

Rabbi Moshe Weinberger (1854 – 1940)

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Introduction

In 1880 there were approximately 250,000 Jews living in the United States. Most of them were either immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Central Europe. However, beginning in 1881 large numbers of Jews began to arrive from Eastern Europe and Russia. The assassination of Czar Alexander II in March of 1881 sparked anti-Jewish riots and massacres in many Jewish communities. These were followed by the passage of laws that severely restricted the lives of Jews. This combination of economic, political, and physical persecution led to a massive immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia. Most of them came to the United States. Indeed, between 1881 and 1923 almost 2,800,000 Jews arrived here.

Coming to America did not, of course, solve all the problems of these immigrants. They were faced with daunting challenges in many areas including those of earning a livelihood and maintaining their religious observance. The religious scene even in the large Jewish community of New York City was more often than not chaotic and bewildering. In the opinion of Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, things were so bad here that he felt the need to write a book encouraging Jews not to immigrate and to remain where they were. He was absolutely convinced that they were much better off religiously in Eastern Europe and Russia than in America.

Sketch of Rabbi Weinberger's Life

Rabbi Moshe Weinberger was born in Hungary in 1854 and studied under several noted Torah scholars, among them R. Moshe Sofer (d. 1917, not to be confused with his namesake known as the Chasam Sofer), R. Shmuel Ehrenfeld, R. Elazar Loew, and R. Meir Perles. In 1880, he was forced to leave Hungary for unknown reasons and arrived in New York City.

Whatever those reasons may have been, New York was the wrong place for him. True, the city then already had an Orthodox Jewish population estimated to number 10,000 people. It housed an impressive Hungarian congregation, Ohab Zedek, founded in 1872/3, as well as several other Orthodox synagogues, most notably Beth Hamedrash Hagodol (1852, reorganized 1859), Beth Hamedrash Livne Yisroel Yelide Polen (1853, later the Kalvarier Shul) and Khal Adas Jeshurun (1856). But these synagogues lived in relative poverty; most lacked the money to support a full-time rabbi. And if any did want a rabbi, they had little

trouble luring one with distinguished European credentials, reports of ritual laxity in America notwithstanding.¹

Thus, in spite of his impressive scholarly background and his staunch adherence to Orthodoxy, Rabbi Weinberger was unable to find a rabbinical position, so he made a number of unsuccessful forays in business.

In 1890 he became the rabbi of Congregation Bnai Israel Anshei Ungarn of Scranton, PA. In 1893 he moved to Philadelphia, where he became the rabbi of Congregation Ohev Shalom.

Congregation Beth HaMidrash HaGadol Anshei Ungarn

In 1895 Rabbi Weinberger returned to New York to become the Rov of Congregation Beth HaMidrash HaGadol Anshei Ungarn. However, his relationship with his congregants was often contentious. They felt that he should devote himself to improving the image and fostering the growth of the shul, whereas he devoted himself to scholarship and education. Some were openly scornful of his effort to found a high level yeshiva. Others felt that the congregation should move to a larger building in an effort to attract new members. “If that meant discarding a few time-honored traditions, they were prepared to pay the price.”²

For eleven years Weinberger kept his position, frequent quarrels and his own difficult economic plight notwithstanding. In August 1905 a dispute caused him to cut back on his classes, and some time later an effort was made to have him fired. But he had a contract and held on, calling all the while for reconciliation. Then on the last day of Passover, April 17, 1906, accumulated tensions finally exploded. The Hungarian Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagadol erupted in rioting and police had to be called to quell the disturbance. The incident that occasioned the violence was Rabbi Weinberger's entry into the matsah business. He claimed to need extra money. This divided the congregation (some congregants were in the matsah business themselves), led to catcalling during the rabbi's Passover sermon, and finally resulted in blows being exchanged. In the aftermath, Rabbi Weinberger refused to resign his position, placed a ban on his synagogue, and never entered its premises again. Though later he sought reconciliation, he apparently spent his remaining years “in exile,” producing matsah.

On the surface, based on the limited data available, the Passover riot looks like a classic battle between traditionalists and innovators. Rabbi Weinberger stood for time-tested values; his opponents demanded change. But closer examination reveals a more complicated picture. Weinberger, by entering the matsah business, projected an entrepreneurial image far more characteristically American than Jewish. On the other hand, Weinberger's opponents, seemingly more outwardly oriented, righteously cloaked themselves in the mantle of tradition, opposing the rabbi's undertaking as both inappropriate and without precedent. Each side thus respected tradition and feared change, while both—albeit in different ways and

for different reasons—also deviated from tradition and accepted change. The resulting guilt, anger, and confusion go far to explain the passionate violence that ensued. In rioting over Weinberger, immigrants partly expressed their frustration at the New World in general.³

Rest of His Life

Rabbi Weinberger spent the rest of his life earning his living from his matzah baking business. An ad in Hebrew for his matzos says in part “Just as in previous years thousands crowded into the synagogue on Willet Street in order to delight in Rabbi Weinberger’s sermons, so too now thousands stand in line to buy Rabbi Weinberger’s kosher and tasty matzot.”⁴ In 1916 Aron Streit became Rav Weinberger’s partner. They originally baked only hand matzos. However, in 1925, Aron Streit and one of his sons opened up a modern [machine] bakery on Rivington Street, and this endeavor eventually grew into the well-known Streit’s matzo business.

Weinberger dreamed of a united Jewish community and he agitated for the establishment of a chief rabbinate. His efforts in 1895 to found the first institution of higher learning in America patterned on the East European yeshivah were unsuccessful. While serving as a rabbi, he “repeatedly supported shochatim against charges of unfitness seemingly motivated more by personal and economic factors than by religious ones.” Weinberger supported Zionist endeavors and contributed to Hebrew journals.⁵

In 1887 Weinberger published his first and most controversial book, *HaYehudim v'ha-Yahadut b'New York*. Written in Hebrew and directed to his brethren in Europe, Weinberger scorned American society as materialistic, sorely lacking in appropriate family values, and a spiritual danger to religious Jews. Contemptuous of Jewish life in America, as well, Weinberger cautioned his former countrymen about the poor standards of kashruth and Jewish education and the low level of Talmud knowledge of Jewry's religious functionaries. He lamented America's magnificent synagogues, which some Jews felt compelled to build, and chided Jews for the extravagance of luring cantors with inflated salaries to fill normally empty synagogue pews.⁶

In addition to the above mentioned book, his other writings include **Kuntres Halacha l'Moshe** (Philadelphia, 1894); **Rosh Divrei Moshe** (Philadelphia, 1895); **Ho'il Moshe** (New York, 1895); **Halacha l'Moshe** (New York, 1902); **Divrei Shalom v'Emet** (New York, 1908); **Igeret Mishneh: An Open Letter to the Beth Hamidrash Hagadol** (New York, 1909); **Dorosh Dorash Moshe** (New York, 1914); **Ha-Measef** 9:2 (1904), p. 20b; **Ha-Measef** 9:4 (1904), p. 46b. He also published several articles in **Ha-Ivri**.

Rav Moshe Weinberger passed in Brooklyn, New York, on June 13, 1940 (7 Sivan), survived by his wife, four daughters and two sons. He is buried in the Union Field Cemetery in Ridgewood, NY not far from the grave of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, the Chief Rabbi.⁷

Future articles will discuss Rabbi Weinberger's attempt to establish the first advanced yeshiva in America as well as his strong criticism of the state of Jewry in New York during the 1880s.

¹ **People Walk on Their Heads, Moses Weinberger's Jews and Judaism in New York**, translated from the Hebrew and edited by Jonathan D. Sarna, Holmes Meir Publishers, Inc., New York, 1982, page 4.

² **Ibid.**, page 24.

³ **Ibid.**, pages 24 - 25.

⁴ **Yeshivat Or Ha-Hayyim: The First Talmudical Academy In America?** by Shnayer Z. Leiman, **Tradition**, 25 (2), 1990 page 88.

⁵ **Hebrew Printing in America, 1735 – 1926, A History and Annotated Bibliography**, by Yosef Goldman, YG Books, 2006, page 572.

⁶ **Orthodox Judaism in America, A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook** by Moshe D. Sherman, Greenwood Press, 1996, page 215.

⁷ See <http://kevarim.wordpress.com/category/union-field-cemetery/>