

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 14_)

Rabbi Dr. Leo (Eliyahu) Jung (1892 – 1987)

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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 110 – 112.

Rabbi Jung was born in Ungarisch-Brod, Moravia on June 20, 1892. His father, Rabbi Meir Tzvi Jung, was a disciple of Rabbi Moshe Schick and a follower of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's *Torah im Derech Eretz* approach to Judaism. In 1890 Rabbi Meir, after having served as a rabbi in Mannheim, Germany, became the rabbi of Ungarisch-Brod where he also directed a yeshiva high school which taught both religious and secular subjects.

“As a young man, Jung studied at his father's yeshiva, continuing his Talmud education at Eperjes with the esteemed Rabbi N. B. Fischer and later at Galanta with Rabbi Yoseph Zvi Dushinsky. Jung subsequently moved to Berlin to study with Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman, the director of the Hildesheimer Rabbinerseminar, ultimately receiving rabbinic ordination from him in 1920. Jung received an additional ordination from Rabbi Mordechai Schwartz and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook while the latter was in London during World War I. After studying at several universities on the European continent and in England including Vienna, Berlin, Geissen, Marburg, Cambridge, and London, Jung earned the equivalent of a Ph.D. at the University of London.”

In 1920 Rabbi Jung immigrated to the United States and became the rabbi of Congregation Knesset Israel in Cleveland, Ohio. There he was a novel phenomenon, given that he was an English speaking Orthodox rabbi with a beard and a Ph.D. “While in Cleveland, he was instrumental in organizing a Jewish cultural organization called Sinai and an office to assist Sabbath observers in securing employment.

“Two years later, in 1922, Jung was invited to become rabbi of the Jewish Center, a modern Orthodox synagogue in Manhattan. Orthodox rabbis in New York at that time were largely found among the Eastern European Jews of the lower east side. Unlike many of his distinguished Eastern European colleagues, Jung had been inspired by German Orthodoxy's philosophy of *Torah im Derech Eretz*. With his combination of yeshiva and secular education, Jung was the ideal person to articulate Orthodox Judaism to a generation of upper west side, American-born men and women eager to accommodate Judaism with American culture and values. Jung's commitment to *Torah im Derech Eretz* animated his work, and for the next several decades he came to be regarded, not only by his congregants, as one of the leading rabbis of modern Orthodoxy in the United States.”

“Since Orthodoxy was not well represented in the Jewish-American publication world, Jung’s *Jewish Library Series* and his other works played an important role in creating books for and about Orthodox Judaism. The multi-volumed series helped promote traditional rabbinic biography and literature among the American public.

“In 1926, Rabbi Jung, as head of the editorial board of the Jewish Forum, recommended that all Jewish organizations have Sabbath observance as a fundamental purpose. The UOJCA instituted a Sabbath Committee, which included Rabbi Jung. The committee’s goal was to educate, to rally loyalty to the Sabbath, and facilitate employment opportunities for Sabbath observers. Rabbi Jung was vice president of the UOJCA, from 1926 to 1934. In 1926 Jung organized The Rabbinic Council of the UOJCA and was its president for the following eight years. The Rabbinic Council was to assume the rabbinic functions of the Union, including kashrut supervision; the "OU" became its organizational symbol and trademark. As vice president of the UOJCA and organizer of its Rabbinic Council, Jung and others began a crusade to fight the corrupt ‘kashrut jungle’ and replace it with a reliable system under the OU imprint.

“He built new mikvehs, ‘hygienically and aesthetically on the heights of Judaism.’ He was responsible for some fifteen aesthetic and modern mikvehs in America. He stated in *Rhythm of Life*, p. 44

I can remember a number of loathsome places... and I cannot criticize too sharply the carelessness, which made such conditions possible. Coupled with the inability of the rabbis to discuss this all important subject and with a lack of informed rebellion among women (who should have refused to get married before the community established decent mikvaoth) the situation prevailed which rendered such hostility on the part of the half informed and uninformed young women more intelligible.

Rabbi Jung was involved in raising standards by actively creating commissions to improve observance of most aspects of Jewish ritual life including circumcision, conversion, kashrus, Shabbos, burial, and mikveh.”¹

“Known as a generous person, Jung was involved in supporting many charitable causes. He raised funds for the Rabbonim Aid Society (which he founded), the Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish National Fund, and Poalei Agudath Israel. Jung was a founding trustee of the Jewish Braille Institute, chairman of the New York State Kosher Food Advisory Committee, and member of the Jewish Agency. During World War II, he worked with Rabbi Michel Weissmandel in trying to save victims of the Holocaust and in establishing a yeshiva school for refugees in New York. Following the war, he helped thousands of European Jews to obtain visas and resettle in America or Palestine.

“But most of Jung’s efforts were spent trying to build in America what he called ‘Torah-true Judaism.’ A zealous supporter of Jewish education, Jung worked for the benefit of the Rabbi Jacob Joseph Yeshiva in New York and was involved in establishing religious schools for Jewish women. He helped found the Beth Jacob school for girls in Crakow in the 1920s and for many years assisted the efforts of the Beth Jacob system in Europe and the United States. Jung also

developed a close relationship with the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, where he was appointed a professor of ethics in 1931. Jung remained identified with Yeshiva University throughout his life, an institute that most closely reflected his own religious philosophy.”

“In the 1950s his constant themes were reverence, righteousness and rachmanut, which he referred to as the three ‘R’s’ of *kedushah* (holiness). Reverence for God and man was essential to ensure righteousness or justice, which includes the assurance of our personal worth and of human dignity. Rabbi Jung advocated civil rights, avoiding nuclear disaster, and the fighting of the immorality of communism. His speeches from the 1950s are against segregation, against atomic energy, in favor of the United Nations wanting to bring world peace, racial and economic justice in America. His message is the message of mainline religion. Light will triumph over darkness, good over evil.”²

Like many of his Hungarian colleagues Rabbi Jung was originally a strong supporter of Agudath Israel and served for a few years as secretary to its executive board. However, in 1929 when he saw that the Agudah refused to cooperate with the Jewish Agency, he withdrew from the organization and supported the Mizrachi.

He had dealings with many types of people, running the gamut from great Eastern European Talmudists and Western Judaic scholars to American politicians and judges, lay leaders and famous women of the Jewish community. “Jung’s correspondence with these individuals reveals a man of enormous scope whose wide-ranging interests included not only American-Jewish concerns but the problems of world Jewry.” He was a prolific writer and published over 35 books and countless of essays. There is no question that he made an indelible mark on modern Orthodox Judaism in America.

Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung died on December 19, 1987 in New York at the age of 95. He was survived by his wife Irma nee Rothschild (who died in 1993) and four daughters.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Jung

² Ibid.