

Wise, Stephen Samuel

(1879--1949), American Jewish leader, Zionist activist, and champion of social causes.

In 1907 Wise founded the Free Synagogue in New York, and in 1915 established the American Jewish Congress, which aimed to protect Jewish rights and oppose discrimination against Jews, blacks, and other minorities. In 1922 he founded the Jewish Institute of Religion, which later merged with Hebrew Union College.

Wise was also a key player in establishing the American Zionist movement. He and Louis D. Brandeis helped convince President Woodrow Wilson to support the Balfour Declaration---Britain's pledge to establish a Jewish state in Palestine.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Wise's speeches and sermons dealt with all sorts of social issues. He clashed with Franklin D. Roosevelt, then governor of New York, over Wise's campaign against the corrupt mayor of New York, James Walker. The discord between them lasted until Roosevelt's presidential election in 1936, when Wise gave Roosevelt his support.

Wise actively opposed Hitler's policies from the start. The rabbi organized the movement to boycott German products and spoke out against Hitler's behavior at the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin. He was indecisive, though, about whether to support the Jewish Agency's Transfer Agreement, which allowed them to help German Jews leave for Palestine at the expense of being able to protest the Germans' activities.

Wise's leadership role became increasingly difficult as the Nazis gained power. American Jewry was weak and divided over how to respond. Wise tried to use his influence to save Jews from the Nazis by serving on the President's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees, but his efforts were often frustrated by the obstacles created by the State Department, War Department, and even by President Roosevelt, himself. He also found it hard to appeal to the president about European Jewry when America itself faced great danger. In 1943 Wise organized the "Stop Hitler Now" demonstration at Madison Square Garden, but by 1944 was deeply disillusioned. The

establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was a relief to Wise, but he never recovered from the great losses suffered by European Jewry. (see also Boycotts, Anti-Nazi.)