

Rabbi Dr. Schepschel Schaffer (1862 – 1933)

The First Rov of Baltimore's Congregation Shearith Israel

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*Note: All quotes are from Rev. Dr. Schepschel Schaffer, **Twenty-Five Years of Activity in the Cause of Orthodox Judaism 1893 – 1918**, by Israel Fine, Kohn and Pollock, Baltimore, 1918.*

Introduction

During the latter part of the 19th and the first part of the 20th centuries there were *rabbonim* who did their utmost to establish and maintain Orthodox Judaism in America. This was no easy task, since many Jews felt that the “religion of Europe and the observances of their parents” were foreign to America. The result was that the Reform Movement made great inroads into many Jewish communities. Sadly, many shuls, originally founded as Orthodox institutions, over time became Reform synagogues.

In Baltimore, MD, Congregation Shearith Israel stands out as an exception to this historical trend. In 1879 two smaller congregations merged to form a larger congregation with the purpose of creating an organization that would be strong enough to combat the growth of the Reform movement. The fact that this shul still exists today as a vibrant Orthodox institution is proof of the success of this merger. In 1893 Rabbi Dr. Schepschel Schaffer became the Rov of Shearith Israel, serving until his death in 1933. This article deals with the life of Rabbi Dr. Schepschel Schaffer.

His Youth

Schepschel Schaffer was born on May 4, 1862 in Bausk, in the Province of Courland, Russia. Courland had been subject to Russian rule 1737. Nonetheless, it still had most of the characteristics of a German province. German was the official language used in the courts and schools and was spoken by most of the population, regardless of nationality. Rabbi Schaffer's native tongue was German, and the German ideals of the time were harmoniously interwoven with his family's strong Jewish traditions.

On his mother's side Dr. Schaffer was descended from a long line of celebrated *rabbonim* and teachers. His mother was a direct descendent of Rabbi Mordechai ben Avraham Joffe (c. 1530 – 1612) author of the 10 volume *Levush Malkhut*. His paternal grandfather was a sage known for his extraordinary humility and piety, who never uttered a word which did not serve some special important purpose. Supported by his wife's keen business acumen, he was able to devote himself exclusively to Torah study.

Rav Schaffer's father was forced by circumstances to earn his living as a *melamud* (a teacher of children) and, as a result, was only able to provide his family with the barest of life's necessities.

Until the age of 11 Dr. Schaffer's father was his teacher. "From him he received a thorough grounding in Hebrew lore; from him he learned that discipline, that thirst for knowledge, to quench which he was willing to undergo discomforts which to the Jewish youth of today would seem almost incredible. He never enjoyed the games, merriments and liberties of youth which are today considered an indispensable part of proper training and education."

Since his father was busy teaching other children throughout the day, he and young Schepschel were forced to study together from 4 AM to 7 AM in the summer and until 8 AM in the winter! The family could not afford to heat their home at night, so one can easily appreciate the determination that it took for father and son to rise at 4 AM on a subzero Russian winter morning to study together.

Young Schepschel turned out to be a gifted student. "At the age of eleven the assiduous student was already known in the community as the boy who had absorbed the twenty-four books of the Bible so thoroughly that he could recite whole chapters by heart and who, in addition, knew the first half of 'Seder Nezikin' so well that he could point out without fail the exact page in the tractate of any utterance, statement or controversy one might quote. Those who used to gather daily in the local Beth - Hamidrash to spend hours of study frequently used the boy as a living index, requesting him to locate a verse of the Bible or a saying in the tractates of Gemara he was known to have learned, often merely to have their sport and try the strength of his memory, occasionally to remedy a real need."

Yeshiva Education

It soon became clear that a gifted student like Schepschel required more time and attention than his father could give him. At the tender age of 11 he was sent to study with the rabbi of Shalat, a neighboring town. The communal duties of the rabbi of Shalat were fairly limited, so he had considerable free time to devote to his new student. "In a year and a half he was able to finish and then to repeat the entire 'Seder Nezikin,' which he now knew almost by heart. Very often he stood the test which was put to exceptionally gifted students. A Gemara was opened, the finger pointed to any place on the page and the question was asked: 'Which words are to be found under the pointed finger ten, twelve or fifteen pages farther on in the tractate?' And this at the age of twelve and a half."

After a year and half of study with the rabbi of Shalat, his teacher sent him to study in Shavel in the yeshiva of Rabbi Eliezer Lunz, known as the "Charif," because of his especially keen mental acumen.

Dr. Schaffer in later years often tersely characterized the difference in the methods of the two Yeshiboth he had thus far attended by the fact that while in Shalat he had learned in one year about three hundred pages of Gemara; all he accomplished with Lunz in the same period of time was fourteen pages of the tractate “Kidushin.” But these fourteen pages were conned thoroughly, with all the commentaries, with, in addition, the comparison of all similar and corresponding controversies in other tractates and with the practice of deducting new cases which might occur in contemporary every-day life.

While studying in Shavel, Schepschel celebrated his Bar Mitzvah in a very simple fashion. “He was ‘called up’ to the reading of the Torah on a Monday morning and, when he came down, Rabbi Lunz pinched his cheek and assured him that he was an excellent Bar-Mitzvah who might hope to be one day a leader in Israel, adding that he would serve tea that evening to all the Bachurim who might care to come to his home to celebrate the Bar-Mitzvah.”

After spending two years studying in the yeshiva of Rav Lunz, Rabbi Schaffer went to Weksna to study in the yeshiva of Reb Moshe Perels. In the three years he spent in Rav Perels’ yeshiva he finished *Seder Noshim* as well as tractate *Chulin*. He was by this time an “expert” in the intricacies of Pilpul. His rosh yeshiva publicly told him that he no longer needed the aid of an instructor, and could continue his studies independently.

Secular Education

Schepschel was now 18 years old, and he began to think about his future. Despite the fact that he had spent long hours studying Talmud, he had not neglected the study of secular subjects. “As a rule the study of modern Hebrew and of European languages and literatures was looked upon by the older generation of Talmud scholars as almost sinful and was forbidden, but young Schaffer had always been a favorite and a privileged character because of the fact that he hailed from Courland and spoke German.”

At that time the Russian government insisted that the official rabbi of each community have a secular education in addition to a Torah education. The result was that there were two rabbis in each community – the actual rabbi and the government sanctioned rabbi. More often than not the “official” rabbi was more interested in doing what the government wanted than in fostering Yiddishkeit. Therefore, there was a real need for strictly observant, secularly educated rabbonim. Schepschel decided the he would try to become such a Rov.

Rabbi Dr. Hillel Hakohen Klein (1849 – 1926)

In 1880 Rabbi Dr. Hillel (Philipp) Klein became the Rov of the large Jewish community of Libau (Liepaja), Latvia. Rav Klein was a brilliant Talmud *Chocham* who was also well educated secularly. Therefore, he was able to serve not only as the official government rabbi but also as the recognized Orthodox rabbinical authority in Libau, something that was quite unusual.

In light of his aspirations, Schepschel naturally felt that Rabbi Klein might assist him in his desire to combine a secular education with a Torah education, so he went to Libau to solicit Dr. Klein's advice. Rabbi Klein soon became Schepschel's role model and patron. He appointed him to be the Talmud instructor of the highest class in his yeshiva. In his spare time Schepschel studied secular subjects privately with one of the teachers at the Gymnasium of Libau. At the end of three years he took the examinations for a diploma and passed them without difficulty.

Berlin – The *Rabbiner* – Seminar

The Berlin *Rabbiner-Seminar* (Rabbinical Seminary), headed by the famous Rabbi Dr. Azriel Hildesheimer, was the only institution in the world at this time where one could pursue secular studies without being induced in the slightest way from the path of Torah observance. Schepschel was steadfastly committed to Orthodoxy, so it became clear to him that he must now go to Berlin if he wanted to continue his studies.

Going to Berlin was a daring and courageous move for the 21 year-old Schepschel. He had no relatives in Berlin and absolutely no other contacts there. There was also the problem of how he would support himself there. Nonetheless, in April of 1883 he arrived in Berlin. Berlin was at this time a large metropolis, and Schepschel's entire life up until now had been spent in relatively small towns and cities.

The reception which he met was as new to him as the environment. Every one was polite and friendly, yet cool and reserved almost to the degree of indifference. He would be welcome in the Seminary, he was told, but he must first secure the resources needed for life in a city like Berlin. From later experience he learned that this was a sort of test to which all strangers were subjected in order that they prove their true mettle. Fortunately, his Talmudical knowledge as well as his congeniality secured him a few real friends among the students at the Seminary, whom he assisted in their studies and who, in turn, helped him by introducing him among their acquaintances, thus affording him the opportunity of making himself known to an ever-growing circle.

During the first six months of his residence in Berlin he suffered almost beyond endurance, but as he had molested no one, kept his attire faultless and always maintained a cheerful exterior, none knew of his true condition, though some surmised it. Later on he secured a home with a worthy and well-to-do family in return for the care he bestowed upon the Hebrew education of the only son of the family, and before very long he became a favorite tutor in the Talmud. Business people of wealth gave him handsome emoluments for daily evening lessons, so that he was able not only to pay his way but even to send money home to his parents.

By 1885 Schepschel had obtained sufficient financial support to enroll in the Hildesheimer Seminary. He also matriculated at the University of Berlin, where he studied philosophy, Semitics, German literature, and Roman law.

At the end of four years he had completed his dissertation and was ready to take the qualifying examinations for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. However, the fees for taking this exam at the University of Berlin were very high, so instead he went to the University of Leipzig, where the costs were somewhat less. In 1889 he was awarded his PhD “cum laude.” The title of his thesis was “The Principle of Law and Its Relation to Morality According to Talmudical Ethics and Jurisprudence.”

In February 1890 he successfully passed his semicha examinations at the Seminary. He was now a full-fledged, Orthodox “Rabbi Doctor.”

Return to Russia

The chances of Rabbi Dr. Schaffer obtaining a rabbinical position in Germany were not good, because he was not a native German. He also received news that his father was dangerously ill and near death, so he returned to Russia to be with his family. His father passed away six weeks later. Dr. Schaffer remained with his family for almost a year, assisting them in their preparations for immigrating to America.

After his mother, sister, and four brothers left for America, Rabbi Schaffer decided that he might obtain a position as Rov in Russia. With this in mind, he went to several leading Rabbonim in Russia, was examined by them, and then received semicha from each of them. Thus he obtained semicha from Rav Avraham Diamant of Yurburg, from Rav Zev Lehrman of Erzvilok, and from the world famous Kovno Rov, Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Spector.

He was also given semicha by Rav Alexander Moshe Lapidus (Lapidoth) of Rossieny (a friend of Rav Yisroel Salanter). While visiting Rav Lapidus, he met the Rov’s youngest daughter, Anna, who was a very accomplished Hebraist and a student of language and literature. The result was that he asked Rav Lapidus for permission to marry Anna, and the Rov gave the couple his blessing.

Rabbi Schaffer now had semicha from some of the most illustrious Russian rabbis of his day as well as a doctorate. Nonetheless, it became clear to him that there was little opportunity for him to obtain a rabbinical position in Russia. Thus, he decided that his only course of action was to go to America. It was decided that he would leave first and that his Kallah would join him once he was settled, and they would marry in the United States.

In October 1892 Rabbi Dr. Shaffer arrived in New York. However, he did not remain there for very long. Soon he would become the first Rov of Congregation Shearith Israel of Baltimore, a position he held for forty years.

However, the circumstances leading to how this came about and his career in Baltimore will have to wait for the next “Glimpses Into American Jewish History” column.