

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 53)

Rabbi Simon Joshua Glazer (1878 – 1938) II

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Introduction

The first part of the life of Rabbi Simon Joshua Glazer was sketched in the last Glimpses Into American Jewish History column. In his youth Rabbi Glazer received a first class Torah education. At the age of 18 he was ordained by Rabbi Alexander Moshe Lapidus (1819 – 1906), a lifetime friend of Rav Yisroel Salanter. In 1897 Rabbi Glazer immigrated to America where he devoted himself to mastering the English language and acquiring secular knowledge.

After four years of study he possessed an unusual combination of skills for his time, namely, he was an Orthodox rabbi who was at home both in the Torah and secular world. “He was able to appeal to a wide range of people. He became an outspoken proponent of the use of English in sermons, and criticized Eastern European rabbis who did not learn this skill.”¹

His first rabbinical position was in Des Moines, Iowa, starting in 1902, just after his marriage. By 1904, he had published his first book, a history of the Jews of Iowa.² One must consider that this book, whatever its deficiencies, was the product of a man who had been in America for less than a decade. [See Rabbi Simon Joshua Glazer (1878 – 1938) I for information about this publication.] Moreover, he also began editing an English-language Jewish newspaper in Iowa, the *Jewish Herald*.³

Toledo, Ohio

In 1905 Rabbi Glazer became a Rov in Toledo, Ohio, where he edited the Anglo-Jewish newspaper *The Jewish Compromiser*. In 1907 he published in English *The Sabbath School Guide*, a textbook designed for use in Jewish Sunday schools. While Rabbi Glazer certainly felt that a once-a-week Jewish education was not at all ideal, he realized that this was the only religious education that many Jewish children received. Until the appearance of his book, most Sunday religious schools used books prepared by reform rabbis. Rav Glazer felt he should provide an alternative that presented Judaism from the standpoint of Orthodoxy.

Montreal, Quebec Canada

In the year 1907 we again find Rabbi Glazer and his family relocating, this time to Montreal. There he became the rabbi of the United Synagogues, a consortium of some of the city's congregations.

While in Montreal from 1907 to 1918, Glazer worked to improve Jewish education, assisted in the establishment of a federation of Jewish charities and helped in the formation of the YMHA. Glazer also proved to be an adept negotiator. In a dispute between clothing workers and their employees, most of whom were Jewish, Glazer was asked by Canada's Labour Minister and the president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union to mediate the discord. Glazer's mediation met with considerable success.⁴

Rabbi Glazer was an activist in the area of labour relations. He was, apparently, a supporter of the organization of the Jewish Butcher's Employees Association of Montreal in 1909 and instrumental in getting this association recognized by other Jewish labour organizations. He also intervened in other labour disputes involving Jewish workers, in one of which he incurred the wrath of one of the manufacturers for having denounced him in a sermon.⁵

Rabbi Glazer lectured widely outside of Montreal, including in his journeys Ottawa and Toronto. He spoke publicly in English as well as in Yiddish. Thus in 1911, to celebrate the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary, a special thanksgiving service was held in the Chevra Kadisha synagogue in which Rabbi Glazer was advertised as speaking in English.

Rabbi Glazer was interested in looking beyond the immediate controversies within the Montreal Jewish community in which he was constantly engaged. He had begun an attempt to chart the future of North American Jewry and to influence what American Orthodox Judaism was going to look like. To this end, he wrote a very interesting book during his years in Montreal, publishing it in 1917. Its title was **The Guide of Judaism**. The Hebrew subtitle, much to the same effect, was Moreh ha-Yahadut.

Glazer designed the book to be a systematic work for the study and instruction of Judaism in its entirety. It takes its general structure from Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, which was designed as an all-inclusive work on Judaism. Rabbi Glazer's guide to Judaism is completed in approximately 180 pages. From his preface, it is possible to understand not merely that he wrote in English, but also the high level of his English writing. He stated:

... the *vis vitae* of Judaism in the New World, its renaissance and its progress is possible only in this generation of patriotism and consciousness of self. The bricks of the great edifice of European Jewishness are being carried over the Atlantic. One Jewish center was

always built upon the ruins of another. Such is our history and its philosophy.

The problems confronting Israel today are: How shall, or rather, how can Judaism be perpetuated in the face of Western civilization? Is Judaism really in danger because of its Oriental origin?

Eliminating Reform as a factor in solving these problems, the question arises: What alternative have the spiritual leaders in Israel to offer to the growing generation which is both free and cultured?

Judaism, since the last quarter of the eighteenth century, continued to develop among the great masses of European Jewries along three distinct lines: the Mendelsohnian School, the Israel Baal-Shem School, and the Elijah Gaon School. Frankfurt, Warsaw and Wilna fairly illustrate the characteristics of the intentions of those schools. Will it be possible, or, facing conditions as they are, is it desirable to perpetuate the divisions and create a Hassidic Chicago, an Ashkenazic Philadelphia, or a Pilpulistic New York?

By means of observation during two decades among various types of communities, and alongside Reform colleagues and radical agitators, it is my firm conviction that the problems of Judaism in the New World can, and will be solved by only one means — by means of EDUCATION.

And, as an *avant propos*, I dedicate this work to American Israel, to the growing and grown generation.

Gazer was thus a man who did not merely know English (and at least a smattering of Latin and French); he was also able to write a powerful essay, which expressed some very interesting ideas, and, indeed, a unique vision of Judaism's future in North America.⁶

Rabbi Glazer left Montreal in 1917 for a pulpit in Seattle, Washington. In 1920 he became the chief rabbi of eight Orthodox congregations in Kansas City, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri. In 1923 he came to New York, where he served as the rabbi of several congregations in Manhattan and Brooklyn. We will discuss his activities in these locations in our next article.

¹ **The American Rabbinic Career of Rabbi Gavriel Zev Margolis** by Joshua Hoffman, Masters Thesis, Bernard Revel Graduate School, Yeshiva University, July, 1992, page 92 (unpublished).

² This book may be downloaded at no cost from http://books.google.com/books/pdf/The_Jews_of_Iowa.pdf?id=cqMdAAAAMAAJ&output=pdf&sig=TdyAxmAQKIMz61a4QcUQmnU-qxU

³ **Rabbis and their Community: Studies in the Eastern European Orthodox Rabbinat in Montreal, 1896-1930** by Ira Robinson, University of Calgary Press, 2007, page 37.

⁴ **Orthodox Judaism in America, a Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook**, by Moshe D. Sherman, Greenwood Press, 1966, page 76.

⁵ **Rabbis and their Community**, page 44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pages 48 – 49.