

A Renaissance Rabbi

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Note: This article is based on the book **Ish Yehudi** by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, Shearith Joseph Publications, 2008. **Ish Yehudi** is richly adorned with photographs and documents depicting personalities and places of historical significance in pre-holocaust Europe. Rabbi Carlebach served as Mashgiach and Rebbi at a number of Torah institutions beginning in 1954.

Introduction

The term Renaissance Man is used to describe a person who excels in a wide variety of subjects or fields. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's biography about his father, Rav Dr. Yoseph (Joseph) Tzvi Carlebach (1883 – 1942), Z"l, gives fascinating information about the life of a man who deserves to be described as a Renaissance Rabbi. In **IshYehudi** the reader learns about an extraordinary man who was the respected Rov of a number of prestigious communities in pre-World War II Germany, a towering Torah scholar, a foremost orator, a dynamic educator, a prolific writer, a mathematician who earned a PhD in mathematics and philosophy from Heidelberg University, an expert in astronomy, a scientist, a connoisseur of the arts and humanities, and so much more. When it came to acquiring knowledge, Rabbi Joseph Tzvi Carlebach was never satisfied.

Family Background and Education

Joseph Carlebach was born on January 30, 1883 in Luebeck, Germany, where his father, Dr. Salomon Carlebach, served as Rov from 1870 to 1919. Joseph's father was a Talmid Chochoam who was also an outstanding orator.

Joseph obtained his early Torah education at home from his father and from Rabbi Mordechai Gumpel, a disciple of Rabbi Jacob Ettlinger (1798 – 1871), the renowned Chief Rabbi of Altona and author of *Aruch Laner*, whom his father employed as a tutor for the Carlebach children.

At the age of 18 Joseph went to Berlin to study Torah at the Rabbinical Seminary founded by Rabbi Dr. Ezriel Hildesheimer. Simultaneously he attended the University of Berlin, where his studies focused on mathematics, physics, chemistry, and astronomy, as well as philosophy. While at the University of Berlin, Joseph came in close contact with the world-renowned physicist Max von Planck in whose laboratory he worked, as well as with the then well-known astronomer Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster, and with Wilhelm Dilthey, an accomplished historian, psychologist, sociologist and philosopher. In

addition, he somehow found time to be an instructor at the religious school of Adas Yisroel Congregation.

Despite his extensive secular studies, Joseph never failed to devote several hours each day to Torah study. The Jewish community of Berlin in those days was blessed with many unique men who left an indelible impression on young Joseph. Among them were such Torah luminaries as Rabbis David Tzvi Hoffman, Joseph Wohlgemuth, Jacob Barth and Ezra Munk.

Jerusalem

In March 1905, Joseph passed his state examination, graduating summa cum laude. He was now qualified for a high school teacher's diploma in mathematics and natural sciences.

Ephraim Cohn, principal of the Laemel Teachers' Seminary of Jerusalem, happened to be in Berlin when Joseph received his diploma. He had come to hire an instructor in mathematics and natural sciences for his institution, and an orthodox young man, with a diploma from Berlin University in these subjects, was exactly what he needed. He offered Joseph the position of instructor.

Joseph had some qualms about accepting the position, since Jerusalem at this time was embroiled in a battle regarding the teaching of secular subjects in Jewish schools. Indeed, a ban had been issued signed by many of the most prominent Jerusalem rabbonim forbidding anyone from teaching secular subjects in Jewish schools. Those who did risked being put in Cherem.

Joseph turned to his father for advice. After consulting with a number of Torah authorities, his father sent him a letter urging him to go. In addition, the faculty of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary unanimously encouraged him to accept this position. Thus, it was mathematics and science that brought Joseph in 1905 at the age of 22 to Jerusalem. The years he spent in the Holy Land were to shape his whole outlook and to give his world view a new horizon.

During his three-year stay in Jerusalem, Joseph was befriended by the Chief Rabbi, Rav Shmuel Salant ZT"l, who made Joseph not only welcome in his home, but also at his shiurim. "Reb Shmuel" left an indelible impression on Joseph. Interestingly enough, Reb Shmuel was one of the signers of the secular studies ban, but he apparently put this aside when it came to Joseph.

Joseph met a number of other distinguished rabbis, among them Rav Avraham Yitzchok Kook (1865 – 1935), who became the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine in 1921. While in Eretz Yisroel, he acquired a good working knowledge of both Hebrew and Yiddish.

The students at the Laemel School soon realized that their instructor was a man of unusual talents and methods. In addition to his dynamic classroom presentations, he would take his students for excursions in the environs of Jerusalem. They soon discovered that he knew the name of every star in the sky and of every plant and shrub on earth. He knew the hiding places of the animals and would show his students how they lived and fed. He would explain how the clouds were formed and even forecast the weather. When they came upon an historic site, he would dramatize the events that had occurred there. Furthermore, while walking he had the boys sing songs praising G-d for the beauty of this world and His abundance.

In 1908, when the time came for Joseph to return home to Germany, the most prominent rabbonim of Jerusalem expressed their deep appreciation for his blessed work with their youth. Indeed, Rav Salant tried to persuade him to marry while he was in Germany and then return to Eretz Yisroel.

Back in Berlin

Shortly after returning to Berlin, Joseph was engaged as an instructor for mathematics and the natural sciences at the prestigious (secular) Margareten High School for Girls. His being hired for this position was a testament to his qualifications in that no Jew had ever held such a post at the school, let alone an Orthodox Jew who would be absent from classes on Shabbosim and Jewish holidays.

At the same time he assumed his former position as a rebbe in the Adas Yisroel School and also attended the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary. However, this was not enough to fill the time of the industrious Joseph; so, from 1908 to 1910 he also worked on his doctoral dissertation. His thesis focused on the scientific and mathematical achievements of Rabbi Levi ben Gershon (1288 – 1344), known as the RALBAG or Gersonides.

In 1919 Joseph married Lotte Preuss, the oldest daughter of Dr. Yitzchok (Julius) Preuss. “Preuss was a physician of fine training and wide experience, a learned scholar in Hebrew literature as well as in medical and general history.”¹ Dr. Preuss’ **Biblical and Talmudical Medicine** was an encyclopedic work that reviewed every medical reference in Tanach, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud, the Medrash, and ancillary works.

During this period Joseph received Semicha from Rabbi Dr. David Hoffmann (1843 – 1921), Rector of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary and author of halachic responsa *Melamed Leho`il* as well as a number of commentaries refuting the Bible criticisms of some who questioned the veracity of the Torah.

Joseph was now known as “Rabbiner Doktor Yosef Carlebach.”

World War I – TIDE Schools in Lithuania

World War I began in 1914. Serving in the German army, Rav Carlebach was charged with organizing a secondary school system by the German Occupation Authority in Lithuania. After consultations with some of Lithuania's foremost Torah scholars and with their agreement, Rav Carlebach founded a high school based upon the principles of *Torah im Derech Eretz* [TIDE] that featured both Torah and secular studies in the curriculum.

The language of instruction in the Carlebach Gymnasium in Kovno (as this high school came to be known) was not Yiddish or German but Modern Hebrew. Within three years the separate boys and girls schools had a combined enrollment of almost 1000 students. Two other TIDE high schools were established in Telshe and Ponevezh within a short time.

TIDE elementary schools were also set up throughout Lithuania and were known as Yavneh schools. "The Yavneh system was the main Orthodox school system in the shortlived independent republic of Lithuania. In the milieu created by this modern state, the old-fashioned *cheder* became extinct."² (For more on these schools see this reference as well as Chapter 14 of **Ish Yehudi**.)

Rabbi and Innovative Educator

Rabbi Dr. Salomon Carlebach of Luebeck passed away suddenly in early 1919, and Rav Yosef was offered his father's position. He did not know what to do in light of the fact that many of the leading rabbis of Lithuania urged him to continue his work there. His mother pleaded with him to return to Luebeck, and her sudden passing not long after his father had died clinched his decision. He became the Rov of the city of his birth.

In order to raise the level of Torah study in his home town, Rav Yosef convinced Rabbi Shmuel Joseph Rabinow to settle in Luebeck. Rabbi Rabinow was an outstanding young *Talmid Chocham* who had studied at the famed Slabodka Yeshiva in Kovno. These two rabbonim laid the foundations for an advanced yeshiva in Luebeck that eventually attracted a number of outstanding students. Some years later when Rav Carlebach moved to Hamburg to become the city's Chief Rabbi, the yeshivah together with its Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Rabinow, also relocated there.

In 1922 Rav Yosef was offered the position of Director of Hamburg's Talmud Torah Real Gymnasium. This school had been started in 1805 by Rabbi Mendel Frankfurter (1742 -1823), a grandfather of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808 – 1888).

Here Rav Joseph's full talents as a forward thinking educator and administrator shone. Hebrew language and grammar were introduced as major subjects, as well as Hebrew literature, with special emphasis on the medieval poets and philosophers. New physics and chemistry laboratories were built. He himself gave a course in the history of the fine

arts to the students in the highest grade. He was also concerned with the physical fitness of his students and made participation in swimming and outdoor sports compulsory.

One of his boldest innovations was the one or two week excursion to distant parts of the country. Day outings had been part of the school curriculum in the past, but Rav Carlebach took this idea to new heights. On these trips students visited museums and historic sites and were introduced to the geological and biological characteristics of the countryside. Furthermore, each day started and ended with physical exercise. If there was a river nearby, the day began and ended with a swim.

His students enjoyed his classes to the extent that one former student related, “We used to turn the clock back ten or fifteen minutes so that his classes would last longer!”

Orator of Renown and Prolific Writer

In 1926 Rav Joseph Tzvi Carlebach became Chief Rabbi of Altona, one of Germany’s oldest and most venerated *kehillos*. It was here that his extraordinary oratorical powers became known to thousands. In fact, he soon acquired the reputation of being the foremost rabbinical orator in all of Germany.

Blessed with a strong, clear voice which he used to advantage, he also incorporated his many artistic talents into his delivery. His perfect and fluent usage of words was enhanced by his style of delivery which used appropriate arm, hand, and body movements coupled with relevant facial expressions. However, he never misused his talents for cheap or demagogic oratory, nor did he ever give an interpretation of a biblical or Talmudic text that was either forced or artificial. He had the rare ability to speak in a manner that enlightened both learned scholars and ordinary congregants. His sermons were always a stirring experience for those who heard them, and his remarks were often the main topic of conversation on Shabbos afternoons.

Rav Carlebach also somehow found the time to publish hundreds of scholarly articles on a myriad of subjects from rabbinics to mathematics, the humanities and the arts.

Chief Rabbi of Hamburg and Last Days

On April 4, 1936 Rav Carlebach became chief rabbi of the Synagoge-Verband (Synagogue Association), in the Bornplatz Synagogue. Fourteen other rabbis, more than two hundred guests of honour, and 1,500 other guests attended his installation ceremony.

Despite the growing threats to Jewish life from the Nazis, Rav Carlebach refused to abandon his flock even though he had several opportunities to do so. A contemporary of Dr. Carlebach described his role as Chief-Rabbi of Hamburg as follows:

His sermons were masterpieces of diplomacy and wisdom in the face of the increasing focus of the Gestapo. The Gestapo had frequently attended the synagogue over the years. Those who were attentive enough heard with

admiration, and also often with fear, how he castigated the current situation, without provoking intervention by the Gestapo. His natural warmth and feeling of responsibility led him to give advice, support, and often to alleviate personal troubles. He never left his interlocutor feeling ignored or angry. His comforting words were calming.

When numerous community members were arrested in connection with the Pogrom Night of 9/10 November 1938, he asked to share their fate. The Gestapo refused as there was no order to arrest him.

The years 1936 to his deportation to Riga on December 6, 1941 became legendary. The Nazi persecution of the Jews made the Jewish community into one large family, with Dr. Joseph Carlebach as its “pater familias”. He was its courageous spokesman and its tireless religious leader: he visited civil service departments, prisons, concentration camps, and hospitals, always in danger of being insulted and thrown out, but never lost the least of his dignity. His boundless patience earned him respect from Nazi functionaries.”³

On March 26, 1942 Rav Carlebach, his dear wife Lotte, and their three youngest daughters were murdered by the Nazis, ending the life of a brilliant man who possessed so many, many talents. May his memory long be remembered!

(His older children had been part of a Kinder Transport to England before the family’s deportation. His youngest son, Rav Shlomo, the author of **Ish Yehudi**, survived after spending four years in various concentration camps.)

¹ **Julius Preuss** by Dr. Fred Rosner, **Medical History**, October 1975 19(4), pages 376–388. Available at <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=1081665>

² **Ish Yehudi: The Life and Legacy of Rav Joseph Tzvi Carlebach**, A Review Article by Rabbi Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer, **The Jewish Observer**, December 2008, 40 (9) pages 33 -38

³ <http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/rz3a035//1joseph.html>