

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part ---)

Rabbi Dr. Bernard (Yissachar Dov) Illowy (1814 – 1871) (Part I)

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

Introduction

In 1840 Rabbi Abraham Rice was the first Orthodox rabbi to settle permanently in America. Thus from 1654, when Jews first settled in America, until 1840 American Jewry was without qualified Orthodox rabbinic leadership. Fortunately, Rabbi Rice's arrival in the United States marked the beginning of the slow but steady arrival of other Orthodox rabbonim. One of the most qualified of these was Rabbi Dr. Bernard Illowy.

His Life in Europe

“Rabbi Bernard Illowy, Ph.D., was born in Kolin, Bohemia, in the year 1814. He came of a family distinguished for its Talmudic learning and its piety. The great-grandfather, the first of the name of whom we have any record, was Rabbi Phineas Illowy, who resided in Ungarisch-Brod, province of Moravia, Austrian Empire. In the collection of Responsa of the great Rabbi Meir of Eisenstadt, the *מאירות פנים*, there is found a *שאלה* from him in the matter of an Agunah and a reply thereto addressed to him. At that time, as appears from his signature, he was Haus-Rebbe or private chaplain to the banker Emmanuel Oppenheim, the son of Samuel Oppenheim, Court Jew, and in his day the foremost and most influential Israelite in the whole Austrian empire.

“His son, Rabbi Jacob Illowy, was called from Moravia to the Rabbinate of the City of Kolin and the district of Maurszim, the second largest congregation in the kingdom of Bohemia. As was the custom then, the occupant of the rabbinical chair also became, by virtue of his office, the presiding officer of the Beth-Din, the Resh-Mesivta. Rabbi Jacob was a great scholar, profoundly versed in the learning of the Rabbis; he conducted a Yeshivah and wrote voluminously elucidations, explanations and novellae to the Talmud, all of which are as yet in manuscript.

“The father of Rabbi Bernard (Rabbi Jacob Judah) was, as had been his fathers before him, a man well grounded in the Torah, a thorough Talmudic scholar, and, moreover, was possessed of much secular learning. Though only a private individual--he had been in trade in his younger years--he was one of the most distinguished members of the Jewish community, and such was the regard entertained for his character and his learning by his coreligionists, that, when he walked through the streets of the Jewish quarter, the people would rise and remain standing until he had passed. Although not professionally a teacher,

he always had a number of pupils,--*Bachurim*--young men whom he instructed not alone in Mishnah and Talmud (though this was the sole purpose of his having pupils) but also in some branches of secular learning, more especially mathematics and German.

“Bernard Illowy received his early education in Mishnah and Talmud from his father who had destined him to be a teacher in Israel, almost from his birth. He completed his theological studies in the famous rabbinical school of Rabbi Moses Sopher (the *Chasam Sofer*) in Pressburg, Hungary, from whom he received the *Hattarat Horaah*.”¹

“Following receipt of rabbinical ordination, Illowy enrolled at the University of Budapest where he completed a Ph.D. in languages and classics. Still unmarried and undecided about his professional goals, Illowy traveled to Padua, Italy, where the distinguished scholar Samuel David Luzzatto had come to teach the Bible, philosophy, and Jewish history at a newly formed rabbinical seminary, one of the first Orthodox rabbinical seminaries to combine secular and traditional Jewish learning, the Instituto Convitto Rabinico (later Collegio Rabbिनico Italiano). Disappointed with the program at the Padua seminary, Illowy left for Znaim (Znojmo), a medieval Moravian city where he accepted a position at a women's gymnasium teaching French and German and tutoring the son of a high-ranking official of the city. Since Jews were not welcome at Znaim and permanent residence was only granted with special permission, Illowy returned to his native Kolin and began teaching at a local gymnasium. Shortly thereafter he married Kathryn Schiff of Raudnitz, Bohemia.

“In 1849 Illowy applied for the position of District rabbi (*LandesRabbiner*) of the Hesse region in Germany. After traveling to Kassel several times for interviews and receiving the endorsement of the Jewish community, his election was vetoed by the Minister of Interior who did not approve of Illowy's support of the 1848 revolutions. The government apparently desired a rabbi with what they considered to be more conservative politics.”²

America

In about 1852 Rabbi Dr. Illowy immigrated to America. He was the first ordained Orthodox rabbi with a PhD to settle here. He had equipped himself with a wide array of important skills, since in addition to being an eminent Talmudist and scholar, “he was an accomplished linguist, and besides a thorough knowledge of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, spoke fluently German, English, French, and Italian. His command of Hebrew was remarkable, and some of his polemical letters written in that language were cited as models of elegance of Hebrew composition.”³

He settled in New York City where he taught and preached at Congregation Anshei Chesed, then New York's largest Orthodox congregation. During the High Holidays he officiated at Congregation Shaaray Zedek. He then left New York to accept a teaching position in the newly formed Hebrew school of Philadelphia's Congregation Rodeph Shalom. A year later he became the synagogue's rabbi. From 1854 to 1856 he served as rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation in St. Louis. He then accepted the position of

rabbi of Congregation Kenesseth Shalom in Syracuse, NY. In 1859 he became rabbi of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, also known as Congregation Nidchei Israel or the Lloyd Street Stadt Shule. During the spring of 1861 Rabbi Illoy left Baltimore to become the rabbi of Congregation Shaarei Chesed in New Orleans. He was offered this position because of his open support of the South's eventual secession from the Union. He remained in New Orleans throughout the Civil War and moved to Cincinnati where he served as rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, retiring in 1869 for health reasons.

Powerful Speaker

“He was a powerful and fascinating speaker and convincing preacher, and his ministrations were so successful that his synagogue on Sabbath and holidays was always crowded with worshipers, and many who had strayed away from the fold were brought back again. Many valuable gifts received by him attested the esteem in which he was held by his congregants. Many of his English sermons and addresses were published in both the denominational and the daily press.

“On the ordinary Sabbaths he usually preached for three quarters of an hour, and not infrequently an hour and even more. On the days when the prayers were longer than usual, [he spoke for] twenty minutes, or at most, half an hour. At no time was complaint made that he preached at too great length; on the contrary, he was not infrequently told that he had cut it too short. If, as occasionally happened, he preached a rather short sermon, his members would gather about him after the service and ask him if he were not feeling well.

“His fervor and his consistency carried conviction to others, and [he] brought back to Judaism many who had strayed far away.”⁴

To be continued.

¹ **Biography (of Rabbi Bernard Illoy by his son Dr. Henry Illoy)** <http://www.jewish-history.com/Illoy/biography.html>

² **Orthodox Judaism in America, A Biographical Dictionary and Sources Book**, Moshe D Sherman, Greenwood Press, 1996, page 101.

³ **Biography (of Rabbi Bernard Illoy)**

⁴ **Ibid.**