

Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman (1861 – 1945)

A Forgotten Champion of American Orthodoxy

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

Today it is not uncommon to meet people who have grown up in nonreligious homes to become observant Jews. Some of these people even attain distinction as well-known Jewish leaders. However, in the Nineteenth Century such an accomplishment was unheard of. Yet, Bernard Drachman was such a person. Raised in a non-Shomer Shabbos home, he went to public school in Jersey City, NJ and then Columbia College. While in high school and college, Rabbi Drachman also attended the (reformed) Temple Emanuel Hebrew Preparatory School of New York City for six years. In 1882 he graduated Columbia with honors and decided to study for the rabbinate. Temple Emanuel granted him a scholarship with the idea that he would prepare for the reformed rabbinate. He pursued his studies in Europe at the University of Breslau and the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau from which he received his rabbinical degree. He also matriculated at Heidelberg University which conferred upon him the degree of Ph.D. Magna Cum Laude in 1885.

A Difficult Choice

“Upon returning to America he was immediately confronted with the conscientious question as to what attitude he should assume on the issues of reform against Orthodox Judaism. His venerable friend and patron, Dr. Gustav Gottheil, was desirous of having him as his assistant and had indeed expected that such would be the case, but the young rabbi's views and inclinations were all on the side of historic Judaism and his studies in Germany had intensified his attitude. It was a difficult choice. He chose the less glamorous and less remunerative field of activity, since it was in accordance with his convictions. He speedily became known as an enthusiastic and energetic champion of Orthodox Judaism, one of the then very few English-speaking representatives of the ancient faith in the America of that time.”¹

As a result of this, Orthodoxy gained a well-educated, articulate spokesman, who devoted his life to fostering what he termed “American Orthodoxy.” This type of Orthodoxy remained faithful to the perpetuation of the age-old principles of the Torah, while at the same time incorporating those aspects of American culture compatible with it. Rather than transplant Eastern European Orthodoxy as is, Rabbi Drachman sought to develop an Orthodoxy that was generic to the American milieu. But make no mistake, in Dr. Drachman's view this development

was not to take place at the expense of Halacha. Indeed, in 1887, shortly after he began serving as rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel Bikkur Cholim of Manhattan, the synagogue membership voted to abolish the ladies' gallery and have mixed seating. Without hesitation Rabbi Drachman resigned his position and severed all connection with this congregation. "This incident created a great sensation in the city and, indeed, in Jewish circles throughout the country and, to a considerable extent, throughout the world."²

In 1890 Dr. Drachman became the rabbi of the newly formed Congregation Zichron Ephraim. "This synagogue was founded through the largesse of Jonas Weil, in memory of his father Ephraim; Bernard's election chances were certainly not hurt by the fact that he had married Jonas Weil's daughter Sarah in New York on February 8, 1888."³ Rabbi Drachman served as rabbi of this congregation until his passing in 1945. The synagogue, located at 163 East 67th Street, N.Y., is known today as the Park East Synagogue (Congregation Zichron Ephraim). It is affiliated with the Orthodox Union and was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on 8/18/1983. "This synagogue was founded by Jews from south Germany as an Orthodox congregation. It is one of the few synagogues still owned by the same congregation which built it."⁴

Jewish Causes

"Bernard Drachman was actively involved in numerous Jewish causes, mostly in leadership roles, even as he tended to the flock at Zichron Ephraim."⁵ Indeed, he was ready to join and/or lead almost any endeavor that he felt would strengthen traditional Judaism. Below are some of his activities.

The Jewish Theological Seminary

Many readers may not be aware that the Jewish Theological Seminary was founded as an Orthodox institution. "Although a certain proportion of the organizing delegates and participating rabbis belonged to the Conservative wing of Judaism, the principles of the seminary, as declared in its charter of incorporation, granted by the Legislature of the State of New York on the ninth of May, 1886, were those of uncompromising adherence to the tenets of Orthodox Judaism."⁶ Indeed, in 1902 and later in 1926 there were efforts to merge the Seminary with Yeshiva Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon (RIETS).⁷

Rabbi Drachman assisted Dr. Sabato Morais, the Seminary's founder. In 1889 he was made Dean and held this position until 1909. In his autobiography Rabbi Drachman gives no reason for his leaving the Seminary. However, the editor of this autobiography says the following about Rabbi Drachman's feelings toward the Seminary in the years before his resignation. "This weakening of both Jewish loyalty and scholarship grieved him and caused him no end of anxiety. If he spoke up against it in Faculty conferences to a Board and President predetermined upon a fundamental change in policy, his insistence must have

been painful. In getting rid of him, they were, then, 'dropping the pilot,' shaking off the voice of their own Orthodox conscience. In view of the Seminary's later development, as a 'Conservative' institution not inhospitable to Reconstructionist tendencies, does not the above seem a probable explanation?"⁸ Rabbi Dr. Drachman never abandoned his Orthodox principles.

"In the early 'teen' years of the twentieth century"⁹ Dr. Drachman began teaching at RIETS. He remained connected with RIETS until 1940. Over the more than 30 years of his association with Yeshiva College in his position as "professorial lecturer"¹⁰ he taught "most of the Hebrew subjects, with the exception of the Talmud and related branches,"¹¹ as well as the German language.

The Jewish Welfare Board

Rabbi Drachman was one of the original organizers of the Jewish Welfare Board. "The Board was formed from a variety of Jewish organizations as a result of World War I, attending to needs of Jewish servicemen, and supplying funding to enlist Rabbis at military posts."¹² "The Welfare Board laid great stress upon its spiritual work, upon bringing the message and the comfort of religion to the soldiers. An essential part of the work was the preparation of a suitable abbreviated prayer book. It was recognized at once that men engaged in active war service, in the midst of the constant alarms and peril of daily combat, could not be expected to use the full ritual of the Jewish order of prayer."¹³ Dr. Drachman took a leading role in the preparation of this abbreviated prayer book.

The OU and The Jewish Sabbath Alliance of America

In 1913 Dr. Drachman became the second president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America. "Through the retirement of Dr. Mendes from the Presidency due to ill health, Dr. Drachman became the only logical candidate."¹⁴ Rabbi Drachman had been involved in the OU from its inception in 1898. "A special unit of the Union, designated the Jewish Sabbath Association, was instituted to focus on this area. Besides educational work to rally loyalty to Sabbath observance and prevailing upon business establishments to remain closed on Shabbath, employment opportunities were sought for the Shomrey Shabbath. In 1907, Dr. Bernard Drachman, as chairman of that committee (which subsequently became an autonomous organization, the Jewish Sabbath Alliance), reported that within the preceding years jobs had been obtained for 1,500 Sabbath observers."¹⁵

Candidate for Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of London

"In the year 1912, The Post of Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of London had become vacant through the passing away of its then incumbent, the Very Reverend Doctor Hermann Adler."¹⁶ During the early summer of 1912, Dr. Drachman received an official letter of invitation from the United Synagogue

inviting him to “preach in various synagogues with a view to becoming a candidate for the chief rabbinate.”¹⁷ “This was a position unrivaled for dignity and power anywhere among the Jewries of the world.”¹⁸ In October 1912 Rabbi Drachman arrived in London. He was subjected to a whirlwind of interviews and spoke at many synagogues in London and other cities in England. All in all, he made a highly favorable impression on almost everyone he met and/or heard him speak.

Two incidents recorded by Dr. Drachman about his visit to England shed light on his character and approach to Judaism. Firstly, he describes a dinner that he had to attend about which he says, “I did not enjoy, which did not run off pleasantly and which may have had an important influence upon the outcome of the campaign for the chief rabbinate.”¹⁹ The invitation was from Reverend A. A. Green, an official of an Orthodox synagogue. It was to take place in Green’s home. However, Rabbi Drachman had reason to suspect that Green’s kashrus was not reliable. Apparently there was no way for him to refuse the invitation. At the dinner he found himself in the presence of a number of other guests seated at the head of the table with his host. It soon became obvious that he was not eating, and his host confronted him saying, “I presume that you are not eating because you think that my food is not kosher.”²⁰ Rabbi Drachman writes, “I assured Mr. Green that I was not insinuating that the meal was not kosher, and no further reference was made to the subject. But the atmosphere has become distinctly chilly, and when I left I felt that the Reverend Mr. Green could hardly be numbered among my friends. That feeling did not disturb my equanimity, but I reproached myself for having permitted myself to be involved in a controversy, be it ever so slight, or brought into a position which could be considered compromising.”²¹

Secondly, almost all of the speeches that Dr. Drachman gave in England were delivered in English. However, on one occasion he was asked to address a group of immigrants from Eastern Europe in Yiddish. To the astonishment of those who had made this request he replied, “I should not care to use the Yiddish as the language of my sermons.” To the question, “Why not?” he replied, “I do not consider Yiddish a language, in the true sense of the term. It is, at best, a dialect of the German. It is an incorrect and ungrammatical German. Since I can speak a correct German, I see no reason why I should myself corrupt and spoil the language I speak.”²² The result was that he addressed the group in a simple yet correct German and was perfectly understood by all present!

In the end Rabbi Drachman was not elected Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of London. Those opposed to him were able to use a procedural technicality to block his election.

Scholarly Works

Rabbi Dr. Drachman also found time for scholarly endeavors. In 1899 he published the first English translation of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's **The Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel. From the Heart of Israel or Jewish Tales and Types** first appeared in 1905. *Dibre Ha-Riboth* (Matters of Controversy, a rabbinical disputation between Zerahiah Ha-Levi and Abraham ben David) was published from a manuscript (Unicum) in 1907.²³ In addition, he contributed countless articles to the English and Yiddish press that furthered the cause of Orthodox Judaism.

Houdini

Rabbi Drachman knew Harry Houdini (Ehrich Weiss) when Houdini was a pupil in the Talmud Torah of his synagogue, Congregation Zichron Ephraim. Houdini's father, Dr. Mayer S. Weiss, was a Hungarian born rabbi. "Despite the nature of his vocation, he (Houdini) had a profound reverence for the Jewish faith and deep-seated filial affection for his parents and reverence for their memory."²⁴ Dr. Drachman relates that in 1890 the Weiss family was in dire financial straits, and Rabbi Weiss came to him for aid. Rabbi Drachman volunteered either to give or lend money to Rabbi Weiss. Instead, Rabbi Weiss suggested that Dr. Drachman buy some of his seforim. Dr. Drachman recalled that "He had a large and excellent Hebrew library, and I selected a fine set of the *Codes of Maimonides*, for which I paid the price he asked."²⁵ Years later, after Houdini's father had passed away and Houdini was a world-renowned and wealthy man, Rabbi Drachman approached him to ask for a donation to help pay off his synagogue's mortgage. Houdini agreed to donate the then substantial sum of \$500 on one condition. He wanted the set of Maimonides back to keep in memory of his father! Dr. Drachman agreed and within 24 hours of the return of the seforim he received Houdini's check for the \$500. Interestingly enough, Rabbi Drachman officiated at the funeral of Houdini when he died in 1926.

Personal Life

In 1888 Dr. Drachman married Sarah Weil the daughter of Jonas Weil. "Bernard and wife Sarah found time to produce eight children, 6 boys and two girls - Beatrice (b. 1890), Edgar (b. 1892), Julian (b. 1894), Albert (b. 1896), Mathilde (b. 1899), Myron (b. 1901), and Theodore (b. 1904). Son Sidney was the first born, but died at the age of 6 months. Sarah died after their children reached maturity, in 1925, and two years later Bernard married Hadassah Levine, who would outlive him. Bernard Drachman lasted almost to his 84th birthday, dying in New York City on March 12th, 1945, of natural causes."²⁶

Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman was a man who devoted his life to furthering the cause of Orthodox Judaism at a time when many were abandoning a Torah life. They mistakenly felt that such a life was incompatible with American society. Dr. Drachman's life's work focused on showing others that one could be an observant Jew and a full-fledged American. His efforts and the efforts of those

like him laid the groundwork for the vibrant Orthodoxy that we see in America today. May he long be remembered for his good deeds!

¹ **Memorial Journal** published by the Congregation Zichron Ephraim, 3/31/46
(<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Village/2262/drachman/bernard.htm>)

² **The Unfailing Light**, Bernard Drachman, The Rabbinical Council of America, New York, 1948, page 203.

³ <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Village/2262/drachman/drachman.htm>

⁴ <http://www.nyc-architecture.com/UES/UES104.htm>

⁵ <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Village/2262/drachman/drachman.htm>

⁶ **The Unfailing Light**, Bernard Drachman, The Rabbinical Council of America, New York, 1948, page 181.

⁷ **Bernard Revel**, Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, Feldheim Publishers, second edition, 2000 pages 102-114.

⁸ **The Unfailing Light**, Bernard Drachman, The Rabbinical Council of America, New York, 1948, footnote page 261.

⁹ Ibid., page 368.

¹⁰ Ibid., page 370.

¹¹ Ibid., page 368.

¹² <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Village/2262/drachman/drachman.htm>

¹³ **The Unfailing Light**, Bernard Drachman, The Rabbinical Council of America, New York, 1948, footnote page 365.

¹⁴ <http://www.ou.org/orthodoxunion/unionstory/chapter6.htm>, footnote 2.

¹⁵ <http://www.ou.org/orthodoxunion/unionstory/chapter7.htm>

¹⁶ **The Unfailing Light**, Bernard Drachman, The Rabbinical Council of America, New York, 1948, footnote page 290.

¹⁷ Ibid., pages 291-92.

¹⁸ Ibid., page 290.

¹⁹ Ibid., page 303.

²⁰ Ibid., page 304.

²¹ Ibid., page 304.

²² Ibid., pages 301- 302.

²³ This sefer is available on the Internet at <http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdf/divreharivot.pdf>.

²⁴ Ibid., page 337.

²⁵ Ibid., page 338.

²⁶ <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Village/2262/drachman/drachman.htm>