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## AMERICA'S FIRST NATIVE-BORN, UNIVERSITY-EDUCATED ORTHODOX RABBI

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*Please note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from "Henry W. Schneeberger: His Role in American Judaism" by Israel M. Goldman, American Jewish Historical Society Journal, Sept. 1967-June 1968, Volume 57, issues 1-4, pages 152-191, available online at [www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm](http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm)*

Rabbi Pinchas M. Teitz, who eventually became rav of Elizabeth, New Jersey, visited America from 1933-1935. While here, he made a presentation at a convention of the Agudas Harabbonim of America. He stated that based on what he had seen during his tour of America, it was imperative that Orthodox rabbis learn to speak English in order to communicate effectively with the younger generation.

Some members of the organization, irate at his suggestion that clinging to Yiddish was a mistake, had the Agudas Harabbonim secretary send him a letter returning his membership and berating him for presuming to give this advice to older rabbis.

In hindsight we can see how right Rav Teitz was. Many fine *rabbonim* who came to America from Europe were at a decided disadvantage because they could not communicate effectively with native-born American Jews who did not speak and understand Yiddish. Further, since most of these *rabbonim* were not well educated in secular terms, they were not properly appreciated by a younger generation that was often too eager to appear fully Americanized.

One exception was Rabbi Dr. Henry W. (Pinchas HaLevi) Schneeberger.

Henry Schneeberger was born on August 29, 1848. His parents, Sigmund and Regina (Cohen) had been married in Hanover, Germany, in 1846 and immigrated to America that year. Young Henry received his early secular education while attending public school.

"Then he went to the Columbia Preparatory School and finally to Columbia College where he earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1866 at the early age of eighteen, and his Master of Arts degree in the following year. Along with his secular studies, he engaged in programs of Jewish studies in Mishna and Talmud under two private tutors."

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During his teens he showed an interest in rabbinics. "At the early age of seventeen, while still a student at Columbia College, he was invited to deliver his first sermon on the seventh day of Passover on April 26, 1865, at the synagogue of the Congregation Rodeph Shalom on Clinton Street in New York."

The congregation was so pleased with his sermon that it passed a congratulatory resolution which said, "It is indeed a pleasure to state that everyone present listened to him most approvingly. Further, we can state, with much satisfaction, that from childhood on up to the present day he led an exemplary

life, both morally and from the religious point of view."

At this time there was no institution in America at which Henry could pursue rabbinical studies. Therefore, in 1867, shortly after his graduation from Columbia College, Henry left for Europe. He went to Mainz (Mayence) in Germany to study with Rabbi Samuel Bondi (1794-1877), a scholar of considerable repute, to whom he was related. Rabbi Bondi was descended from the famous Frankel-Teomim, Oppenheimer and Katzenellenbogen families.

After spending some time studying with Rabbi Bondi, Henry continued his studies with Rabbi Bondi's son-in-law, Rabbi Dr. Marcus Lehmann (1831-1890), the well-known 19th century writer and the rabbi of Mainz.

"After nearly two years of study in Mayence, Henry Schneeberger was advised by Dr. Lehmann to continue his studies under the most famous Jewish scholar in Western Europe at

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that time, Dr. Israel [Azriel] Hildesheimer (1820-1899), who had also been the teacher of Dr. Lehmann. He was at that time the Rabbi of Eisenstadt in Hungary and had established a rabbinical school there. In addition to his vast Jewish learning he was a university graduate and very erudite in many fields modern culture."

Henry was the only American in Rav Hildesheimer's yeshiva.

#### Under Rabbi Dr. Hildesheimer's Tutelage

"The ideology and the personality of Dr. Hildesheimer captured the heart and mind of his devoted disciple and left its permanent stamp on the kind of Judaism which Dr. Schneeberger was to espouse for the rest of his life."

In 1869 Rav Hildesheimer moved to Berlin to serve the Jewish community there. It was in Berlin in 1873 that he established his world famous *Rabbiner-Seminar*. The Hildesheimer Seminary was the only institution under Orthodox auspices where students were required to have a significant secular education before being admitted. Further, it was expected that they would also continue their general education at the university level.

Another unusual feature of the seminary's curriculum was that time was set aside for studying Tanach and the Hebrew language.

About 20 students accompanied Rav Hildesheimer when he relocated to Berlin. Henry was one of them. While studying at the seminary, Henry earned a doctorate from the University of Jena in 1870. His dissertation was entitled "The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehuda HaNasi."

There were two unusual things about his thesis. First, it was written in English rather than German, the language of European academia at that time. Second, he had the boldness to disagree with and sharply criticize the writings of some of the foremost contemporary Jewish scholars. He wrote the following about Heinrich Graetz, at the time considered by the academic world to be the greatest living Jewish historian:

Mr. Graetz, however, with his accustomed superficiality in examining the sources, has the unfortunate habit of applying his paltry scale to all the true eminent characters of Judaism and in judging them by it; he has not left one person in his whole historical work without deforming and disfiguring it. Our hero partakes of this fate.

On February 22, 1871 Dr. Schneeberger received his formal rabbinical ordination from Dr. Hildesheimer. In the document of ordination Dr. Hildesheimer testified to Henry's high moral character and to his devotion to Judaism. He also wrote, "He is worthy to be crowned with the crown of *Morenu Horav* [Our Teacher, the Rabbi]."

#### Return to America

"Thus equipped with the rabbinic title and with the university degree, he lost no time and hurried home to try out for a rabbinical post. Only three weeks after his ordination in Berlin, he preached at the synagogue where he had delivered his very first sermon, at the Rodeph Shalom Synagogue on Clinton Street in New York City."

In 1873 Rabbi Schneeberger became the rabbi of Congregation Poel Zedek in New York City. However, "Dr. Schneeberger's ministry in New York City was but a brief prelude to his long and distinguished rabbinate in Baltimore. In the Spring of 1876, the Chizuk Amuno Congregation, which had been organized five years previously, was nearing the completion of its new synagogue on Lloyd and Lombard Streets. This congregation which heretofore had not yet had a rabbi decided to engage one with the opening of its new house of worship."

Rabbi Schneeberger was invited to officiate at the new synagogue's dedication. He so impressed the members of the congregation that on August 30, 1876, he was sent a letter inviting him to become the first rabbi of Chizuk Amuno. On September 14, 1876, Rabbi Schneeberger delivered his first sermon as rabbi of the congregation, ushering in what was to be a forty-year association with the shul.

#### Rabbinic Career

Rabbi Schneeberger was involved in a myriad of activities during his career at Congregation Chizuk Amuno. His contract required him to give sermons each week - in English and German alternately. He was also required to open a school and give daily instruction to the congregation's children.

When it came to education, Rabbi Schneeberger was quite forward thinking. He wanted Judaic studies given in Hebrew or English. However, some of his *baalei batim* wanted twice-weekly German instruction, because this was the first language of many members. Rabbi Schneeberger disagreed vehemently, and German language instruction was postponed until 1878. Ironically, interest in German soon waned, and in 1886 instruction in this language was dropped as a religious school requirement. It was totally abandoned two years later.

He was much in demand by other synagogues as an occasional speaker. Indeed, shortly after he became the rabbi of Chizuk Amuno, Shearith Israel, another German Orthodox shul in Baltimore, sent a letter to the officers of Chizuk Amuno asking if Rabbi Schneeberger could speak at their shul from time to time.

Many other synagogues were also interested in having him speak at their functions. Over the years he consecrated synagogues in Baltimore and other communities along the Atlantic seaboard. For example, he spoke at the dedication of Shearith Israel's first synagogue building in 1879. Twenty-five years later he was the featured speaker when Shearith Israel dedicated a new building. He also spoke at the dedications of synagogues in Washington, D.C. (1878), York, Pennsylvania (1903), Lynchburg, Virginia (1903), and the Shomrei Mishmeres Synagogue of Baltimore in 1905.

Rabbi Schneeberger soon became involved in the charitable and philanthropic work of the Jewish community. In those years the Hebrew Hospital and Asylum Association of Baltimore City used to hold an annual Sukkot festival. As early as 1889, Rabbi Schneeberger delivered

the oration at this program.

Beginning in the early 1880's, and continuing for more than two decades, Rabbi Schneeberger was deeply involved with the welfare of Russian Jewish immigrants who began to come in ever larger numbers as a result of Czarist persecution. On June 19, 1884, he was one of four signers to a letter addressed to Sir Moses Montefiore, thanking him for his aid to the Russian Jews who had found a refuge in Baltimore.

The letter advised Montefiore that the Russian Jewish immigrants had established a school in honor of their benefactor. Rabbi Schneeberger was one of the teachers in this school, instructing the immigrants in the daytime and also at night. He also became their mentor, advising them to become good American citizens and cautioning against the radicalism of some in their midst.

#### Jewish Theological Seminary

Manhattan's Jewish Theological Seminary was originally founded as an Orthodox institution. While some 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 May 9, 1886, uncompromisingly adhered to the tenets of Orthodox Judaism. (See *The Unfailing Light*, by Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman, Rabbinical Council of America, New York, 1948, page 181.)

Indeed, in 1902 and later in 1926 there were efforts to merge JTS with Yeshiva Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon (RIETS). (See *Bernard Revel*, by Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, Feldheim Publishers, second edition, 2000, pages 102-114.) Consideration of such a merger would have been impossible unless both institutions shared essentially the same (Orthodox) religious principles.

Rabbi Schneeberger, one of the founders of JTS, played a key role in raising funds for its establishment. He invited Dr. Sabato Morais, the first president of JTS, to Baltimore and arranged for him to speak on behalf of the seminary.

#### The Orthodox Union

Rabbi Schneeberger was in the forefront of the battle to combat the Reform movement. He and other leaders of JTS thought this could best be done by uniting the religious forces of Eastern and Western European Jewry in the U.S. As a result, they formed the Orthodox Jewish Congregational Union of America which later became known as the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations. Rabbi Schneeberger was one of the original trustees of this organization and attended its first and second conventions in 1898 and in 1900, respectively.

#### Scholarship

As the first American-born, university-trained, Orthodox-ordained rabbi, it was only natural that Rabbi Schneeberger would be asked to participate in the Jewish Publication Society's project to produce a new English translation of the Bible. In 1895 he was informed by the editor-in-chief of the project that he had been assigned the task of translating the Book of Yechezkel. This was a formidable responsibility, given the difficulty of the text. Nonetheless, Rabbi Schneeberger submitted his final manuscript in 1903 and it was published as part of the JPS Bible translation.

#### Personal Life

On April 19, 1882, Rabbi Schneeberger married Sarah Nussbaum in New York City. The couple had six children - Fannie, Sigmund, Charles, Philip, Josephine, and Irvin. Sigmund, Charles, Fannie and Josephine never married and were buried in plots adjoining their parents.

"Rabbi Schneeberger continued to serve the Chizuk Amuno Congregation until his health began to fail. In 1912, he was made Rabbi Emeritus due to ill health. On November 2, 1916, he passed away [having served his congregation for 40 years]. The Baltimore newspapers that afternoon ran a photograph of Dr. Schneeberger with a caption above it saying, '*Grand Old Man' Dies after Long Illness, Beloved Rabbi Dead.*'"

Orthodoxy owes a considerable debt to men like Rabbi Dr. Henry W. (Pinchas HaLevi) Schneeberger, because they laid the foundations upon which today's vibrant *Yiddishkeit* is built. It is only proper that we express our *hakaras hatov* by remembering their lives and their accomplishments.

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