

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 14_)

Rabbi Dr. Phillip (Hillel) Klein (1849 – 1926)

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Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotations are from **Orthodox Judaism In America, A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook** by Moshe D. Sherman, Greenwood Press, 1996, pages 117 – 119.

The overwhelming majority of rabbis who came to America in the latter part of the 19th Century and the early part of the 20th Century were Talmudic scholars who had little secular education. One exception was Rabbi Dr. Phillip (Hillel) Klein.

Dr. Klein, a native of Bratchka, Hungary, was born on May 20, 1849, and in his youth he studied with his learned father, Zev Zvi, who had studied in Pressburg under Rabbi Moshe Sofer. At an early age Rabbi Klein showed strong predilections for a rabbinic career. Indeed, at age 11 he was able to recite large portions of the Talmud by heart. “Prior to his bar mitzvah, Klein enrolled at the yeshiva of Pressburg where he remained for four years. While still in his teenage years, Klein traveled to Eisenstadt to continue his studies with the noted Talmudist and scholar Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer, who had opened an Orthodox rabbinical seminary in Eisenstadt. Immediately recognizing Klein's aptitude, Hildesheimer asked him to recite a daily Talmud class for the junior students of the Eisenstadt yeshiva.

“Eager to pursue the study of secular subjects, Klein remained in Eisenstadt for only two years, departing for Vienna where he enrolled at a local gymnasium and later at the University of Vienna. While studying at the university, Klein also lectured on the Talmud at a *beth hamidrash* synagogue of Rabbi Zalman Shpitzer. When Hildesheimer became communal rabbi of Berlin and established a rabbinical seminary in that city, at the invitation of his mentor, Klein agreed to join the newly formed Berlin school. In 1871, at the age of 21, Klein received rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Zvi Benjamin Auerbach of Halberstadt and two years later successfully completed a Ph.D. at the University of Berlin.

Dr. Klein was in Russia from 1874 to 1891. He served as a tutor to the son of a wealthy merchant family in Kiev, Ukraine for five years and then became the rabbi of Liebau, Kurland, in Latvia where he remained for ten years. “Shortly after accepting the position he married Julie, the daughter of Mendel Hirsch, granddaughter of the famed Rabbi Samson R. Hirsch.”

The increase in anti-Semitism in Czarist Russia led to the introduction of a regulation requiring all foreign born Jews to leave the Russian empire, and Rabbi Klein was therefore forced to immigrate to America. Upon arriving in New York in 1891, he accepted the position of spiritual leader of Congregation Ohab Zadek, a congregation consisting of mostly immigrants from

Hungary. The Chief Rabbi of New York, Rabbi Yaakov Joseph, played a key role in Dr. Klein being offered this position. He served Congregation Ohab Zadek until his passing in 1926. “Unlike most European rabbis in America, Klein was one of the few European-trained Orthodox rabbis who served a congregation of middle-class Jews in upper Manhattan whose membership was becoming increasingly acculturated to American life.” Also, unlike almost all other European rabbis then residing in America, Rabbi “Klein was not only a notable Talmud scholar but possessed formal training in secular wisdom. For that reason, Klein was regarded by many of his own European colleagues as a religious *maskil* as well as a Talmudist.”

Rabbi Klein delivered his sermons in such a high classical German that a group of his congregants had to repeatedly ask him to speak so he could be understood. Over time fewer of his congregants understood German, and therefore Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman, who spoke English fluently, was added by the synagogue as a colleague of Rabbi Klein’s. They alternated speaking on Shabbosim, with Rabbi Klein speaking in German one week and Rabbi Drachman in English the next.

“It was not in scholarship that Klein made his mark but rather as a distinguished communal leader. Klein's activities in Orthodox Jewish life in New York included kashruth supervision at several slaughterhouses as well as the Horowitz-Margareten Matzah Company. In 1896 he established the Agudath Shomrei Shabbat, a society that promoted the halakhic observance of Sabbath, and two years later he became one of the founders of the Orthodox Jewish Congregation Union (later Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, or UOJCA). Klein became one of the trustees of the UOJCA and remained dedicated to its work throughout his lifetime.

“As the graduates of the Jewish Theological Seminary began introducing modest innovations into the synagogue service, Klein emerged as a forceful polemicist against the developing Conservative movement. His combination of Talmud and general knowledge was certainly a consideration when the directors of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) in 1902 requested that Klein become president of the seminary. Though Klein eventually retired from the presidency of RIETS to make way for Rabbi Dr. Bernard Revel, he remained closely associated with the yeshiva, in particular as a member of the Agudath ha-Rabbonim committee granting ordination to RIETS students.

“A lifelong supporter of Zionism, Klein founded a rabbinic society of Zionists called the Knesset Zion ha-Metzuyenet. To counteract the Federation of Zionist Societies of Greater New York, which lacked a religious agenda, Klein established the Federation of Zionist Organizations in 1897. Later, he became a member of the United Zionist Societies (forerunner of the Federation of American Zionists). In addition, Klein served, for many years, as president of a charitable institution in Palestine, the Kolel Shomrei Hachomos.

“Klein's efforts on behalf of the Zionist movement and American Mizrachi in particular did not prevent him from becoming an active member and supporter of the non-Zionist Agudath Israel movement. Like many of the early supporters of the Agudath Israel organization, Klein encouraged Orthodox participation in the Synagogue Council of America when it was formed in 1926 during the last year of his life.

On March 21, 1926, Klein died at the age of 76 in New York City, survived by his wife, six sons, and two daughters. His wife, Julie, died two days later.”

The March 23, 1926 issue of the New York Times carried the following obituary.

SERVICES FOR DR. KLEIN

800 Rabbis Head Mourners at the Impressive Funeral.

A succession of funeral services was held yesterday for the Rev. Dr. Phillip Klein, for thirty-five years rabbi of the Congregation Ohab Zedek of 18 West 116th Street who died Sunday at his home, 137 West 119th Street. Owing to the serious illness of his widow, who had not been informed of his death, no service was held at the residence.

The first ceremony took place at the funeral chapel at 247 Lenox Avenue, where the crowd of mourners filled the street. Three hundred rabbis, headed by the Rev. M. Margulies and the Rev. Isaiah Levy took turns in carrying the coffin from the house to the Lenox Avenue address and from there to the synagogue on 116th Street and on later occasions during the funeral. From the synagogue the procession went to 313 East Tenth Street, headquarters of the Jerusalem charitable organization Jolel Shomre Hachomos, of which Dr. Klein was President. Before going to Washington Cemetery for the interment, a final service was held at the Norfolk Street Synagogue, where Dr. Klein performed his first duty in this country when the Ohab Zedek Congregation worshipped there.