

## **Rabbi Jacob Joseph – Chief Rabbi of NY**

### **The Stevens Faculty Forum 3/4/2009**

**I. Jewish Immigration to America – Spanish Portuguese, German, Russian – 1881 began massive immigration from Eastern Europe, more than 2 million**

**II. Situation was chaotic – Several synagogues decided needed a chief rabbi to bring order, particularly in area of kosher supervision**

**III. Rabbi Jacob Joseph became the First Chief Rabbi of NY**

**A. Rabbi Jacob Juspha, better known as Rabbi Jacob Joseph, was born in Kroz, Lithuania in 1840 into a very poor family. His father worked in a beer brewery. His father “would skimp and deprive himself and his household of food to pay for his [son’s] tuition.” Young Yaakov turned out to be an exceptional Torah student and studied for a number of years in the famous Volozhin Yeshiva which was headed at that time by the Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1817 - 1893). Later he became one of the chief disciples of Reb Yisroel Salanter (1810 – 1883).**

**B. His was a dynamic nature, and like his Musar Rabbi Israel he could not remain long in one place. After holding rabbinic positions in several Lithuanian towns he accepted, in the summer of 5643 [1883], the year that Rabbi Israel died, the position of Community Preacher in Vilna. In a short time he became very popular, especially with the unlettered. His sermons, masterpieces of Musar were named *Revues*.**

**His published book of sermons, *L’Bais Yaakov* (Vilna, 1888), shows him to have been a man with an orderly mind and liberal outlook. The sermons are clear, well constructed, and ethical in emphasis.**

**However, as learned as he was, through overconfidence in people, he became involved in some financial enterprise that failed and he went bankrupt. This made a painful impression upon him, he nearly lost his mind. He became melancholic and would spend hours on the old Jewish cemetery in Vilna weeping. (Israel Salanter, Religious-Ethical Thinker)**

**IV. In 1879 delegates from 32 NY City congregations met and decided to offer the position of Chief Rabbi of New York to the noted Talmud scholar and Bible commentator Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Jehiel Michel Weiser (1809 – 1879), known by the acronym Malbim. He died before he could reply.**

#### **V. Other attempts**

**Between 1881 and 1885 over 50,000 Jews came to the United States from Eastern European countries. The rabbinical leaders in Europe were increasingly aware of the religious problems faced by these immigrants.**

**Given this, it is not surprising that shortly after Rabbi Ash (who had served as a de facto chief rabbi) passed away in 1887, members of Beth Hamidrash Hagadol led an effort to find a Chief Rabbi for New York. A number of prominent congregations formed the Association of American Orthodox Hebrew Congregations. Each synagogue pledged funds to help support the soon to be chosen Chief Rabbi for a period of five years.**

**Among those considered for the position was Rabbi Hillel Lifshitz, noted both for his Talmudic scholarship and his wide general culture, including a command of the German tongue, and Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Spektor, son of Rav Elchanan Spektor. However, neither candidate was supported unanimously by the key players in the search. Therefore, the Association turned to another person who had expressed an interest in becoming chief rabbi – Rabbi Jacob Joseph.**

**At a meeting of the Association held on December 7, 1887 Rabbi Jacob Joseph was elected Chief Rabbi with an annual salary of \$2500, a munificent sum in those days, for an initial period of six years. In addition, he was to be provided with an apartment suitable for a Chief Rabbi's residence. "In the letter informing him of his election, the Association also undertook to provide traveling expenses for himself and family and to grant him the advance requested." New York was soon to have its first Chief Rabbi!**

**It took some time to raise the funds needed to cover the expenses of bringing Rabbi Jacob Joseph and his family to America as well as money for rent and house furnishings. In addition, the Association**

**drafted a constitution outlining the duties of the Chief Rabbi as well as his relationship with its congregational members.**

## **VI. The Chief Rabbi Arrives**

**On early Saturday morning, July 7th, [Parshas Devarim] the ship *Aller* (on which RJJ was sailing) reached its American port, Hoboken, New Jersey. The Rabbi spent the Sabbath aboard ship and his congregation counted the hours to sundown when they might cross the river to welcome their leader.**

**As soon as Shabbos was over many people boarded the ferry from New York to Hoboken in order to greet the new Chief Rabbi. Stevedores at the port of Hoboken, New Jersey were amazed to see some ten thousand bearded Orthodox Jews waiting to greet Rabbi Joseph upon his arrival. Mr. Dramin Jones of Congregation Bais HaMidrash HaGadol headed the delegation that had come to greet the new Chief Rabbi. He welcomed Rabbi Joseph by offering him bread and salt and then recited the traditional benediction upon seeing a great scholar: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast imparted of Thy wisdom to those who revere Thee,” and added, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast given us life and sustained us and privileged us to reach this day.”**

**Rabbi Jacob Joseph was then introduced to the large crowd that had come to greet him. The Chief Rabbi responded with a brief address calling for unity and cooperation to carry out his holy work. He was then taken by carriage to the Mayer’s Hotel in Hoboken where he spent the night.**

**On Sunday morning the Chief Rabbi was taken to his new residence amid considerable “pomp and circumstance.”**

**When it [the procession escorting him] reached the house at Henry and Jefferson Streets, thousands upon thousands of Jews milled about. Police had been called earlier. There were some curiosity seekers, but the crowd was composed almost entirely of East European immigrant Jews who felt that the arrival of Rabbi Joseph marked the beginning of a spiritual revival for American**

**Jewry and a new deal for the disregarded and despised Russian Jew.**

**It was with great pride that the Jews of the lower East Side learned of the article on the Chief Rabbi's arrival which appeared in the New York Herald of July 8th. "The only such dignitary in this country," this important American newspaper called him, further disclosing that "he was till recently in charge of the largest synagogue in Wilna."**

**All seemed propitious for the Chief Rabbi when he assumed his office. However, this was not to be the case.**

**I was there as vice-president of the synagogue [on the Shabbos when he delivered his first *drasha*]. Concerning his sermon, he did not succeed fully in moving his hearers here, even though in Vilna he had preached so eloquently to the congregation that he had brought tears to those who heard his voice speaking of ethics which flow from a pure heart. Of course, his language style used in his preaching was Lithuanian, without any order, and he mixed together a good bit of nonsense with a little subtle argumentation and points of Scripture. He hurt the ears of the intelligent listeners who were accustomed to preachers whose sermons were delivered clearly in pure English or German, and therefore they didn't think much of him. (Otzar Zikhronotai, by Judah David Eisenstein, 1929, page 60. A translation of Rabbi Eisenstein's recollections of Rabbi Jacob Joseph is available at <http://otzarzikhronotai.blogspot.com/2005/07/rabbi-jacob-joseph-1840-1902.html>)**

**This was merely the beginning of the woes that Rabbi Jacob Joseph was to experience in his role as Chief Rabbi of New York. There was trouble ahead for the new Chief Rabbi, real trouble.**

## **VII. The Chief Rabbi Encounters Opposition**

**However, from the outset the appointment of Rabbi Joseph by the *Association* [of American Orthodox Hebrew Congregations] created a furor among certain Jewish circles. Many Orthodox congregations who did not partake in the selection refused to**

recognize Rabbi Joseph's leadership. Reform Jewry, on the other hand, remained indifferent or hostile to the entire idea of a “chief rabbi.” Jacob Joseph's appointment was particularly resented by the Anglo-Jewish press, then dominated by German Jews. Thus, the New York correspondent of Isaac Mayor Wise's *American Israelite*, even before Rabbi Joseph's arrival in America, expressed bemusement that a man who spoke neither German nor English, and whose vernacular was an unintelligible jargon (Yiddish) had been chosen as a fitting representative of Orthodox Judaism to the world at large.

**Others questioned the entire concept of a Chief Rabbi.**

“What is the Chief Rabbi to do?” had already been asked in December, 1887, by the perceptive New York correspondent of the *American Israelite*, *Mi Yodea*. He stated that even those “most eager for the creation of this new office,” did not quite know what its functions were to be. To render ritual decisions he was not needed, nor were preachers a scarce commodity; and it seemed highly unlikely that the congregations would import a chief rabbi just to sit and study day and night.

“What do we need of an immigrant and prejudiced rabbi?” asked the Reform periodical *Jewish Tidings*. “He should go back to the land that gave him birth.”

In a later issue the argument was carried further:

“Rabbi Joseph is unfamiliar with the language of this country and is therefore unfitted to exercise authority or influence over American Jews. The Jews of this country do not need a Grand Rabbi and one from a foreign country; one who is reared among the prejudices and bigotries of the Eastern countries will certainly prove an obstacle to the people over whom he is expected to exercise control.”

## **VIII. Kashrus: Problems and Pitfalls**

A motivating factor in the minds of those who wanted a chief rabbi for New York was their feeling that such a person would be able to put a

stop to abuses in the kosher meat industry. The abuses in this area were apparent to many. Indeed, time and again the Jewish community of New York had witnessed squabbles between butchers, accusations and counter-accusations among the *shochtim*, as well as abuse to anyone who tried to impose a reasonable system of supervision.

The solution to this situation was really quite simple, namely, the institution of stringent standards of supervision in the kosher meat industry. Therefore, it did not take long for Rabbi Joseph, with the support of the Association of American Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, to take energetic steps to remedy this situation.

But the leaders of the Association saw in the supervision of kosher meat a source of income for the organization. They argued that proper supervision cost money, and those who benefited from it should pay for it. The Chief Rabbi, however, was opposed to any direct charge for the supervision of kashrut. He maintained that it was in the interest of the entire community that order and harmony exist in this industry and the costs of administering it be borne by the communal religious agency, the Association of American Orthodox Hebrew Congregations. But he had to surrender to the superior wisdom and experience of the “American business men” who had brought him to this country. He was able, however, to exact the compromise that the tax for supervision be placed not upon meat but upon poultry.

Every bird slaughtered in the kosher abattoirs was to be under the strict supervision of Rabbi Joseph's staff, and stamped accordingly with a special lead seal (*plumbe*). A tax of a penny was to be added to the selling price of each chicken. It was anticipated that this penny tax as well as the dues paid by each congregational member of the Association would be sufficient to cover the salaries of Rabbi Joseph and his *mashgichim*.

However, the Association completely misread the public's reaction to this additional expense. Instead of easing Rabbi Joseph's job, the *plumbe* became a weight which dragged the Chief Rabbi down to the depths of indignity. It eventually led to his downfall.

The penny tax was opposed by many: to Jewish housewives it smacked of price gouging; to Jewish radicals, and for most of the Yiddish press, it was reminiscent of the infamous hated levy imposed by the czarist Russian government on kosher meat. An equally bitter protest came from the ranks of the butchers and slaughterers who were convinced that the best inspection was the one that inspected the least.

In addition, some rabbis, threatened with the loss of their income from the abattoirs and butchers and resentful of the exalted state and salary conferred on the “chief rabbi,” joined in the agitation against [Rabbi] Joseph and the penny tax.

Opposition to the *Association* and to Rabbi Jacob Joseph also came from a number of Galician and Hungarian congregations who were unwilling to submit to an authority dominated by “Litwaks” (Lithuanian Jews). Instead, they decided to look for a “chief rabbi” of their own, and in 1892 settled on Rabbi Joshua Segal as their choice. What followed was a squalid competition between the two “chief rabbis,” and their partisans over the supervision of “kashrut.” In 1893 still another rabbi entered the fray. His name was Hayim Vidrowitz of Moscow. He managed to gather to his side a few followers from a number of Hassidic “shtiblakh” (prayer rooms), and hung out a sign reading “Chief Rabbi in America.” Asked who had given him this title, Rabbi Vidrowitz replied, “The sign painter.”

Rabbi Joseph, despite a small and appreciative following, could not overcome the centrifugal forces in the New York Jewish community. Reduced to shame and parody his influence gradually declined. The *Association* soon began to renege on payments of [Rabbi] Joseph's salary, and for all practical purposes became a mere paper organization.

## IX. The Chief Rabbi's Funeral

A contemporary wrote, “The Rabbi was left without any income and is in dire straits, and there is nothing that can be done with him now. He and his whole family are in very serious difficulties.” Reduced to abject poverty, Rabbi Joseph was forced to move his family to a squalid Lower East Side tenement flat.

**To Rabbi Joseph's financial distress was added physical illness. He was confined to his bed, an invalid the rest of his life. The community that had once hailed him now completely neglected him. Forgotten was all he had done to elevate the position of the East European Jew and to establish dignity and integrity in the religious institutions which served him. All but forgotten, he lay on his bed of pain, remembering what had been and musing no doubt on what could have been.**

**At the end of July, 1902, the Chief Rabbi once again became the topic of discussion. On the 28th of the month he breathed his last, and headlines announced his demise the next day. He died at 62, after a five year confinement to his bed because of paralysis.**

**Word of the Rabbi's death spread rapidly throughout the Lower East Side, and the very people who ignored him while he lived felt obligated to honor him in death. There was an unprecedented outpouring of grief from all segments of the Jewish community. A funeral procession through the streets of the Lower East Side was planned, with stops at the main Orthodox synagogues, where the Chief Rabbi was to be memorialized.**

**It soon became clear that thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands of mourners planned to participate. Recognizing both the probable enormity of the crowd and the legal requirement to procure a permit for such an event, one of the organizers [of the funeral] called upon the local police. After receiving permission for the march, he informed the police official on duty that as many as 20,000 people might participate. He left assured that twenty-five policemen would be in place the next day and that more could be had if requested.**

**The morning of July 30, 1902 witnessed a huge funeral procession following the casket of the Chief Rabbi.**

**Behind it stretched a line of 200 carriages bearing family members, local officials, wealthy merchants, and dozens of prominent rabbis from around the country. Standing before**



them on both sides of the street stretched a crowd of 50,000 to 100,000 mourners.

Weeping, wailing, and the chanting of Psalms filled the air as the massive entourage made its way to each of the main Orthodox synagogues. The crowds struggled and occasionally surged as particularly zealous mourners sought to touch the casket, but remarkably no serious incident occurred. Two hours later, after recitation of the final prayers, the last leg of the march to the ferry at the end of Grand Street (the cemetery was in Brooklyn) commenced. Turning east on Grand Street, the procession soon came upon a massive brick factory that housed the famed printing press manufacturing firm of R. H. Hoe and Co.

There, unbelievably, a riot began! The chronology of the events that led to this riot is given below. The events are presented in stages.

*Stage One:* As the procession began to pass the Hoe factory, some workers who had climbed onto the roof or gone to upper-story windows to get a better view of the procession, started throwing a variety of items including food, water, oily rags, and pieces of wood and metal at the mourners.

*Stage Two:* The mourners were outraged at such disrespect for so solemn an occasion. Some of them began throwing the missiles back at those who had tossed them; others burst into the factory in an effort to stop the assault.

*Stage Three:* The first floor office workers were unaware at what was transpiring outside. Therefore, when the irate mourners, many of them screaming in Yiddish, burst into the first floor of the factory, they panicked. The police were called. In addition, in an attempt to “protect” themselves from what appeared to be an unruly mob, they turned on the fire hose and doused the “invaders.” Some anti-Semitic remarks were shouted at the mourners, who were quickly expelled from the factory building.

*Stage Four:* Meanwhile, out in the street, a general melee ensued. The fire hose was aimed indiscriminately at those outside the building, whether they had been in the building or not. The

mourners responded by hurling bricks, rocks and other items at the Hoe Building. Most of the building's windows were shattered. However, this situation did not persist for very long. Indeed, the scene outside the factory began to calm down by the time the head of the funeral procession began boarding the ferry to Brooklyn, located a half mile past the factory.

*Stage Five:* “A few minutes later, at 1:20 p.m., a squad of 200 policemen, summoned at the outbreak of hostilities by the Hoe employees, arrived on the scene under the leadership of Inspector Adam A. Cross. ‘Without a word of warning or any request to disburse,’ stated the report on the incident commissioned by the mayor, the police ‘rushed upon the remnant of the gathering, some of them with great roughness of language and violence of manner.’”

In the end hundreds of people were injured, primarily by the clubs and fists of the policemen. Eleven Jews were arrested. Nine were fined between five and ten dollars each and then released. The other two were held for \$1000 bail for inciting a riot. Eventually, four employees of the Hoe Company were also arrested.

The entire Jewish community of New York was outraged by what had happened. Charges of anti-Semitism were leveled at the workers of the Hoe Company as well as at the police. In addition, the police were accused of treating as criminals people whose only “crime” was that they had peacefully participated in the Chief Rabbi’s funeral procession.

Protest meetings were organized demanding that Mayor Seth Low, who had been elected a year earlier on a pledge to reform the police department, form an investigative committee to look into this incident. Such a committee, consisting of notable reformers, including two prominent Jews, was indeed formed. It took testimony from many witnesses and issued a comprehensive report. This report condemned the brutal actions of the police in no uncertain terms. The police commissioner, Colonel Partridge, eventually resigned. Two officers who had been in charge of the police when the riot occurred also resigned, and a number of others were transferred to precincts that did not include the Lower East Side.

**The tragic story of Rabbi Jacob Joseph's tenure as Chief Rabbi of New York had concluded with an infamous anti-Semitic incident at his funeral. It marked the end of the attempt to establish a central rabbinical authority over New York's Jewish community.**