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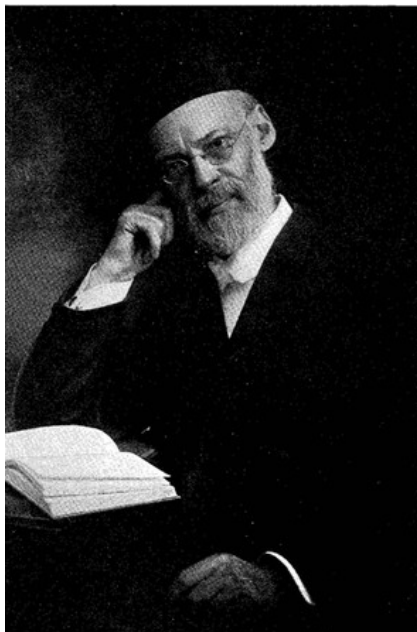
RABBI SCHEPSHEL SCHAFFER: EARLY YEARS OF AN ORTHODOX ACTIVIST

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
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Editor's Note: All quotes are from "Rev. Dr. Schepschel Schaffer, Twenty-Five Years of Activity in the Cause of Orthodox Judaism 1893-1918" by Israel Fine (Kohn and Pollock, Baltimore, 1918).

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a number of rabbis did their utmost to establish and maintain Orthodox Judaism in America. This was no easy task, since many Jews felt that the "religion of Europe and the observances of their parents" were foreign to America. The result was that the Reform movement made great inroads into many Jewish communities. Many shuls, originally founded as Orthodox institutions, over time became Reform synagogues.



Baltimore's Congregation Shearith Israel stands out as an exception to this historical trend. In 1879 two smaller congregations merged to form a larger congregation strong enough to combat the growth of Reform. That this shul still exists today as a vibrant Orthodox institution is proof of the success of the merger - and of the vibrant leadership of Rabbi Dr. Schepschel Schaffer, who became the rav of Shearith Israel in 1893 and served the congregation until his death in 1933.

Rabbi Schaffer was born on May 4, 1862, in the town of Bausk in Courland, Russia. Courland had been subject to Russian rule since 1737 but still had most of the characteristics of a German province. As German was the official language, used in the courts and schools and spoken by most of the population regardless of nationality, Schepschel grew up speaking the language.

On his mother's side he was descended from a long line of celebrated rabbis and teachers. His paternal grandfather, a sage known for his extraordinary humility and piety, never uttered a word that did not serve some important purpose. Supported by his wife's keen business acumen, he was able to devote himself exclusively to Torah study. Circumstances forced Rav Schaffer's father to earn a meager living as a teacher of children.

Until the age of 11, Schepschel was taught by his father.

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From him he received a thorough grounding in Hebrew lore; from him he learned that discipline, that thirst for knowledge, to quench which he was willing to

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undergo discomforts which to the Jewish youth of today would seem almost incredible. He never enjoyed the games, merriments and liberties of youth which are today considered an indispensable part of proper training and education.

Because his father was busy teaching other children throughout the day, he and young Schepschel were forced to study together from 4

to 7 a.m. in the summer and until 8 a.m. in the winter. The family could not afford to heat their home at night, so one can imagine the determination it took for father and son to rise well before dawn on bitterly cold Russian winter mornings to study together.

Young Schepschel turned out to be a gifted student.

At the age of eleven the assiduous student was already known in the community as the boy who had absorbed the twenty-four books of the Bible so thoroughly that he could recite whole chapters by heart and who, in addition, knew the first half of "Seder Nezikin" so well that he could point out without fail the exact page in the tractate of any utterance, statement or controversy one might quote. Those who used to gather daily in the local Beth-Hamidrash to spend hours of study frequently used the boy as a living index, requesting him to locate a verse of the Bible or a saying in the tractates of Gemara he was known to have learned, often merely to have their sport and try the strength of his memory, occasionally to remedy a real need.

It soon became clear that a gifted student like Schepschel required more time and attention than his father could give him. So at the tender age of 11 he was sent to study with the rabbi of Shalat, a neighboring town.

In a year and a half he was able to finish and then to repeat the entire "Seder Nezikin," which he now knew almost by heart. Very often he stood the test which was put to exceptionally gifted students. A Gemara was opened, the finger pointed to any place on the page and the question was asked: "Which words are to be found under the pointed finger ten, twelve or fifteen pages farther on in the tractate?" And this at the age of twelve and a half.

After a year and half of study with the rabbi of Shalat, Schepschel was sent by his teacher to study in Shavel in the yeshiva of Rabbi Eliezer Lunz, known as the "Charif" because of his especially keen mental acumen.

Dr. Schaffer in later years often tersely characterized the difference in the methods of the two Yeshiboth he had thus far attended by the fact that while in Shalat he had learned in one year about three hundred pages of Gemara; all he accomplished with Lunz in the same period of time was fourteen pages of the tractate "Kidushin." But these fourteen pages were conned thoroughly, with all the commentaries, with, in addition, the comparison of all similar and corresponding controversies in other tractates and with the practice of deducting new cases which might occur in contemporary every-day life.

While studying in Shavel, Schepschel celebrated his bar mitzvah in a very simple fashion, receiving an *aliyah* on a Monday morning, followed by a pinch on the cheek from Rabbi Lunz, who told the young man he was an excellent bar mitzvah who one day could well be a leader in Israel. Rabbi Lunz also announced that he would serve tea in his home that evening for any *talmidim* who wished to drop by and celebrate Schepschel's bar mitzvah.

After spending two years studying in the yeshiva of Rav Lunz, Schepschel went to Weksna to study in the yeshiva of Reb Moshe Perels. In the three years he spent in Rav Perels' yeshiva he finished *Seder Noshim* as well as tractate *Chulin*. He was by this time expert in the intricacies of *piipul*.

Secular Education

Schepschel, now 18 years old, began to seriously think about his future. Despite the fact that he had spent long hours studying Talmud, he had not neglected the study of secular subjects. "As a rule the study of modern Hebrew and of European languages and literatures was looked upon by the older generation of Talmud scholars as almost sinful and was forbidden, but young Schaffer had always been a favorite and a privileged character because of the fact that he hailed from Courland and spoke German."

At that time, the Russian government insisted that the official rabbi of each community have a secular as well as a Torah education. As a result, there were two rabbis in each community - the actual rabbi and the government-sanctioned rabbi. More often than not the "official" rabbi was more interested in doing what the government wanted than in fostering *Yiddishkeit*. Therefore, there was a need for strictly observant, secularly educated *rabbonim*. Schepschel decided he would try to become such a *rav*.

In 1880, Rabbi Dr. Hillel (Philipp) Klein became the *rav* of the large Jewish community of Libau (Liepaja), Latvia. Rav Klein was a brilliant Torah scholar who was also well educated in secular subjects. He was thus able to serve not only as the official government rabbi but also as the recognized Orthodox rabbinical authority in Libau.

In light of his aspirations, Schepschel naturally felt Rabbi Klein might assist him in his desire to combine a secular education with a Torah education, so he went to Libau to solicit his advice. Rabbi Klein soon became Schepschel's role model and patron, appointing him Talmud instructor of the highest class in his yeshiva.

In his spare time, Schepschel studied secular subjects privately with one of the teachers at the Gymnasium of Libau. At the end of three years he took the examinations for a diploma and passed without difficulty.

The Rabbiner-Seminar

The Berlin *Rabbiner-Seminar* (Rabbinical Seminary), headed by the famous Rabbi Dr. Azriel Hildesheimer, was, at that time, the only institution in the world where one could pursue secular studies without being induced in the slightest to deviate from the path of Torah observance. It was clear to Schepschel that he had to go to Berlin to continue his studies.

Moving to Berlin was a courageous move for the 21 year-old Schepschel. He had no relatives or contacts in the city, and there was also the problem of how he would support himself. Nonetheless, in April of 1883 he arrived in Berlin.

The reception he met was as new to him as the environment. Everyone was polite and friendly, yet cool and reserved almost to the degree of indifference. He would be welcome in the Seminary, he was told, but he must first secure the resources needed for life in a city like Berlin.

From later experience he learned that this was a sort of test to which all strangers were subjected in order that they prove their true mettle. Fortunately, his Talmudical knowledge, as well as his congeniality, secured him a few real friends among the students at the Seminary, whom he assisted in their studies and who, in turn, helped him by introducing him among their acquaintances, thus affording him the opportunity of making himself known to an ever-growing circle.

During the first six months of his residence in Berlin he suffered almost beyond endurance, but as he kept his attire faultless and always maintained a cheerful exterior, none knew of his true condition, though some surmised it. Later on he secured a home with a worthy and well-to-do family in return for the care he bestowed upon the Hebrew education of the only son of the family, and before very long he became a favorite tutor in the Talmud. Business people of wealth gave him handsome emoluments for daily evening lessons, so that he was able not only to pay his way but even to send money home to his parents.

By 1885 Schepschel had obtained sufficient financial support to enroll in the Hildesheimer Seminary. He also matriculated at the University of Berlin, where he studied philosophy, Semitics, German literature, and Roman law.

Within four years he'd completed his dissertation and was ready to take the qualifying examinations for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The fees at the University of Berlin were, however, quite prohibitive, so he went to the more affordable University of Leipzig. In 1889 he was awarded his Ph.D. *cum laude*. The title of his thesis was "The Principle of Law and Its Relation to Morality According to Talmudical Ethics and Jurisprudence."

The dissertation of Dr. Schaffer, which was dedicated to Dr. Philip Klein and published in Frankfurt am Main in 1889, is in many respects a noteworthy production. It is an exhaustive treatise and shows wide reading not only in Hebraic lore but also in general works on philosophy, law

and ethics. It called forth comments of praise from numerous scholars in these realms.

One of these in particular, Dr. M. Lazarus, the author of the well-known work, "*Die Ethik des Judentums*," considered the dissertation a valuable contribution. Not only did he write Dr. Schaffer a letter expressing his complete satisfaction with the work but he also makes mention of it in a note to his own book as a "thorough and in many respects excellent work."

In the introduction to his dissertation Dr. Schaffer clearly sets forth his theme: The study of ethics, morality and the principle of law, as these have been formulated in the Talmud, and a comparison between the Talmudic systems and those of the great Roman code of laws as well as with the more important codes of modern times.

In February 1890 Schepschel successfully passed his *semicha* examinations at the Seminary. He was now a full-fledged Orthodox "Rabbi Doctor."

Return to Russia

Because he hadn't been born in Germany, the chances of Rabbi Dr. Schaffer obtaining a rabbinical position there were not good. And he had just learned that his father was dangerously ill, and in fact near death, so he returned home. His father passed away six weeks later. Dr. Schaffer remained with his family for almost a year, assisting them as they prepared to immigrate to America.

After his mother, sister, and four brothers left for the United States, Rabbi Schaffer thought he might obtain a position as a *rav* in Russia. With this in mind, he went to several leading Russian *rabbanim* and, upon rigorous examination, received *semicha* from each of them - Rav Avraham Diamant of Yurburg, Rav Zev Lehrman of Ervilok, and the world famous Kovno Rov, Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Spector.

He was also given *semicha* by Rav Alexander Moshe Lapidus (Lapidoth) of Rossieny (a friend of Rav Yisroel Salanter). While visiting Rav Lapidus, he met his youngest daughter, Anna, who was a very accomplished Hebraist and a student of language and literature. Rabbi Schaffer asked Rav Lapidus for permission to marry Anna, and the *rav* gave the couple his blessing.

Despite having *semicha* from some of the most illustrious rabbis of his day, as well as a doctorate, it became increasingly clear to Rabbi Schaffer that he probably would not obtain a rabbinical position in Russia. He decided his only course of action was to go to America. He left first, and Anna was to join him once he was settled. They would marry in the United States.

Rabbi Dr. Schaffer arrived in New York in October 1892. He did not remain there for long, however, as he was soon asked to be the first *rav* of Congregation Shearith Israel of Baltimore - a position he would hold for forty important and eventful years in American Jewish history.

(To be continued next week in Dr. Levine's monthly "Glimpses Into American Jewish History" column.)

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