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FAILED EXPERIMENT: NEW YORK'S ONLY CHIEF RABBI

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Posted May 28 2008

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(It is widely known among Orthodox Jews that Rabbi Jacob Joseph [RJJ] served as chief rabbi of New York in the latter part of the 19th century. Many are aware that his experience in New York was quite tragic. There is, however, much more to the story of the life of this rav, including the occurrence during his funeral of one of the most serious anti-Semitic incidents in American history.)

In this essay, and in the next two installments of my monthly "Glimpses Into American Jewish History" feature, we shall deal with the life of Rabbi Joseph.)

Rabbi Jacob Juspha, better known as Rabbi Jacob Joseph, was born into a very poor family in Kroz, Lithuania in 1840. His father, who worked in a beer brewery, sacrificed no end to provide his son a Torah education. Young Yaakov was an exceptional Torah student and studied for a number of years in the famous Volozhin Yeshiva, 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).

While Rabbi Joseph did not perpetuate the Musar system of his Master, he considered himself his spiritual heir. At home, in Vilna, Rabbi Joseph, who more than anyone else tried to popularize Rabbi Israel Salanter's ideas among the people, was considered an authority on rabbinic law, a great preacher, and he lived up to the name he was given, Charif, (sharp, keen minded). Rabbi Joseph was the first of the young Rabbis to put into effect Rabbi Israel's theories. [*Israel Salanter, Religious-Ethical Thinker* by Menachem G. Glenn, Yashar Books, 2005]

Rav Joseph's first rabbinic post was in the town of Vilon (Veliuona) in the Kaunas district of Lithuania. He established a yeshiva there for a few select young men. The yeshiva stressed *bekius*; each student was required to select one tractate of Talmud during each *z'man* and was expected to know it virtually by heart.

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A dynamic man who, as was true with his teacher Rav Yisroel Salanter, found it difficult to remain in one place for a long time, Rav Joseph served in several rabbinical positions in Lithuania before accepting the post of "community preacher" of Vilna in 1883.

In a short time he became very popular, especially with the

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unlettered. His sermons, masterpieces of Musar were named Revues. The most wealthy and the most learned of Vilna, many of whom had their Ordination (Semichah), also flocked to hear these sermons. Since Vilna had no chief Rabbi [at this time], he became head of the Bais Din there. [Israel Salanter, *Religious-Ethical Thinker*]

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 became melancholic and would spend hours on the old Jewish cemetery in Vilna weeping. [Israel Salanter, *Religious-Ethical Thinker*]

* * *

In 1852, Beth HaMidrash HaGadol was organized as the first Russian-American Jewish congregation. It would remain the leading Eastern European congregation in New York City for four decades.

Although Abraham Joseph Ash served intermittently as its rabbi from 1860 on, there was dissatisfaction with him on the part of many of those who *davened* at the shul. Several reasons were given - he alternated between business and the rabbinate, he was inclined toward chassidism; etc. - and many of the more learned congregants, especially the *shochtim* and butchers, did not recognize his authority because they believed his scholarship was lacking.

It was widely felt that what New York really needed was a chief rabbi. At a meeting held in 1879 and attended by delegates from 32 New York City congregations, a decision was made to offer the position of chief rabbi of New York to the noted Talmud scholar and Bible commentator Rabbi Meir Leibish ben Yechiel Michel Weiser (1809-1879), known by the acronym Malbim.

The Malbim was famous for his battles against the Reform movement. He served communities in Russia, Poland, and Germany. In each of these communities the "enlighteners" informed against him on the grounds that he was an extremist and a "rebel against enlightenment" and he was forced to leave. In 1879 he was without a rabbinical position and therefore free to accept a call from a new community. At the time he was asked to be chief rabbi of New York, however, he was also offered the rabbinate of Kremenchug in Russia. He chose to accept the latter position rather than travel all the way to America.

The Malbim would never actually serve in Kremenchug as he passed away before he could assume the new position. His death led to the reappointment of Rabbi Ash as rav of Beth HaMidrash Hagadol, a turn of events that put an end to a search for a chief rabbi. Beth HaMidrash HaGadol was the leading congregation in New York City, and without its participation nothing of significance could be attempted. But the idea of appointing a chief rabbi of New York was not forgotten by Jewish leaders.

* * *

More than 50,000 Jews came to the United States from Eastern Europe between 1881 and 1885. Rabbinical leaders in Europe were made increasingly aware of the religious problems faced by these immigrants. In 1887 Rabbi Yaakov Halevi Lipschitz (1838-1931), the secretary to Rabbi Yitzchok Elchanan Spektor (1817-1896), known worldwide as the Kovno Rov, wrote:

For some years now, many leading rabbis who are greatly concerned with the welfare of their people and the Torah have turned their attention to their brethren in America. Since the material and spiritual lives of American Israel are so intertwined with our brethren here, in matters of aid and support, in matters of family purity, marriage, and divorce, which are officiated over by improper men, in matters of kashrut... [To deal with these problems] the leading rabbis held three conferences two years ago [1885] in Telsiai and in Ponevezh to seek ways and means of elevating Jewish religious life in America. ["New York Chooses a Chief

Rabbi" by Abraham J. Karp, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961) Sep 1954-Jun 1955, 44. Article available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>

Given this, it is not surprising that shortly after Rabbi Ash passed away in 1887, members of Beth HaMidrash Hagadol led a second 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 were 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. Neither candidate, however, 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.

* * *

(Unless otherwise indicated all quotes in this section are from "New York Chooses a Chief Rabbi" by Abraham J. Karp, cited above.)

On the eve of Sukkot, 1887, the Association dispatched a letter to Rabbi Jacob Joseph, communal preacher of Vilna, inviting him to become its Chief Rabbi. The leaders were disturbed by their [previous] lack of success and by the waning enthusiasm of the congregations. Their letter to Rabbi Jacob Joseph had an urgent, even desperate, tone. Are you ready to accept the position? If so, let us know immediately. We will then call a meeting to elect you and send you the contract. Rabbi Jacob Joseph did not keep them waiting. Within the month he informed them of his willingness to accept, stating that leading rabbis had urged this action. He suggested that his salary be such as would befit the office and permit its incumbent to live in comfort and dignity. He also demanded a six year contract. Seemingly as an afterthought he mentioned that he would need a substantial advance before he could leave Vilna.

The reason for Rav Joseph's requesting an advance was that his financial situation was precarious. The rabbi was deeply in debt and needed to pay off creditors before he could leave Europe.

At a meeting of the Association on December 7, 1887, Rav Joseph was elected chief rabbi with an annual salary of \$2,500, a munificent sum in those days, for an initial period of six years. He was also 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."

It took some time to raise the funds needed to cover the expenses of bringing Rav Joseph and his family to America and paying for rent and home furnishings. In addition, the Association drafted a constitution outlining the duties of the chief rabbi as well as his relationship with its congregational members.

The readers of the *Tageblatt* learned the good news on the morning of July 1, 1888. "Now It Is Certain," the headline proclaimed. The Chief Rabbi would arrive in ten days. Rabbi Jacob Joseph had boarded the ship *Aller* at Bremen, and was already on his way. Preparations to welcome the great man were begun. An apartment was rented and furnished. The press was alerted. The leader of the Association spent a busy week of frenzied activity. Among those preparing for the advent were the "Hebrew Retail Butcher Union" [sic]. An invitation was issued for "only those butchers who sell Kosher meat" to attend a meeting, Monday, July 2nd, at 125 Rivington Street. Matters pertaining to Judaism in general and "the Union and butchers in particular" were on the agenda.

On early Saturday morning, July 7th, the ship *Aller* 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 were amazed to see some ten thousand bearded Orthodox Jews waiting to greet Rabbi Joseph upon his arrival. Dramin Jones of Congregation Bais HaMidrash HaGadol headed the delegation that had come to greet Rav Joseph. He welcomed him with an offering of 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."

Rav Joseph was then introduced to the large crowd that had come to greet him. He responded with a brief address calling for unity and cooperation to carry out his work. He was then taken by carriage to a 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. The good feelings would not last long:

I was there as vice-president of the synagogue [on the *Shabbos* when Rav Joseph 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]

This was merely a hint of the woes Rabbi Jacob Joseph was to experience in his role as chief rabbi of New York.

(To be continued next week in Dr. Levine's monthly "Glimpses Into American Jewish History" feature, which appears the first week of each month.)

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New York's Only ASHKENAZI Chief Rabbi

Date 03:05, 05-29, 08

I think the title of your article, not mention the body of your article, should clarify that he was the Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi. Sephardim had their own "chief" rabbis during the turn of the 20th century.

New York's Only Chief Rabbi ??

Date 09:05, 05-29, 08

For almost 100 years now the Syrian Sephardic community has had a Chief Rabbi as well as the Turkish Community too. So I guess unless Sephardic Jews are not considered Jewish, There was and still is a Chief Rabbi here in Brooklyn, New York.

Solomon R. Betesh

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