of music" which "played several airs before the house." Bloch spoke of Vidaver's "urbanity as a man" and "ability as a preacher." His discourses were praised for their "cogent argument, lucid thought and resistless eloquence." Some hint of possible controversy surrounding the honoree might be read between the following lines: "Pray accept our solemn assurance that our friendship for you is not only when your sky is serene and your prospects fair; but should dark clouds lower in your horizon, and the tempest of enmity and the tornadoes of adversity assail you, we do solemnly promise you our active aid and our cooperation."²⁷

A formal resolution declared that Vidaver's "ministrations from the pulpit have demonstratively shown that it is compatible for the Israelitish rabbi to be a thorough [read, orthodox] Jew, and withal liberal and lenient toward others," that "as a preacher he knows how to render the stern lesson of religion and morality attractive even to the most callous and indifferent," and that "we

26. *The Occident*, XXIII, February 1866, pp. 523-524.

27. *Ibid.*, XXV, August 1867, pp. 255-256.

deem him entitled to our warmest gratitude and eminently worthy of our efficient support and cooperation as long as it shall please our heavenly Father to continue him among us." The resolutions were presented to Vidaver by Messrs. A. Bloch, S. Caro, M. Spiro and R. A. Cohen.²⁸

From his response, it seemed that Vidaver was not beloved of all of his members and that the tribute accorded him was a demonstration of support by some of his friends in the face of hostility towards him by others. The following passage is indicative:

Yes, my friends, friendship is a foretaste of that heaven where all is perpetual concord and perpetual love, whilst enmity is the true type of that dark and gloomy region, . . . that Gehenna where is consigned everything that is unholy. . . . It may seem strange that a man in an avocation like mine, whose occupation it is to preach the balmy words of God, should be very often exposed to the shafts of bitter and malignant enmity. My three years' experience amongst you has taught me that this may be for two reasons:

In the first place there are many who contract their friendships too hastily, and in time their attachment becomes a violent enmity; for friendships rapidly formed are apt to be rapidly destroyed. In the second place, a great many expect to find in a man in my position absolute perfection, and the moment they find he has failings, friendship vanishes, and then commences the unkind business of criticism and destruction.²⁹

Henry Vidaver did not remain much longer at the United Hebrew Congregation. In February, 1868 he left St. Louis and accepted the position of preacher of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York City.³⁰ Rabbi Morris Raphall had been forced by failing health to retire from active service at B'nai Jeshurun, though he still retained his title as rabbi of the congregation. Ultimately, Vidaver succeeded Raphall as rabbi. A writer of the time offered the following appraisal:

Dr. Vidaver is of the medium height, with a dark complexion and black hair and beard. His head is of ample size, while the face is expressive of both the intelligence and force of character which are notable in the man. He preaches fluent-

28. *Ibid.* The *Occident* reprinted these resolutions from the *Missouri Republican*.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

30. J. Alexander Patten, *op. cit.*

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ly in the English tongue. A favorite theme with him has always been Hebrew poetry, and it is to be seen in all his discourses, that he is moved by a most delicate, while ardent poetic fancy. Some of his illustrations and figures of thought are exceedingly beautiful and eloquent. At the same time his keen mind and practical observation make him a preacher of great power on both learned and common topics. Many of his Hebrew productions in poetry and prose have been published. Gifted as a scholar, and zealous in all his duties among his people, he is regarded as one of the most useful of the Jewish clergy of the city.³¹

From 1869 to 1874, Vidaver functioned as rabbi of B'nai Jeshurun. He was regarded as the most influential member of a little group of Hebraists who were the champions of the language in a city whose Jewish population at the time was largely ignorant of it. During this period, several of his Hebrew poems, all translations from other languages, were published in the *Jewish Messenger* of New York. Of particular interest is the interchange in the columns of that newspaper between Vidaver and Sabato Morais over the work of Samuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865), the Italian Jewish scholar who had been a pillar of nineteenth century *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. The issue was Luzzatto's talents as a poet. Morais regarded Luzzatto highly. Vidaver disparaged the Italian's poetry. Vidaver's opinion comes much closer to contemporary critical assessment than does that of Morais. More significant, however, is Vidaver's evident familiarity with Luzzatto's wide and deep scholarly labors in the areas of Biblical exegesis, Hebrew grammar, liturgical studies and historical analyses. This comprehension of Luzzatto's crucial contribution to nineteenth century Jewish scholarship testifies to Henry Vidaver's qualifications as a man of wide learning.³²

For a time, Vidaver was the patron of Leon Horowitz (1847-1926), a "wandering *maskil*, Hebrew writer, teacher, and, finally, a businessman."³³ Vidaver helped by giving Horowitz a teaching job in his religious school. Later, the relationship between the two

31. *Ibid.*, p. 602.

32. *Jewish Messenger*, New York, June 18, 1869, pp. 1-2. On Luzzatto see M. B. Margolies, *Samuel David Luzzatto: Traditionalist Scholar* (New York, 1979).

33. Lloyd P. Gartner, "Rumania and America, 1873: Leon Horowitz' Rumanian Tour and Its Background," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, December 1955, p. 70.

experienced a severe strain. "Having abandoned much of traditional Judaism, Horowitz felt keenly the anomaly of teaching it to young children. . . . When he put his perplexities to Vidaver, the rabbi 'laughed and ridiculed me, for he had already elevated himself to the heights of modern enlightenment, which would not ensnare man in inward matters.'"³⁴ Horowitz was incensed over this response, regarding it as a manifestation of hypocrisy in that Vidaver shared his religious skepticism but for reasons politic persevered in his outward orthodoxy.³⁵

Horowitz later incurred the wrath of Vidaver over his trip through Rumania in 1873 which induced some Rumanian Jews to emigrate to the United States. Vidaver wrote:

Some people from Berlad, Jassy and Bucharest in the expectation infused in them by a traveler, that here they would find a "society" to support them and that they would be given a tract of land. . . . They walk the streets and in their bitterness curse the day they were born. . . . But do tell me . . . friend Horowitz, who sent you? What is the name of the society established here? For who knows how many more will come here from Rumania and die of starvation, and why should many curse you, God forbid?³⁶

In an editorial entitled, "Hebrew Rabbinical Education," published in the *New York Herald* on July 22, 1872, he was referred to as "the eloquent Dr. Vidaver," and as one of only two English speaking rabbis (from the pulpit) in New York City, the other being Rabbi S. M. Isaacs.³⁷ Lamenting the lack of American trained rabbis, the editorial goes on to say that "it would be a great loss to New York if Drs. Gutheim [Rabbi James K. Gutheim of Congregation Emanu-El in New York] and Vidaver should both leave us. Their ministrations . . . cannot be easily supplied, and their services should be correspondingly appreciated."³⁸

Vidaver had come under fire in his congregation because he had introduced a mixed choir and an organ into B'nai Jeshurun's Sabbath services. An early anti-Reform pamphlet, *Le-Lamed La-*

34. *Ibid.*, p. 72

35. *Ha-Doar*, May 8, 1925.

36. Lloyd P. Gartner, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

37. Morris U. Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States* (New York, 1952), p. 555.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 556.

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To'im Binah (to teach understanding to those who stray) was published by Nahum Streisand (New York, 1872). The author served as rabbi in New York and later in San Francisco. He declared that he had written his pamphlet "against those who permit the singing of women and the organ in the synagogues during prayer." He specifically condemned Rabbi Vidaver for introducing these innovations. The frontispiece noted that the cost of publication was underwritten by "a wealthy member of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun." It would seem that Streisand's tract was an element in the controversy which ultimately forced Vidaver's resignation in 1874.³⁹

Vidaver made his way to San Francisco where he was elected rabbi of Congregation Sherith Israel prior to the High Holy Days of 1874, at the handsome salary of \$5,000 annually. He wrote and arranged an order of Yizkor services for that year. His reformist tendencies which were apparently the source of his difficulties at B'nai Jeshurun continued to be displayed in his new pulpit.

. . . Dr. Henry Vidaver, formerly rabbi of B'nai Jeshurun in New York City, an eminent preacher, was elected spiritual leader of Congregation Sherith Israel. Dr. Vidaver displayed a leaning toward reform. During his regime the congregation made considerable progress.⁴⁰

Vidaver gave his first Sabbath sermon at Sherith Israel during August of 1874. He spoke before a full congregation, and the majority were in "ecstasies" over his oratory. The San Francisco correspondent of *The American Israelite* commented:

Our new candidate for public favor . . . preserves with studious jealousy the dignity of his position, articulates the vernacular of our beloved country as trippingly from the tongue as players do and makes withal a very pleasant impression upon his male auditors. How the ladies like our new minister I have not yet learned . . . with a little pains on the part of our rabbi we shall have a worthy representative of Israel in

39. Jacob Kabakoff, "Hebrew Sources of American Jewish History," *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus* (New York, 1976), p. 221.

40. Michael M. Zarchin, *Glimpses of Jewish Life in San Francisco* (Berkeley, 1964), pp. 131-132. Rabbi Aron J. Messing, who had preceded Vidaver at Sherith Israel, had apparently been too orthodox for the gradually reforming congregation. See Norton B. Stern, "An Orthodox Rabbi and a Reforming Congregation in Nineteenth Century San Francisco," *WSJHQ*, April 1983, pp. 275-281.

one of our pulpits at least. Dr. Vidaver will have no reason to regret that he has cast his lot with "Israel's remnant," [Sherith Israel] since all have already begun to look upon him as an eminent divine, an able orator, and, what is so essential in a minister, a clever gentleman.⁴¹

However, attendance at services fell off even with the superior pulpit work of the new rabbi.⁴² But seven and one-half years later the same San Francisco observer who reported the lower attendance late in 1874, the acerbic Isidor N. Choynski, noted that, "Dr. Vidaver's synagogue is the best attended, as he is always interesting in the pulpit and draws many Christians to his sanctuary."⁴³ Vidaver was described as "a trump in the pulpit," who slashes right and left, and asks no questions if he thinks that innovations are necessary." Choynski was of the opinion that Vidaver was leading his congregation into the vanguard of the Reform movement.⁴⁴

Henry Vidaver continued the Reform practice of Confirmation on Shavuot, which had been introduced to Sherith Israel by his orthodox predecessor, Rabbi Aron J. Messing in 1872.⁴⁵

This synagogue is yet the center of attraction, and Christian and Jew alike hang upon the pile of adjectives which the eloquent doctor rattles off in wonderful style. The class which presented itself for confirmation was, to use a Californianism "way up." They recited whatever was drilled into them, in a masterly manner, and though some of them were a little stogy and did mouth the declarations, the *tout ensemble* was most pleasing to the audience which composed almost every shade of religion, and which crowded every inch in standing room.⁴⁶

Sherith Israel was one of seven congregations in San Francisco during Vidaver's ministry there. It was one of the two original Jewish congregations in the Far West, having been established in April, 1851.⁴⁷ The estimated Jewish population of the city was

41. *The American Israelite*, August 21, 1874, p. 5. Vidaver became a great favorite of the ladies, who considered him by far the handsomest of the rabbis in the Bay Area. *Ibid.*, April 7, 1885, p. 4. See William M. Kramer, "The Emergence of Oakland Jewry," *WSJHQ*, April 1978, p. 244.

42. *The American Israelite*, December 25, 1874, p. 4.

43. *Ibid.*, April 28, 1882, p. 349.

44. *Ibid.*, December 25, 1874, p. 4.

45. *The Hebrew Observer*, San Francisco, May 31, 1872, p. 4, June 14, 1872, p. 4.

46. *The American Israelite*, June 25, 1875, p. 6.

47. William M. Kramer and Norton B. Stern. "A Search for the First Synagogue in the Golden West," *WSJHQ*, October 1974, pp. 3-20.

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between 15,000 and 18,000, the majority being unaffiliated with any synagogue and resorting to *ad hoc* minyanim for the High Holy Days. The largest of the houses of worship was Congregation Emanu-El, served by Rabbi Elkan Cohn, with a membership of 286 families. Next came Vidaver's Sherith Israel with its 200 families. Ohabai Shalome, served by Rabbi Albert Bettelheim, numbered 164 families. This information was offered by Rabbi Max Lilienthal of Cincinnati, who visited the Bay City in the spring of 1876. Lilienthal described Vidaver as "a pupil of the late, great [Salomon] Munk of Paris and one of the best Hebrew writers in the country."⁴⁸

Vidaver did much to enhance the quality of his congregation's religious and Hebrew school. Over 300 children were enrolled in it by the end of his second year at Sherith Israel. He served as the superintendent of the school. Sessions were held every afternoon and particular emphasis was given to the instruction in the Hebrew language. Vidaver and his wife obviously devoted much time to the confirmation service and its arrangements. Mrs. Vidaver invited the confirmation class to her home and "made things lively for the happy youngsters" who were privileged to "bask in the *jeu d'esprit* of the Doctor, who, when he is in good humor, can set the table in a roar."⁴⁹ Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise of Cincinnati, the great leader of the Reform movement, visited the Sherith Israel religious school on a visit to San Francisco in 1877, and was "loud in praise of the system used. . . ."⁵⁰ He found that "under Dr. Vidaver's superintendency [the religious school was] one of the best disciplined schools in this country."⁵¹

Vidaver's reformist tendencies doubtless played an important role in the ongoing transition of his congregation from its original orthodoxy. Just before the renewal of his contract for a five-year term beginning with July, 1876, he introduced an organ, a mixed choir and a restructured ritual "in conformity with modern, moderate reform," with the approval of the board of Sherith Israel. Isidor N. Choynski, the keen observer and journalist of San Fran-

48. *The American Israelite*, June 9, 1876.

49. *Ibid.*, June 16, 1876.

50. Congregation Sherith Israel, minutes, August 2, 1877, Volume III, p. 305.

51. *The American Israelite*, September 2, 1877, quoted in "The Western Journal of Isaac Mayer Wise," edited by William M. Kramer, *WSJHQ*, January 1973, p. 129.

cisco Jewish life, who was also a member of Sherith Israel, commented on the changes in his usual manner:

Thus we are marching on, step by step, until finally we shall no longer deride the innovation of the cornet [in lieu of the shofar] of our neighbors over the way [Congregation Emanu-El], nor speak feelingly on the subject of hats on or off. We are coming to it fast, and what of it? This halfway of doing things is, after all, but a humble imitation — a sort of plated article; give us the stockings and the straw, or let us have cornets and Christian choristers.⁵²

Nor were Vidaver's reformist ideas confined to the synagogue. On the issue of Jewish nationalism, we find him in the camp of those of his colleagues who regarded the idea of a return to Zion as anathema and who excised all references to this idea from the prayerbook. In the spring of 1877, Vidaver delivered a talk at the Dietz Opera House in Oakland, California, entitled "The Jew and His Nationality." Among other statements on the theme, he had this to say:

I declare it emphatically that, though we are Jews by faith, we are Americans by nation . . . and I emphatically declare it that the Jew has no other nationality nor does he long or wish for any other nationality but that of the country in which he dwells. . . . Thus He who directs the wheels of history willed it that Israel's nationality should be wiped out but that Israel as a people with its mission of light, shall live forever. . . . Ladies and gentlemen . . . do you want to know your nationality? It is none else but "American!" We shall cling with all our hearts to our belief in the unity of God, and thus remain Jews; but we shall, likewise, with all our souls, cling to our blessed country, and thus remain Americans.⁵³

Though he brought religious innovations and reforms to congregations he served, Vidaver did not collaborate with his Reform colleagues. As his obituary notice put it, he "did not cooperate in the Reform movement in which his colleagues were engaged, although himself of a liberal turn of mind, because he was always at the head of the conservative congregations."⁵⁴

52. *The American Israelite*, November 3, 1876.

53. *Ibid.*, May 4, 1877, p. 6. See William M. Kramer, "The Emergence of Oakland Jewry," *WSJHQ*, April 1978, p. 245, for additional quotations from this oration, which was given on behalf of the Daughters of Israel Relief Society of Oakland.

54. *The American Israelite*, September 29, 1882, p. 108.

The American Career of Rabbi Henry Vidaver

Henry Vidaver died September 14, 1882, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. Some 3,000 people attended his funeral, "sitting, standing, bending, leaning and crouching" within the sanctuary seating only 1,000, and spilling out onto the sidewalks. "For forty years has Vidaver amassed a fund of knowledge which would set up a hundred rabbis of the spring variety. . . ." were among the comments in the forty-minute eulogy delivered at Sherith Israel by Rabbi Elkan Cohn of Emanu-El.⁵⁵ The two most analytic commentators on the Jewish community of San Francisco, Isidor N. Choynski and Gustav A. Danziger, were both members of Vidaver's congregation. Both agreed in their assessment of the rabbi. Choynski wrote that "no greater man ever preached the word of God in any of our pulpits." Vidaver was "a rabbi who combined within himself the rare qualities of an extraordinary scholar and of an orator whose peer, particularly in the vernacular, is not within my ken."⁵⁶ Almost thirteen years later, Danziger, in a lengthy article on the Jewish community of San Francisco, wrote that Vidaver was one of only four rabbis who "left their stamp upon the people:"

He excelled in learning all the rabbis that have ever been in San Francisco, past or present [1895], and as an orator, he had no peer in any pulpit, Christian or Jewish. Most persuasive, logical, forcible, he was at the same time learned and everyone of his sermons or lectures was a masterpiece of erudition and rhetoric.⁵⁷

The American career of Rabbi Henry Vidaver was a reflection of the tensions between the old and the new, the traditionalist and reformist, the East European and the American, polarities which marked the second half of the nineteenth century in the Jewish community of the United States.

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

57. Gustav A. Danziger, "The Jew in San Francisco: The Last Half Century," *Overland Monthly*, April 1895, pp. 394-395. Danziger, who sometimes wrote under the pen name of "Adolphe de Castro," had served as a rabbi himself, and as a Hebrew teacher, and he was a dentist, journalist, playwright, diplomat, and a friend of Ambrose Bierce. On Danziger, see Norton B. Stern, "A San Francisco Synagogue Scandal of 1893," *WSJHQ*, pp. 201-203; Stephen D. Kinsey, "Jewish Community of San Jose," *WSJHQ*, October 1974, pp. 83-84; William M. Kramer, "The Emergence of Oakland Jewry," *WSJHQ*, October 1978, p. 74.