

Wise, Stephen S. (b Budapest, Hungary, 17th of March, 1874; d New York, 19th of April, 1949.) Reform Rabbi and American Zionist leader.

Stephen S. Wise was born in Budapest, Hungary, the son of Aaron Wise and Sabine de Fischer (Farkashazy). He came to the United States in 1875, when his father became rabbi of Congregation Rodeph Sholom in New York City. He studied rabbinics under the tutelage of Alexander Kohut and Gustav Gottheil in New York, and was ordained by Adolph Jellinek in Vienna. He also studied at the College of the City of New York, Columbia University, and universities in Oxford and Vienna. Wise returned to the United States to become assistant rabbi to Henry F. Jacobs at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York City. In 1900, he took the position as rabbi of Temple Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon, where he established a reputation as a brilliant speaker and a passionate advocate for social justice. In 1905, he was a candidate to become the senior rabbi at Congregation Emanu-El. The Board of this prestigious New York City Reform congregation offered him the position, but made it clear that they would need to approve his sermons in advance. In response, Wise sent Louis Marshall his famous "open letter" in 1906, declining the position and reiterating his commitment to freedom of the pulpit. In 1907 Wise founded the Free Synagogue in New York City. Services were held in the Hudson Theatre, with a branch on the Lower East Side at Clinton Hall. The tragic fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1911 compelled him to increase his efforts on behalf of exploited immigrants.

Wise worked closely with Judge Louis D. Brandeis in establishing the Provisional Executive Committee for General Zionist Affairs in 1914. In 1918, he was elected president of the Zionist Organization of America. In 1922, he established the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR), a multi-denominational rabbinic school in New York City. JIR was designed to be a more Zionistic alternative to the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati. The two schools eventually merged, forming the HUC-JIR, with four campuses, including one in Greenwich Village.

Throughout his career, Wise affiliated with the Reform movement, but showed an independent spirit and a trans-denominational approach that met the needs of the Jewish community of New York City. A strong supporter of President Franklin Roosevelt, he has been criticized for not having pushed the President harder to save European Jewry at the earlier stages of Nazi persecution. Nevertheless, his accomplishments in building the Free Synagogue, the JIR, and the American Zionist movement mark him as one of the most important American Jewish Leaders of the 20th Century.