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DR. SIMEON ABRAHAMS: MORE THAN A FOOTNOTE

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There were Jews living during the nineteenth century who made substantial contributions to *Yiddishkeit* but who, unfortunately, are almost completely forgotten today. Their lives are at most a footnote in standard books dealing with American Jewish history. One such man was Dr. Simeon Abrahams, a pillar of the New York Jewish community during his relatively short life.

Simeon, the third child of Jacob and Catherine Eitlah (nee Dyer) Abrahams, was born in New York on January 12, 1810. Jacob served as the official *shochet* of the Spanish-Portuguese Congregation Shearith Israel from 1803 until 1813. Simeon, who remained a strictly observant Jew his entire life, continued his father's affiliation with Shearith Israel, serving as the synagogue's *baal tokeah* on Rosh Hashanah and as treasurer for a number of years. His interests also extended to the community at large. For example, in 1829 he became a volunteer fireman, serving in Phoenix Hose Company No. 22.

In his earlier years and almost up to mature manhood he was in trade, then having acquired an ample competency he retired from business and devoted himself to study. He went to Jerusalem [in the late 1840s] and remained there for a number of years engaged in the study of the Torah and, it was said, became so well versed therein that the title of Rabbi was bestowed upon him and ever after, when called to the reading of the law, he was titled Rabbi.¹

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While in Jerusalem Simeon also studied *mila* and had a scribe write a booklet for him entitled *Ze Sefer Haberit* which contained the halachos and procedures of ritual circumcision.

Simeon returned to New York, probably in 1848. His extensive Torah knowledge made him a rarity at a time when many Jewish men residing in America could barely read Hebrew. He was soon very much in demand as a *mohel*, becoming one of the most active *mohellim* in

New York during the 1860s.

In 1851 Abrahams enrolled in the University Medical College of New York and graduated two years later. Shortly thereafter he opened a medical practice. Dr. Abrahams also established a Jewish clinic where the poor could be treated at no cost. He did not forget his years of learning in *Eretz Yisrael* and was known to devote all his leisure time to Torah study.

Communal Activities

Dr. Abrahams was involved in a number of Jewish communal activities.

In 1841 several members of Shearith Israel started an adult school which they called "The Hebrew Literary and Religious Library Association." Classes were held in the reading and translation of Hebrew, and in the laws and customs of the Jews. Simeon Abrahams, Montgomery Moses, and Professor Nordheimer of New York University were on the staff. It is not known how long the school lasted.²

Intermarriage was becoming increasingly prevalent during the nineteenth century. There were those who felt one should overlook the fact that a Jewish man had a gentile wife and accord him the same synagogue honors as those who had not intermarried. Dr. Abrahams felt this was wrong, maintaining that the Jewish community should take a strong stand against intermarriage. He made his views clear in a letter he wrote that appeared in 1845 in the monthly Jewish publication *The Occident*:

. How ridiculous it is to see a man who has married a gentile wife, and has for her sake given up every thing which his religion demands of him, mount the reading-desk on our most solemn days, and participate in the religious services of the day; or to see a woman who openly says that she has married a gentile, boldly entering the place of worship, and placing herself in the front ranks among the true daughters of Israel, as though she had not violated the duties of her religion. It is a great fault in the trustees of congregations, that they do nothing to prevent these things; and that they in a manner encourage them, by selling seats in their places of worship to persons of this class, thus setting a baleful example for their own sons and daughters.

To countenance acts like these is not the way to put a stop to them; not to punish by setting on them a mark of public disapprobation, is to encourage them; and surely we do not set a good example to the rising generation, whom, we pretend, we are striving to rear by all means at our disposal to become proper representatives of Judaism, whilst we do nothing to prevent this increasing bane of our nation, since we allow a person who has in a measure voluntarily abandoned his religion, to remain a member of our societies and congregations.

Among us the object of punishment is not so much the disgrace of the guilty as the deterring of the yet innocent from the committal of wrongs; and I therefore hold it requisite, in order to infuse a wholesome fear in the minds of the young, not to permit any of those who have married out of the congregation, be they men or women, to have any part or share with us in the religious rites or services of our ancient and holy religion; they have voluntarily withdrawn themselves from us, there let them remain, it is an act of their own, done without any necessity, and our very existence as Jews demands of us, as such, that they should not be permitted to re-enter, or to have extended to them, any of the rites or privileges of our religion; they should not be permitted to purchase or hire a seat in the Synagogues; the men should not be allowed to be called to the reading of the law, nor to be reckoned to make *Minyan*, nor in any way to be countenanced or regarded as Jews.

This may be considered severe punishment, but desperate diseases require desperate remedies. But however unpleasant it may be for a person to be compelled to refuse another those offices or services, by allowing the transgressors to retain their former rights in congregations and societies, the name of Jew, in this country especially, will, I fear, soon be a matter of history, but not of reality.³

Dr. Abrahams also took great interest in the activities of New York Jewry on behalf of their brethren in the Holy Land and was an active member of the *Hebrah Terumat Hakodesh*, a society that raised money to assist Jews in *Eretz Yisrael*. He also mounted opposition to the use in New York City public schools of books that advocated Christian doctrines. In *The Occident* he expressed his concern for the *kashrus* of oil used in cooking. In his opinion it was definitely possible that lard oil was being mixed with other oils, and hence Jews needed to be assured that the oil they used was indeed kosher.

* * *

Dr. Abrahams was preparing a translation of a portion of the Talmud at the time of his sudden death on April 14, 1867. The April 15 edition of *The New York Times* carried the following obituary:

Yesterday morning Dr. Simeon Abrahams, the well-known and highly esteemed physician, was found dead in his bed at his residence, No. 31 Bleeker Street. Dr. Abrahams retired on Saturday night in apparent good health, and when the domestic called him at 4 o'clock yesterday morning (his usual hour), she could obtain no reply, and as the deceased did not make his appearance at the breakfast table an investigation followed, when his death was ascertained. Coroner Schirmer will hold an inquest today. Death is supposed to have been caused by disease of the heart. Mr. Abrahams was a bachelor, and 58 years of age.

Dr. Abrahams devoted his relatively short life to his people and to Torah Judaism. His efforts should not be forgotten.

[1] A letter to Dr. S. Abrahams of New York as to the permissibility according to Jewish law of a post mortem Examination on the body of a deceased Israelite, Dr. B. Illoway April 6, 1856 available at www.jewish-history.com/Illoway/letter11.html.

² *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654-1860* by Hyman B. Grinstein, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1945, pages 252-253.

³ The Occident, Volume II, No. 12, March 1845.
(www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume2/mar1845/intermarry.html).

Dr. Yitzchok Levine served as a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey before retiring in 2008. He now teaches as an adjunct at Stevens. Glimpses Into American Jewish History appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine can be contacted at llevine@stevens.edu.

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