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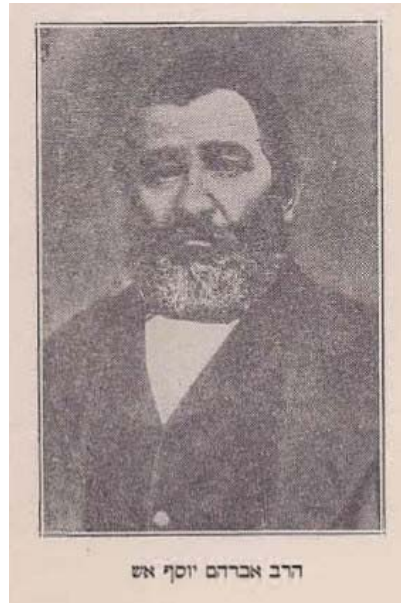
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RABBI ABRAHAM JOSEPH ASH: STRENGTHENING ORTHODOXY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Posted Jun 29 2011

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Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from "The History of the First Russian-American Jewish Congregation" by J. D. Eisenstein, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961), AJHS Journal, available at www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm.



Readers of this column are aware that it was not until 1840 that the first ordained Orthodox rabbi, Rabbi Abraham Rice,¹ settled in America. Other *rabbonim* soon began to settle in America. One of them was Rabbi Abraham Joseph Ash.

Rav Ash, a *talmid chacham*, was born in Semyavitch, Horodno province, Polish Russia, in 1813. He was one of the original members of the first Russian American congregation, known simply as *Beth Medrash*, founded on the Lower East Side of New York on June 4, 1852. Within a short time Rabbi Ash was appointed rav of the congregation, receiving a salary of \$2 per week.

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The congregation was forced to move frequently during its early years due to increased membership. From 1853 to 1856 the shul occupied a hall on Pearl Street between Chatham and Centre Streets.

Interestingly enough, support for the shul's next relocation came from Sephardim.

About this time (1855) Rabbi Ash formed the acquaintance of John Hart, a Portuguese, who, on the anniversary of his parents' death, came down in a carriage to visit the congregation in Pearl Street to say the *Kaddish* prayer. The Rabbi also "learned" with him a chapter of the Pentateuch and a chapter of *Mishnyot*. In gratitude for his religious labor Mr. Hart influenced his rich friend, Samson Simpson, to donate 3000 dollars towards the purchase of a synagogue. Another Portuguese, Mr. Shendar, gave 500 dollars; Dr. Ashman, 200 dollars; and from members was collected 1300 dollars more, making a total of 4000 dollars, which sum they paid towards the purchase of the Welsh Chapel, No.78 Allen Street, leaving a

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mortgage of 3500 dollars.

Thus, it is shown that the Portuguese-American Jews were the main support for the purchase of a place of worship for the first Russian-American congregation.

The dedication of the synagogue occurred on the day preceding Pentecost, June 8, 1856. Rev. Abraham Rice of Baltimore delivered the dedication sermon.

Beth Medrash became the prototype synagogue for early Eastern European immigrant Jews who began to arrive in significant numbers during the 1870s. It possessed an excellent library of *sefarim*, and served as both a place for prayer and religious study. The shul also had a *beis din* that dealt with a variety of halachic issues.

Unfortunately, the shul suffered from frequent disagreements.

The first division in the congregation occurred when Rabbi Ash opposed the appointment of Aaron Friedman as Shochet for the congregation, in order to sustain the decision handed down by the Rabbis of his native country regarding his capacity for the office, while Mr. Middleman, a Talmudic jurist, endeavored and ultimately succeeded by correspondence with the Galician Rabbis, known as *Mephorshe ha Yam*, in obtaining a permit for the *Shochet*. Rabbi Ash, however, refused to honor the permit. Mr. Middleman, in consequence, withdrew and formed a *Minyan* for himself and followers on Bayard Street, the subsequent outcome of which was the creation of a congregation for the "Kalvarier." [Kalvarier]

The congregation consisted of members who leaned towards Chassidus and those who did not. (Rabbi Ash belonged to the Chassidic group.) It was only a matter of time before there were additional arguments.

New quarrels between the rabbi's followers and the officers of the congregation led to a lawsuit, and later to another split; this time Rabbi Ash and twenty-three of his followers left the synagogue and they formed a new congregation which they named "Bet ha-Midrash ha-Gadol"; it was dedicated on August 13, 1859.

It should not be surprising to learn that in light of the disagreements he encountered, Rabbi Ash eventually sought to leave the rabbinate.

Rabbi Ash, about the time of the Civil War, became engaged with a partner in the manufacture of hoop skirts, then the rage of fashion, in which business he accumulated nearly ten thousand dollars. He then changed the Rabbinate for the more dignified office of Parnas [President], and instead of receiving a stipend, contributed liberally towards the expenses of the congregation.

Later he lost his money and had to resume the Rabbinate. In 1876 he took up the business of importing *Kasher* (kosher) wine from Los Angeles, California. Fate, however, decided against him, and in 1879, in spite of all his endeavors, he was obliged to resume his religious functions in the congregation, his salary then being 25 dollars per month, till his death, May 6, 1887.

Rabbi Ash was a staunch defender of Orthodoxy. He not only opposed Reform, he criticized those Orthodox synagogues that allowed Reform spokesmen to address their members. When in 1884 Beth Midrash Anshei Suvalk permitted the well-known Reform advocate Kaufman Kohler to address its congregation, Rabbi Ash issued a public censure of the congregation.

One of the few Talmud scholars in New York during the 1860s and 1870s, [Rabbi] Ash taught advanced Talmud classes for interested members of the community. He inspected the performance of ritual slaughterers at New York's abattoirs and granted *shochtim* permits allowing them to slaughter. In addition, [Rabbi] Ash prepared *gittin*, which at times created problems for him with the civil courts. He was frequently consulted on issues of practical Jewish law and periodically corresponded with European rabbis regarding local halachic problems. Following one legal discussion with Rabbi Jacob Ettlinger of Altona, for example, [Rabbi] Ash permitted the purchase of a Methodist church for use as a synagogue.²

According to his obituary in The New York Times of May 10, 1887, "Rabbi Ash was considered an authority on the Jewish marriage law and the dietary laws, and he brought over a number of learned shochems, or slaughterers of animals, to give instruction as to the Jewish manner of slaughtering cattle. No Orthodox congregation in this country would accept a shochem without a certificate from Rabbi Ash."

Rabbi Ash did much to strengthen traditional Judaism at a time when Reform was on the ascent. Upon his passing he was survived by his wife and five children.

¹ See "The First Rabbi in America," *The Jewish Press*, November 6, 2009 (jewishpress.com/pageroute.do/41340).

² *Orthodox Judaism in America, A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook* by Moshe D. Sherman, Greenwood Press, 1996, page 21.

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