

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part __)

Rabbi Moshe Meir Matlin, Torah Education Pioneer in America

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Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from ¹ The Story of Yeshiva University, the First Jewish University in America, by Gilbert Klaperman, the Macmillian Company, Collier-Macmillian Limited, London, 1969.

“More than a million Jewish immigrants landed on the shores of the United States between 1881 and 1905. They came from Russia, Poland, Austria-Hungary (especially from the province of Galicia), and from Roumania. The great majority of them were fleeing from Eastern Europe as a result of the intensified Russian pogroms following the vicious discriminatory May Laws of 1881. In America they tended to settle in the big cities of the East—New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Rochester, Syracuse—and even in the big inland cities, such as Chicago, Denver, Detroit and Cincinnati. About half a million of these new immigrants settled in New York City where the great majority of them had landed.” (Page 2)

In addition to the formidable challenge of earning a livelihood, these immigrants soon found that there were very few established religious institutions where their children could receive a decent Jewish education. Indeed, even as late as 1900 there were just five communally sponsored schools catering to the poor East European Jews who resided in the lower East Side.

There were a few individuals who, despite almost insurmountable obstacles, established a yeshiva at which boys could receive an intensive Jewish education. One such individual was Rabbi Moshe Meir Matlin.

Rabbi Matlin was born in Slutzk, Lithuania in 1855. He studied in yeshivas in Slutzk and Kovno and received *semicha* from the world famous Rabbi Yitzchok Elchanan Spektor (1817 – 1896), the Chief Rabbi of Kovno. In 1891 he accepted an invitation from Rabbi Jacob Joseph, the Chief Rabbi of New York, to become a *dayyan* in a Bais Din established by Rabbi Joseph. Shortly after Rabbi Matlin arrived in New York, Rabbi Joseph put him in charge of all of the kosher supervision services under his authority. In particular, he supervised all of the *shochtim* who were regulated by the Chief Rabbi.

When Rabbi Joseph passed away in 1902, Rabbi Matlin continued to serve as a *Mashgiach* for kosher meat in New York City, but now under the direction of Rabbi Dr. Phillip Hillel Klein (1849 – 1926), who became the de facto successor of Rabbi Jacob

Joseph. Rabbi Matlin served in this position for a total of twenty years. In addition, he was the primary supervisor for the California Wine Association of New York.

Dr. Klein wrote that he “is one to whom no one can compare in nobility of character and piety ...” Rabbi Klein's characterization was well founded, for one of the students who remembered Rabbi Matlin well said he was a complete *tzaddik* (saint or saintly person). Indeed, Rabbi Matlin was a sincere scholar who refused to use his rabbinical profession as a “spade to dig with.” He never presided over weddings or funerals, and he refused to issue divorces, or to take any fee for a rabbinical service. With the Chief Rabbi gone and Rabbi Matlin's employment as dayyan at an end, he confined himself exclusively to kashrut supervision, feeling that it was the only gainful work he could perform that was consistent with his training. (Page 50)

Rabbi Matlin's family accompanied him to America. In about 1892 he enrolled his son Akiva in Yeshiva Etz Chaim. Yeshiva Etz Chaim, founded in 1886, was an intermediate school that enrolled boys at least nine years old who already were somewhat proficient in Chumash and Rashi. Yeshiva Etz Chaim's goal was to give its students a thorough grounding in Gemara and Shulchan Aruch. In addition, it provided some limited secular studies in the late afternoon.

In 1895 or 1896, Akiva [Matlin] was about sixteen and had absorbed as much as could be offered to him at the elementary school. His father, pious and anxious to see his son continue his religious studies, assembled several lads of the same age and taught them personally in his own apartment on the top floor of 172 Clinton Street. In addition to Akiva Matlin, were Hillel Rogoff and Aaron Abramowitz. The news of this advanced class spread, and soon the group grew to about twelve students. Rabbi Matlin could not accommodate them in his home any longer and began to seek larger quarters. The father of one of the students who was a member of the Mariampol Synagogue persuaded his congregation to house the incipient yeshiva. (Page 55)

Rav Yitzchok Elchanan Spektor passed away in 1896. In 1897 Rabbi Matlin joined a group of fellow rabbonim and communal leaders, most of whom were from Lithuania, in establishing a yeshiva named in honor of Rav Spektor. Thus the group of young men that Rabbi Matlin had been teaching became the nucleus for the founding of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS).

Rabbi Matlin never taught Talmud at RIETS on a regular basis. However, “he offered visiting lectures and remained closely involved with the yeshiva's welfare and progress. In addition, he was one of the founders and ongoing supporters of Orthodoxy's major rabbinic union, the Agudath ha-Rabbonim, which, as early as 1903, became closely identified with the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan yeshiva.”¹

Because Rabbi Matlin suffered from a number of chronic health problems, he hoped to relocate to a location where he could pursue a quiet lifestyle.

In 1914 he found the opportunity which he hoped would make it possible for him to withdraw from any form of rabbinical occupation. On his way back to New York City from an inspection trip to the wineries in California, he visited some of his European friends and relatives in Sioux City, Iowa. They talked excitedly about the tranquility of life and good climate of the West. Rabbi Matlin was so carried away with their enthusiasm that he applied for and received a government land grant in Montana. There he hoped to create a model Jewish community and earn his living as a farmer. Unfortunately, his Kovno background had made no provision for farming, and soon Rabbi Matlin was forced to give up his land. He returned to Sioux City, where he assumed a rabbinical pulpit and earned the respect of the entire community. Rabbi Matlin died in Sioux City in 1927 at the age of seventy-two.

Akiva Matlin eventually attended the Medical School of the University of Tennessee, but he never earned a medical degree.

According to his brother Louis and his wife Rebecca, Akiva Matlin's studies were interrupted by a delicate religious problem. The Matlins were Kohanim, of priestly descent, who according to Jewish law are prohibited from being exposed to corpses. When Akiva wrote his father that he had reached the stage where he was already dissecting cadavers, Rabbi Matlin was horrified. Akiva was ordered home immediately and found a job as a bookkeeper in a slaughterhouse. (Pages 210 – 211.)

¹ **Orthodox Judaism in America, A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook** by Moshe D. Sherman, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1996, page 150.