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Front Page

Editorial/Letters

Torah

OP-ED

Media Monitor

Columns

Features

Magazine

Web Exclusives

Food

Jewish Community

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THE CHARACTER OF RABBI JACOB JOSEPH

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Posted Jul 30 2008

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The Jewish Press recently published three articles about the life of New York's chief rabbi, Rav Jacob Joseph (1840-1902): "Failed Experiment: New York's Only Chief Rabbi" (front-page essay, May 30); "The Chief Rabbi Encounters Opposition" (Glimpses Into American Jewish History, June 4); and "The Chief Rabbi's Funeral" (Glimpses, July 4). This column augments the previous pieces by providing some insight into the personality of RJJ, giving readers a feel for the measure of the man.



Rabbi Jacob Joseph,
the first Chief Rabbi of New York

When RJJ passed away, he was survived by his wife, Esther Rachel^[i], his son Raphael, and two daughters, Mrs. Anna Brody and Mrs. S. R. Schultz. Toward the end of his life, the chief rabbi was under the care of his son-in-law Dr. S. Robert Schultz. His children and his wife were all present when RJJ passed away at 11:45 p.m. on July 28, 1902.^[ii]

As soon as the death became known crowds began to gather in front of the house. Nearly a thousand persons were there, and prayers were offered for the rabbi. The fervor of the men and women was striking. Inside the house could be heard loud lamentations over the death.^[iii]

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(Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes below are from "The Position of Chief Rabbi."^[iv])

Many stories about the greatness and philanthropy of the chief rabbi were told after his passing.

"He never knew what money was," said a President of one of the synagogues last week. "Rabbi Joseph could have left a million dollars, but he died in absolute poverty. Millions passed through his hands. Never a dollar did he hold for himself."

Rabbi Joseph's concern for his fellow man and his humility were legendary. He was scheduled to deliver his first *drasha* on *Shabbos Parshas Devarim* 5648 (July 21, 1888) at Congregation Bais Medrash HaGodol, located at 64 Norfolk Street on the Lower East Side, where he had been appointed rav. The officers of the congregation anticipated a huge crowd would turn out to hear the chief rabbi speak. They estimated that as many as 50,000 people might show up. However, the shul was designed to accommodate 1,000 people at most. Their concerns about an overflow crowd were justified. The New York Times reported:

At an early hour yesterday afternoon a crowd began to gather in front of Beth Hamedrash Hagodol Synagogue, on Norfolk street, attracted by the report that the new chief rabbi, Jacob Joseph, would preach there his Inaugural sermon. As time went on the crowd grew denser, until by 3 o'clock it had filled not only the space directly in front of the synagogue, but the entire block between Grand and Broome streets. It clamored vociferously for admission, and Capt. Webb and 12 stalwart policemen had their hands full trying to preserve order among the struggling mass of people bent on gaining at least a foothold within the temple.

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They paid not the slightest heed to the officers' remonstrances and positive declarations that no more would be permitted to enter.

The synagogue was crowded. It accommodates comfortably about 1,000, but yesterday afternoon it must have contained at least 1,500 people. The heat and lack of proper ventilation caused considerable discomfort, yet every man, and there were none but men present, wore his hat. Several Individuals, evidently not of the Jewish faith, took off their hats, but were at once politely informed that it was contrary to the Hebrew religious law to appear in the synagogue with the head uncovered. ^[M]

Rav Joseph arrived at 3:45 PM. As the president of the synagogue related:

We decided to sell tickets of admission. Rabbi Joseph was then little known here -- that is, his personal characteristics. The doors were opened for the lecture and thousands flocked around the place. Rabbi Joseph, tall, dressed in a frock coat, came through the crowds practically unknown. He went to the door of the church [sic] and saw the people giving up tickets of admission.

"What is this?" asked Rabbi Joseph of the heads of the synagogue who were near the door. It was explained that an admission charge was necessary to keep the people from hurting themselves in the jam at the church [sic]. "Then I will buy one of those tickets," said Rabbi Joseph quietly. "You don't need one," said one of the leaders of the synagogue. "Yes, I do," replied the rabbi. "I want one ticket to get in, and I want another ticket to take me back whence I came. I won't stay in a place where the people must pay to hear me lecture." This was the first time the men in that synagogue were brought in contact with the splendid views of the rabbi who had already won fame as a biblical scholar and teacher.

'I Don't Want Your Money'

A Mr. Levy, who was president of one of the many synagogues that dotted the Lower East Side, related the following story:

He came into the world in poverty and he went out in poverty, after devoting his life and every dollar he earned to his fellow beings. No man was ever a broader philanthropist than Rabbi Joseph. One matter I had before him which showed to me his character.

Two brothers became involved in a lawsuit. After a civil action had been begun it was decided by the brothers to take the matter to Chief Rabbi Joseph. The lay judges who were associated with Rabbi Joseph and who were seated around him when he heard statements of his people gave careful attention to the litigation of the two brothers. Rabbi Joseph settled the matter, and the brothers were so well satisfied with his decision that both insisted on giving Chief Rabbi Joseph \$200.

"I don't want your money. I want to help you all," he said. The two brothers insisted. It then became my duty to give the \$200 to Rabbi Joseph. He turned to his lay judges and said: "Take this money and divide it among the first eight needy people who apply for assistance." That ended the litigation.

The Jacob Joseph Playground

It was mentioned above that Rabbi Jacob Joseph had one son, Raphael Joseph. Raphael had a son Lazarus (1891-1966) who was an attorney, six-time New York State Senator from 1934-45 (21st District 1934-44, 24th District 1945), and New York City Comptroller (1946-1954). Lazarus had a son who was named after his illustrious great-grandfather. Captain Jacob Joseph died during World War II. A park located on the Lower East Side was named in his honor.

This playground, bounded by Henry and Rutgers Streets, is named in memory of Captain Jacob Joseph (1920-1942), a member of the U.S. Marine Corps during World War II, and scion of a family devoted to religious education and civic affairs. Born and raised in New York, Joseph left Columbia University as a junior in 1938 to enlist in the Marines. Joseph died in action at Guadalcanal on October 22, 1942. Five years later, a local law named this playground in his honor. The dedication ceremony was attended by Mayor William O'Dwyer, Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, Councilman Stanley Isaacs, and Joseph's father, City Comptroller, Lazarus Joseph. Parks also unveiled a bronze commemorative plaque on the flagstaff, which celebrates the life and bravery of Capt. Joseph.

This playground was built in part to meet the needs of the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School, named after Capt. Joseph's great-grandfather. ^[M]

May Chief Rabbi Jacob Joseph long be remembered for his valiant efforts to strengthen *Yiddishkeit* at a time when there was an overwhelming move on the part of many to reject the religious values of their ancestors. The existence of today's vibrant American Orthodoxy rests on the groundwork laid by him and others like him.

^[i]Obituaries of Esther Rachel Joseph, The New York Times, February 11 and 12, 1922

^[ii]Death of Chief Rabbi Jacob Joseph, The New York Times, July 29, 1902, page 9.

^[iii]Ibid.

^[iv] "The Position of Chief Rabbi: How It Was Made One of Importance by Its First Occupant, the Late Rabbi Joseph -- Little Stories Now Told on the East Side Illustrating His Character, Just Why He Wielded so Great an Influence," The New York Times, August 10, 1902, page 25.

[v]"Hearing the New Rabbi, The Synagogue Crowded and Hundreds Causing Disorder Outside, The New York Times," July 22, 1888, page 8.

[vi]http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_your_park/historical_signs/hs_historical_sign.php?id=8261

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Rabbi Jacob Joseph was my Great Uncle

Date 07:08, 08-13, 08

Rabbi Joseph brought my grandmother, Sara, his niece, here from Russia. Once here, she became a glove model. She would later marry my grandfather, Abraham Phillips, who was about to be drafted into the Russian army the following day, and rode a horse to a ship leaving for America. There he would be introduced to Sara, my grandmother...and later, marry her in the Rabbi's home. I have a copy of the wedding invitation. Sara and Abraham would settle in Bethlehem, PA., and they would have six sons and 3 daughters. Their eldest, Benjamin, was my father. Ruth Phillips Shakin,

family of RJJ

Date 09:08, 08-7, 11

I believe that Rabbi Joseph also had a nephew named Yaakov Eliyahu Joseph who lived with him. He may have been a brother of Sarah. He was probably born in the 1860's and married a woman named Glicke in the early 1890s. He fathered three children - Helen (Chaye Sarah), Gertrude (Gitel) and George (Yisrael Gershon). He died sometime before 1916.

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