

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 39)

The Chief Rabbi Encounters Opposition

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*Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from **New York Chooses a Chief Rabbi** by Abraham J. Karp, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893 – 1961) Sep 1954 – Jun 1955, 44. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>.*

In the article **Rabbi Jacob Joseph, Chief Rabbi of New York** that appeared last week in the Jewish Press we described the warm welcome that thousands of Jews gave Rabbi Jacob Joseph when he disembarked from his ship in Hoboken, NJ on July 7, 1888. His first *Drasha* at his shul, Beth Hamidrash Hagadol, was attended by an overflowing crowd, so large that it was necessary to have the police present to control the crowds. Initially it looked like Rabbi Joseph's career as Chief Rabbi of New York was going to be a smashing success. Unfortunately, this was not to be the case.

However, from the outset the appointment of Rabbi Joseph by the *Association* [of American Orthodox Hebrew Congregations] created a furor among certain Jewish circles. Many Orthodox congregations who did not partake in the selection refused to recognize Rabbi Joseph's leadership. Reform Jewry, on the other hand, remained indifferent or hostile to the entire idea of a "chief rabbi." Jacob Joseph's appointment was particularly resented by the Anglo-Jewish press, then dominated by German Jews. Thus, the New York correspondent of Isaac Mayor Wise's *American Israelite*, even before Rabbi Joseph's arrival in America, expressed bemusement that a man who spoke neither German nor English, and whose vernacular was an unintelligible jargon (Yiddish) had been chosen as a fitting representative of Orthodox Judaism to the world at large.¹

Others questioned the entire concept of a Chief Rabbi.

"What is the Chief Rabbi to do?" had already been asked in December, 1887, by the perceptive New York correspondent of the **American Israelite**, *Mi Yodea*. He stated that even those "most eager for the creation of this new office," did not quite know what its functions were to be. To render ritual decisions he was not needed, nor were preachers a scarce commodity; and it seemed highly unlikely that the congregations would import a chief rabbi just to sit and study day and night.

An uptown periodical, the Jewish Messenger, was critical of the entire undertaking. If downtown Jewry had thousands of dollars to import rabbis, why, questioned the **Messenger**, did they not support the charitable institutions such as hospitals and homes which their population used?

“What do we need of an immigrant and prejudiced rabbi?” asked the Reform periodical **Jewish Tidings**. “He should go back to the land that gave him birth.”

In a later issue the argument was carried further:

“Rabbi Joseph is unfamiliar with the language of this country and is therefore unfitted to exercise authority or influence over American Jews. The Jews of this country do not need a Grand Rabbi and one from a foreign country; one who is reared among the prejudices and bigotries of the Eastern countries will certainly prove an obstacle to the people over whom he is expected to exercise control.”

Kashrus: Problems and Pitfalls

A motivating factor in the minds of those who wanted a chief rabbi for New York was their feeling that such a person would be able to put a stop to abuses in the kosher meat industry. The abuses in this area were apparent to many. Indeed, time and again the Jewish community of New York had witnessed squabbles between butchers, accusations and counter-accusations among the *shochtim*, as well as abuse to anyone who tried to impose a reasonable system of supervision.

Rabbi Abraham Joseph Ash, who had been the rabbi of Beth Hamidrash Hagadol until his passing in 1887, “had suffered during his incumbency from butchers who flouted his authority and attacked his person.”

[The kosher meat business] was a lucrative business and notorious for its strong-arm methods, chicanery, and squabbles. The butchers and “shochatim” (ritual slaughterers), as well as some rabbis had repeatedly been locked in disputes over the income from “kashrut”: fist fights were not uncommon and disregard for Jewish law and Board of Health ordinances were rampant. Exploiting the vacuum of both secular and rabbinical authority, Jewish abattoir owners and retail butchers alike resolved the matter by engaging their own rabbis, or pseudo-rabbis, to validate the ritual purity of their products. With this seal of “kashrut” the entrepreneur kept his foothold in the Jewish market and justified the higher prices derived from its religious value. The system lent itself to corruption, and it has been estimated that during this period possibly half the kosher meat sold to the Jewish public was non-kosher.²

The solution to this situation was really quite simple, namely, the institution of stringent standards of supervision in the kosher meat industry. Therefore, it did not take long for Rabbi Joseph, with the support of the Association of American Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, to take energetic steps to remedy this situation.

But the leaders of the Association saw in the supervision of kosher meat a source of income for the organization. They argued that proper supervision cost money, and those who benefited from it should pay for it. The Chief Rabbi, however, was opposed to any direct charge for the supervision of kashrut. He maintained that it was in the interest of the entire community that order and harmony exist in this industry and the costs of administering it be borne by the communal religious agency, the Association of American Orthodox Hebrew Congregations. But he had to surrender to the superior wisdom and experience of the “American business men” who had brought him to this country. He was able, however, to exact the compromise that the tax for supervision be placed not upon meat but upon poultry.

The matter having been decided and agreed upon, it was formally announced through a circular in Yiddish, followed by an English version, distributed in downtown New York.

Every bird slaughtered in the kosher abattoirs was to be under the strict supervision of Rabbi Joseph's staff, and stamped accordingly with a special lead seal (*plumbe*). A tax of a penny was to be added to the selling price of each chicken. It was anticipated that this penny tax as well as the dues paid by each congregational member of the Association would be sufficient to cover the salaries of Rabbi Joseph and his *mashgichim*.

However, the Association completely misread the public's reaction to this additional expense. Instead of easing Rabbi Joseph's job, the *plumbe* became a weight which dragged the Chief Rabbi down to the depths of indignity. It eventually led to his downfall.

The penny tax was opposed by many: to Jewish housewives it smacked of price gouging; to Jewish radicals, and for most of the Yiddish press, it was reminiscent of the infamous hated levy imposed by the czarist Russian government on kosher meat. An equally bitter protest came from the ranks of the butchers and slaughterers who were convinced that the best inspection was the one that inspected the least.

In addition, some rabbis, threatened with the loss of their income from the abattoirs and butchers and resentful of the exalted state and salary conferred on the “chief rabbi,” joined in the agitation against [Rabbi] Joseph and the penny tax.

Opposition to the *Association* and to Rabbi Jacob Joseph also came from a number of Galician and Hungarian congregations who were unwilling to submit to an authority dominated by “Litwaks” (Lithuanian Jews). Instead, they decided to look for a “chief rabbi” of their own, and in 1892 settled on Rabbi Joshua Segal as their choice. What followed was a squalid competition between the two “chief rabbis,” and their partisans over the supervision of “kashrut.” In 1893 still another rabbi entered the fray. His name was Hayim Vidrowitz of Moscow. He managed to gather to his side a few followers from a number of Hassidic “shtiblakh”

(prayer rooms), and hung out a sign reading “Chief Rabbi in America.” Asked who had given him this title, Rabbi Vidrowitz replied, “The sign painter.”

Rabbi Joseph, despite a small and appreciative following, could not overcome the centrifugal forces in the New York Jewish community. Reduced to shame and parody his influence gradually declined. The *Association* soon began to renege on payments of [Rabbi] Joseph's salary, and for all practical purposes became a mere paper organization.³

¹ **Twilight Years of Rabbi Jacob Joseph**, by Joseph Adler, http://www.ameinu.net/frontier/jf_1-00_adler.html

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.