Anthology of Jewish Culture – Rabbinic Sources (1880–1918)

# Separation of Communities

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) was the founder of the neo-Orthodox Torah Im Derekh Eretz ideology and probably the most influential leader of German-Jewish Orthodoxy, promoting the observance of Halakhah alongside socio-cultural integration in non-Jewish society. He was also the father of the secessionist ideology, promoting the creation of Orthodox communities (*Austrittsgemeinde*) separated from the general Jewish communities, once German law allowed such a move (1876). Another prominent rabbi, Seligman Baer Bamberger (1807–1878), did not support that move. Rabbi Hirsch's public letter to Rabbi Bamberger, arguing for such separate communities and condemning those Orthodox Jews who did not secede (1877), opened a heated debate regarding the secession policy. R. Hirsch's letter, R. Bamberger's reply and the public letter addressed by R. Naftali Z.Y. Berlin (1816–1893) to the editor of Mahzikei Hadas, objecting to the idea of “importing” secession to Eastern Europe, demonstrate the variety of Orthodox approaches to this question.

## Texts:

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Collected Writings, VI (New York: Feldheim, 1990), p. 201 (from “Thus, according”) to p. 204 (“genuine Judaism”).

R. Bamberger's response, ibid, from p. 248 (from “Did you, Rabbi”) to 250 (“unjustifiable act”).

ר' נפתלי צבי יהודה ברלין, שו”ת משיב דבר, 1894, סימן מד.

# Against the “Evildoers” in Hungary

Rabbi Yekutiel Yehudah (Zalman Leib) Teitelbaum of Sighet (1808–1883), known as the Yetev Lev, was probably the most powerful Hasidic rebbe in greater Hungary in his time, and the father of Hungarian Hasidic zealotry. In this 1883 responsum, he ruled that a Jewish community should not bury an uncircumcised Jewish boy (who had passed away at the age of nine) to teach his parents a lesson.

## Text:

ר' יקותיאל יהודה טייטלבוים מסיגט, שו”ת אבני צדק, ירושלים תשנ”ג, הוספות יורה דעה כד (עמ' טו).

# Halakhah and Technology

Rabbi Yitzhak Shmelkes (1827–1904), a famous Galician rabbi, was the first halakhic authority to address the question of electricity in Jewish law. In the following comment he added as an addendum to his book of responsa, he prohibits the use of a telephone on Shabbat.

Text:

ר' יצחק שמעלקעס, שו”ת בית יצחק, יורה דעה, פרמישלא 1888, מפתחות והגהות לסימן לא (דף קנח ע”א וע”ב).

# Civil Marriage

By the end of the 19th century, some Jews married in civil ceremonies. A debate broke out among the halakhic authorities whether the Halakhah recognizes such marriages ex post facto. The two opinions are presented through the responsa of Rabbi Shlomo Zvi Schück (Hungary, 1844–1916) and Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann (Germany, 1843–1921).

Texts:

ר' שלמה צבי שיק, שו”ת רשב”ן, אבן העזר, סימן צו (1899).

ר' דוד צבי הופמן, שו”ת מלמד להועיל חלק ג (אבן העזר וחושן משפט) סימן כ.

# Against Emigration

“The Great Migration” of the Jews to America, usually dated 1881–1914 met strong rabbinic opposition. The United States, often dubbed *Die Treifene Medineh,* the unkosher country, was portrayed as a place in which Jews would almost necessarily lose their religious observance. Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1839–1933), known as the Hafetz Hayim, a key figure in the rabbinic leadership of the period, wrote a pamphlet against emigration to America. Nevertheless, he also wrote a book of Halakhah and ethical instruction for the emigrants, *Nidahei Yisrael* (1894). He might have changed his opinion concerning emigration. Interestingly, his children from his second marriage and some of his grandchildren emigrated to the New World.

## Text:

ר' ישראל מאיר הכהן, קונטרס נפוצות ישראל, מתוך ספרו שם עולם, חלק שני, 33-31 (וורשה תרנ”ח) (קטעים מסומנים).

# Pragmatic Religious Zionism

Rabbi Yitzhak Ya'akov Reines (1839–1915) was the founder of the Mizrahi Party (1902), and one of the founders of Religious Zionism. Before becoming active in politics, Rabbi Reines took part in various educational enterprises, including founding yeshivas that integrated secular studies into their curricula. He was often criticized by fellow rabbis for his Zionist activity and was accused of collaborating with the “evildoers.” Anti-Zionist writers claimed that the Zionist movement secularizes Jewish identity, attempting to bring a secular redemption by natural means. Rabbi Reines rejected these claims, arguing that collaboration with non-religious people is legitimate when aimed at attaining the common good while setting forth a pragmatic, non-messianic Zionist ideology.

## Texts:

הרב יצחק ריינס, אור חדש על ציון, וילנה תרס”א, פרק י דף ל ע”ב – לא ע”א, עד המילים 'שם בקירוב'.

הנ”ל, מכתבים, בתוך: נפתלי בן מנחם, מספרות ישראל באונגאריה, ירושלים תשי”ח, עמ' 67-66.

# Messianic Religious Zionism

Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook (1865–1935) was appointed the rabbi of Jaffa and the colonies in 1904 and then the Chief Rabbi of Mandatory Palestine in 1921. His theology was based on the notion that the perfect, infinite Good only appears in our world in partial, finite manifestations. Conflicting ideas are actually parts of the same supreme Good. The course of history brings these conflicting ideas into confrontation, but then also to a higher synthesis, with the ultimate synthesis being the redemption. Rabbi Kook saw the conflict between secular Zionism and anti-Zionist Orthodoxy as an example of this process and viewed the return to Zion as a harbinger of the redemption.

## Texts:

הרב אברהם יצחק קוק, שמונה קבצים, א, קלה (Translation in the Blackwell Reader in Judaism, pp. 239).

שם, קפו.

שם, ג, א (Translation ibid, pp. 241–243).

# Anti-Zionism on Practical Grounds

Rabbi Hayim Soloveitchik (1853–1918) is considered one of the greatest Talmudic scholars of the modern age. During his tenure as a senior teacher at the Yeshiva of Volozhin, he developed a methodology for the study of the Talmud and Jewish Law based on formal conceptualization that was later known as “the Brisker Method.” While he usually refrained from political involvement, his objection to Zionism was explicit and vocal. His main argument was that the establishment of a Jewish state was only the means to an end for the Zionists, whose true goal was to secularize the Jewish people.

## Text:

ר' חיים סולובייצ'יק מבריסק, מכתב מתוך 'אור לישרים', וורשה 1900, עמ' 55.

# Anti-Zionism on Messianic Grounds

Some ultra-Orthodox leaders’ objection to Zionism was not based primarily on its alleged harm to Jewish identity. Rather, they argued that Zionism conflict with the belief in the coming of the Messiah by heavenly initiative. Rabbi Hananya Yom Tov Lippa Teitelbaum (1836–1904) of Sighet, known as the Kedushas Yom Tov, was probably the most powerful rebbe in greater Hungary in his time. His father was Rabbi Yekutiel Yehudah (Zalman Leib) Teitelbaum (see above) and his son, R. Yoel, the Satmar Rebbe, would become the most prominent ideologue of radical anti-Zionism and a key figure in 20th century Orthodoxy. The Kedushas Yom Tov's argument against Zionism was based on the claim that the Jews should await the miraculous redemption. Rabbi Sholem Dov Ber Schneersohn (1860–1920), the fifth rebbe of the Habad dynasty and the founder of the Habad Yeshiva, was probably the first to contend that Zionism “pushes on the redemption,” meaning that human endeavor may bring the messianic era before God wills it. Paradoxically, this view ultimately inspired the acute messianism of Habad, a generation later.

## Texts:

ר' חנניה יום טוב ליפא טייטלבוים מסיגט, מכתב, בתוך: נפתלי בן מנחם, מספרות ישראל באונגאריה, עמ' 85.

ר' שלום דובער שניאורסון מלובביץ', מכתב מתוך 'אור לישרים', וורשה 1900, עמ' 59-57 עד המלים 'וימהר גאולתנו בב”א'.

# Non-Zionist Orthodox Nationalism

Dr. Isaac Breuer (1883–1946) was one of the most brilliant 20th-century Orthodox thinkers. A grandson of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (see above), he was raised on the Torah Im Derekh Eretz ideology but gave it an original, nationalist twist. He wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on Kant's concept of law. Breuer was very involved in Jewish politics and became one of the founders of Agudat Israel. His political theology was based on the idea that the national identity of the Jewish people is not based on a common language, territory, folk culture, race and history, as is the case with other peoples, but on its law – the Torah. The Jews are “the People of the Torah,” whose self-determination will be realized in a “Torah State.” He perceived Zionism as a movement that seeks to create a new basis for Jewish identity, based on the above secular elements, thus leading to the split of the Jewish people into two.

Text:

Isaac Breuer, “The Law and the Individual”, in Isaac Breuer, *Concepts of Judaism*. Selection and editing by Jacob Levinger (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1974), pp 46-49, from the words “it is precisely” to the words “preserves the nation” (line 1).

# Anti-Communism

Rabbinic authorities almost unanimously rejected communism. The texts in which they expressed this opinion, however, are surprisingly sparse. One of the earliest rabbinic opinions on this issue is a statement by Rabbi Yosef Hayim Karo (1800–1895), the rabbi of Kalisz (Poland), that is known to us because it was cited by the famous maskil Eliezer Z. Zweifel (1815–1888). Rabbi Yitzhak Zelig Morgenstern of Sokolov-Kotzk (1866–1939), who lived during the turbulent time of the Bolshevik Revolution and the post-WWI failed communist revolutions in other countries, did not attack communism directly, but ironically equated its ideal of equality to a “bed of Sodom” – the Jewish equivalent of a Procrustean bed.

## Texts:

אליעזר צוייפל, סניגור, וורשה תרמ”ה, עמ' 164, מן המילים 'הרב הגדול ר' יוסף חיים קרא' ועד המילים 'במלות קצרות, ע”כ'.

ר' יצחק זליג מורגנשטרן מסוקולוב-קוצק, שארית יצחק, תל אביב תשמ”ט, עמ' 214, פסקה א.

# Radical Musar in the Lithuanian Yeshivas

During the last two decades of the 19th century, the Musar movement gradually expanded in the Lithuanian yeshiva world. Within the intellectualist atmosphere of Lithuanian Jewry, the Musarniks emphasized the improvement of character and religious emotion. Among the various schools of Musar, Novardok (Novogrudok) was the most radical – and perhaps the most fascinating. Its founder, Rabbi Yosef Yozl Horovitz (c. 1848–1919), known as *The Alter fun Novardok* (“The Elder of Novogrudok”), established an ordinary yeshiva in that city that he soon turned into a stronghold of fervent Musar ideology; its curriculum included the study of Musar homilies alongside practical exercises in character development. During the Russian Civil War, Rabbi Yosef Yozl moved his yeshiva to Kyiv. When a typhoid epidemic broke out in Kyiv in 1919, Rabbi Yosef Yozl insisted on attending to his students himself, contracted the disease and died. His homilies, which were compiled in his book *Madregat Haadam* (“The Moral Stature of Man”), exhibit his contempt for worldly concerns and express his enthusiastic call for self-improvement. His thinking and educational path are by no means representative of all the schools of Musar but are arguably the most intriguing among them.

## Text:

ר' יוסף יוזל הורוביץ, מדרגת האדם, ניו יורק תש”ז, בקשת השלמות, פרק ט, עמ' רנו מן המילים 'אמנם עכשיו' ועד עמ' רנח עד המילים 'למה לו חיים'.

# Orthodox Polemics Against “Modern” Education

Jewish education went through significant changes during the 19th century, and “modern” schools, integrating secular studies and modern-styled religious studies were opened in the Jewish Pale of Settlement in Tsarist Russia. Rabbinic authorities strongly objected to these schools and forbade their followers to send their children to them. When Rabbi Israel Perlov, the Rebbe of Stolin (1868–1921), an otherwise moderate Hasidic leader, heard that some of his Hasidim had sent their children to a “modern” school in Turów, he wrote them a letter harshly criticizing their choice and explaining why it was a mistake.

## Text:

ר' ישראל מסטולין, מכתב על בית הספר בטורוב, מתוך: ר' אהרן הויזמן, דברי אהרן, עמ' קח, מכתב ל.

# Military Service and Economic Integration

It was impossible for young Jewish men drafted into European armies to observe the Sabbath. As Jewish businessmen became more integrated into the general economy, where Sunday was the day of rest, they often preferred to keep their businesses open on the Sabbath, so that they would not have to be closed for two successive days. These reasons, along with others, led to a decline in both Sabbath observance and in appreciation of the religious significance of the Sabbath. Rabbi Shaul Brach (1865–1940), a zealous Hungarian rabbi, argued that Jewish violation of the Sabbath in the army and in the context of their businesses was the result of their not cherishing Torah study.

## Text:

ר' שאול בראך, משמרת אלעזר, קרולי 1911, חלק א (תשועה בישראל), לו, דף יב ע”ד עד דף יג ע”א.

# Religious Decline in the United States

Jewish life in the United States was very different from that in Eastern Europe. Fewer Jews were halakhically observant and there was a perceived decline in the “atmosphere” of Jewish communities. Numerous sermons were given by American rabbis deploring the deterioration of Judaism in the New World, and longing for the heartfelt and deep Judaism of the *Alte Heim* (“Old home”) that they had left. Here are sermons by Rabbi Shaul Shochet (1860–1925) of Louisville, and Rabbi Yosef Meir Levin of Cincinnati (1872–1926).

## Texts {{{if two are too much you may choose whichever you prefer}}}:

הרב שאול שוחט, אהבת שאול, ב (שיקגו תרע”ו), עמ' 40 ('כן רואין') עד עמ' 41 ('חינוך בניהם').

הרב יוסף מאיר לוין, לבית דוד (בולטימור תרע”ז), עמ' 80-78 (מן המילים 'ולמען הבין' עד המילים 'ועמלנו עבורם').

# Political Turbulence and Jewish Suffering

Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel of Rabinovitch (1860–1938), the Rebbe of Monastritch, was one of the first Hasidic rebbes to settle in the United States. He was an eloquent man with broad interests, who had Zionist and modernist leanings. In 1930, he was asked to write his memoirs for a Jubilee volume that was published in his honor. The text selected contains the description of a few episodes from the 1917 revolutions in Russia. Beyond reporting the facts, the text reflects the perspective of a Hasidic leader who looked back at his birthplace with nostalgia, but also with sober criticism and even a sigh of relief.

Text:

ר' יהושע השל רבינוביץ ממונסטריץ', חיי יהושע, בתוך: ספר היובל (שמריהו לייב הורויץ, עורך), ניו יורק תר”ץ, עמ' סז מן המילים 'בקיץ שנת' ועד עמ' סט עד המילים 'למען שמו'.

# Religious Decline in Poland

Jewish life in Eastern Europe was certainly more religiously observant than in America, but there too, a steep decline in religious practice was evident, especially among the young. Many young people joined one of the new secular movements – among them Zionism and socialism – while others simply opted for a *hofshi* (“free,” meaning secular) way of life. While many successful yeshivas were established, the overall number of men committed to the study of Torah declined, and, paradoxically, the yeshivas themselves became hotbeds of secularization. Women often preferred modern fashion over traditional attire. In the following text, the third Gerer Rebbe – Rabbi Avraham Mordekhai of Ger – known for his strong leadership and political activism, complains about the loosening of religious norms such as Torah study and *tzni'ut* (modest dress), probably among his Hasidim.

## Text:

ר' אברהם מרדכי אלטר, אדמו”ר מגור, אוסף מכתבים, ורשה תרצ”ז, א, עמ' 12-11.

# Religious Decline in Iraq

Jews in Islamic countries also went through a modernization process, which differed from the one in the West. Sephardi Judaism did not develop either a Reform movement or ideological secularism. Western norms were not adopted as part of an internal cultural development, but were an import from the outside world, mainly through contact with colonial agents. The Paris-based *Alliance Israélite Universelle* was one such agent. These influences were especially felt in the large commercial cities of the Orient. More and more Jews began to publicly violate the Sabbath, often while still attending the synagogue, and they certainly did not give up their community membership. In two cities where the rabbinate was strong enough, we even find signs of proto-Orthodox responses. One of these was Baghdad. Due to ongoing drought and other disasters in Iraq at the beginning of the 20th century, the economic conditions of Iraqi Jews deteriorated to the point that some even died of hunger. In a long 1912 sermon, Rabbi Shimon Aghasi (1852–1914) reproached them and explained how all this comes from their increasing violation of the Sabbath and other sins.

Text:

הרב שמעון אגסי, דרשה משנת תרע”ג, ירושלים תשכ”ד.

# The Kabbalah Polemic in Yemen

Yemen, usually remote from the main loci of modernization, went through a kabbalist-rationalist struggle in the 20th century. Under the influence of a French-Jewish emissary, a small group of rabbis in Yemen developed anti-kabbalistic opinions, although they did not publicize them. The group grew into a small movement called the “Darda'im.” In 1912, a polemic over the Kabbalah broke out, and Rabbi Yehie Kafah (1850–1931), the leader of the rationalist movement, summed up its arguments in a short book, *Milhemot Hashem* (“The Wars of the Lord”). The Yemenite community viewed them as heretics, and even today many people refuse to buy tefillin and mezuzot written by them.

## Text:

הרב יחיא קאפח, מלחמות ה', ירושלים תרצ”א, עמ' 27-26.

# Women's Modest Appearance

With the ongoing process of modernization, married Jewish women began to remove their hair-coverings. In the United States, this became the prevalent norm even among the Orthodox, and some rabbis even endeavored to find justifications for it. Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein (1829–1908), who wrote one of the most important halakhic books of the period, *Arukh Hashulhan*, ruled that married women must cover their hair, but if they failed to do so, a lenient approach could be followed regarding prayer in their presence.

## Text:

ר' יחיאל מיכל אפשטיין, ערוך השולחן, אורח חיים (פיוטרקוב תרס”ז), עה, ז.

# Orthodox Girls' Education

The education of Orthodox girls posed an issue for many parents in Eastern Europe. While Neo-Orthodox Jewry in Western Europe developed a school system for girls, in Eastern Europe, parents had to send their daughters to public schools, where they were prone to modernization and assimilation. One obstacle to opening Orthodox schools for girls was the traditional prohibition against women's Torah study; another was the prohibition against secular studies. Discussions and debates over this question were inconclusive. Sara Schenirer (1883–1935), certainly the most influential 20th-century Orthodox Jewish woman, brought about a breakthrough. The young seamstress from Cracow described in her diary how a sermon she had heard as a refugee in Vienna in 1915 crystallized her ideas about the urgent need to develop Orthodox education for girls in Eastern Europe. Two years later, she established the first Beis Ya'akov school in Cracow. The Rebbe of Belz gave his blessing, and the Hafetz Hayim wrote that the prohibition against women's Torah study no longer applied. Shortly after that, the Agudat Yisrael Party took over the school and systematized its programs. When Schenirer died in 1935, Beis Ya’akov was already the largest Jewish educational network in the world.

## Texts:

שרה שנירער, געזאמעלטע שריפטן, (Brooklyn: Beth Jacob, 1955), עמ' 8 (מן המילה: 'תרע”ה') עד עמ' 10 (עד המילים 'קומענדיקער ארבייט').

ר' ישראל מאיר הכהן, ליקוטי הלכות על סוטה, דף כא.

# Sports and “the New Jew“

The Zionist enterprise was not just about political and demographic change. The pioneers also called for a change of ethos. Diaspora Jews, they contended, focused only on “the tiny letters“ and ignored strengthening the body. They regarded the “Diaspora Jew” as degenerate, and calls to create a “new Jew” were sounded by authors and ideologues. Agricultural work and joining quasi-military forces became top priorities, with those who engaged in them considered the heroes of the day. Besides these more practical activities, the Zionists also fostered a positive approach to sports. Rabbi Kook, a supporter of Jewish renewal, viewed this development favorably. Two of his opponents, Rabbi Yosef Hayim Sonnenfeld (1848–1932) and Rabbi Yitzhak Yeruham Diskin (1839–1925), took a very different approach, viewing such activities as walking in the paths of the Gentiles.

Texts:

הרב אברהם יצחק קוק, שמונה קבצים, קובץ א, תשט”ז. קובץ ג, רעג.

הרבנים י”י דיסקין, זוננפלד ואח', 'קול השופר', ירושלים תר”פ, עמ' 3-1.