# Chapter 1

# The Path to the Rabbinic Throne

**1. The origins of the community rabbi**

Our discussion begins with the community rabbi’s training. Where did he study? For how long? What was his curriculum? Was he taught anything besides Talmud? Did he learn to preach and eulogize? Was he trained to manage problems in a community? The answer to at least some of these questions seems obvious: he studied in one of the great yeshivot. In the minds of many, it is in these institutions where young scholars in their teens amassed their extensive knowledge in Jewish canonical literature, and from which they would embark on the long journey towards the community rabbinate. Studies have already addressed many aspects of the yeshiva system – a network of institutions which operated in the nineteenth century in broad swathes of Eastern Europe, especially the Lithuanian Jewish cultural sphere – which are relevant to our study. Scholarship has focused on the yeshivot of Volozhin, Mir, and the *Kibbutz ha-Perushim* in \*\*\*, all founded at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Studies have also covered the yeshivot in Slobodka, Kobnov and Telz in northern Lithuania founded in the second half of the century.

However, if we examine how many people learned in these famous yeshivot, we clearly see that they only account for a small percentage of the young men of learning age at the time. Furthermore, the fact that many graduates/attendees of these super-communal yeshivot did *not* serve as community rabbis, dayyanim, or *morei tzedek* forces us to ask where other students were concentrated? In other words, where did the hundreds of community rabbis, who did not study in super-communal yeshivot, receive their training? The answer lies in the town *batei midrash* and the city yeshivot which were active in this region. In the 1820’s, we begin to see the growing popularity of town yeshivot which had already began to operate in preceding years. At the same time, we see the establishment of new yeshivot in urban centers. Some examples include the study frameworks created in \*\*\*, the *beit midrash* in \*\*\* in northern Lithuania (headed by Rabbi \*\*\* and known to attract talented students), and the circle of students who studied under Rabbi \*\*\* in the *beit midrash* in \*\*\* in Northeastern Lithuania. The foundation of new yeshivot started as early 1815 in \*\*\*, \*\*\*, \*\*\*, and \*\*\*. These urban yeshivot were characteristically communal in nature, reflected by the cooperation between local rich men, community rabbis and the community establishment/institutions, who all worked together to create, upkeep and manage them. By uniting forces, they afforded the urban yeshiva the status of a communal institution, even if this status was sometimes more declarative than formal.

About ten years later, in the mid-1820’s, we witness another wave of new yeshivot, as well as the transition from a local *beit midrash* system to more organized study frameworks. This rising trend was inaugurated by the foundation of a yeshiva by \*\*\* in \*\*\*, Belarus, and was continued with the founding of yeshivot in \*\*\* and \*\*\* as well as the yeshiva of Rabbi \*\*\* in \*\*\*, and other places as well. In relatively large communities, such as \*\*\*, this process led to the creation of a complex system of yeshivot and *batei midrash* for advanced students. As attested to in the memoirs of \*\*\*, \*\*\* had in the 1870’s: “many yeshivot, large and small. Almost every synagogue had its yeshiva students. There were also full-fledged yeshivot such as Blumke’s Kloyz, the small *beit midrash*, the synagogue of the butchers, water drawers, tailors, cobblers, and many other synagogues where yeshiva students studied. The city supported, and fed thousands of yeshiva students, and provided them lodging and places of study.” While the details of this account may be exaggerated, the picture seems, overall, historically accurate. The largest and most important yeshiva in the city, Blumke’s Kloyz, boasted some of the most talented locals as well as students hailing from other localities, earning the yeshiva considerable reputation. In the 1860’s a Tomchei Torah institution (that is, a study framework for married students) was founded in the city and soon afterwards a yeshiva was established in the synagogue of the שוליות. Sources discussing the Jewish community in \*\*\* yield a similar picture. We also see accounts of young, wealthy Torah scholars who spent time in *batei midrash* and yeshivot with more modest numbers, in smaller communities. It is true that most community *batei midrash*, as well as institutions in the suburbs of various cities, had only a few students. However, given the preponderance of these institutions, the overall number of young men studying in the region is quite impressive. Moreover, some of the urban yeshivot could equal the numbers of students studying in yeshivot in \*\*\*. For example, \*\*\* yeshiva in \*\*\*, had sixty students in the 1830’s, \*\*\* yeshiva would grow to five hundred students in the mid-19th century, and \*\*\* yeshiva in \*\*\*, had almost two hundred students in the 1840’s.

In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the system of communal *batei mdidrash* and yeshivot grew significantly in towns and small cities – whether through the expansion of existing yeshivot or the founding of new ones. Considering the susceptibility of many young Jews to the allure of growing trends such as secularization and trans-Atlantic emigration, this phenomenon seems, at first glance, quite remarkable. Nevertheless, the demographic growth of Jewish communities cannot be discounted; the growing Jewish population significantly enlarged the number of eligible young men available to study Torah.

Apart from local, communal factors, an important driving force behind the growth of the yeshiva system can be attributed to community rabbis who received posts during this period and who were, in all senses, products of the Lithuanian yeshiva system. Besides the basic need to train community rabbis במסגרת התייחסות ושיח, additional factors may have driven them to exert the effort: a feeling of crisis in the face of spreading secularization, the increasing numbers young men joining the ranks of nascent ideological movements (socialism and Zionism, for example) to whom Torah study and a religious lifestyle were not a priority, and the great waves of emigration which threatened the very fabric of community life. During this critical historical juncture, many local rabbis grabbed hold of a familiar and venerable mainstay – community Torah study – seeing in it the only hope for preserving the familiar lifestyle of centuries past. Almost paradoxically, the rabbinical response to crisis in this period resembled the response of R. Haim Volozhin in the early nineteenth century as well as that of R. Israel Salanter mid-century.

These institutions of learning expressed the importance of communal Torah study, a value anchored to a cultural-religious ethos which viewed the Jewish community as a “place of Torah.” The centrality of the yeshiva system in the communal consciousness is attested to by the unrelenting efforts to create and expand study frameworks, and by the ongoing efforts to ensure the continuity of local study institutions even during times of crisis. In addition, a community’s self-perception as a “place of Torah” was a consequence of the fame and prestige afforded to its local center of study. A community’s standing was directly correlated with the erudition of the local rabbi and no less by the extent to which prodigies and scholars flocked to its yeshiva or *beit midrash*. In fact, many of the prominent and renowned rabbis and Torah scholars of the time, chose to study in local institutions, preferring them to the more famous super-communal yeshivot. Thus, for example, \*\*\* studied in the *beit midrash* in \*\*\*, \*\*\* in Blumke’s Kloyz in \*\*\*, \*\*\* in the *beit midrash* in \*\*\*, \*\*\* in \*\*\*, \*\*\* in the yeshiva in \*\*\* and \*\*\*, and \*\*\* who also learned in the yeshiva in \*\*\*. Thus, at least in the eyes of their contemporaries, local yeshivot and *batei midrash* were no less important than Volozhin yeshiva and its offshoots. The super-communal yeshivot did not supplant the classic learning frameworks in Lithuania, but rather comprised, throughout the nineteenth century, one part of a whole: a wide and diverse network of learning institutions with different organizational structures, intended for different audiences: kloyzes open to all, *batei midrash* in towns and cities which offered semi-structured studies for both locals and foreigners, and local yeshivot which were managed and sometimes even funded by community institutions.

To a large extent we can characterize this process as the democratization of Torah study. If in former centuries Jewish society viewed Torah study as the prerogative of an intellectual elite it now offered the majority of young, local men a selection of study tracks tailored to individual talents. Unlike the elitist, super-communal yeshivot, a mixed voice emerges from the town yeshivot and *batei midrash*. “Young students who had yet to study Gemara independently,” sat alongside “advanced students, who could study the Gemara and its commentaries without a teacher’s assistance” as per Shaul Stampfer’s description. These institutions were part of the local milieu and represented an integral part of the fabric of community life. They can even be seen as bodies which contributed to the integration of local Jewish society. They provided solutions to diverse needs – for locals as well as young men hailing from nearby towns or far-flung communities, for those who sought to study Torah for its own sake, as well as those who wished to train themselves to receive *semikha* from the local rabbi. The allure of these institutions derived, among other things, from the fact that they offered a young man a full study track and a complete training regimen. This track had a gradated structure, beginning with a “small” yeshiva, continuing onto a “large” yeshiva and culminating in additional studies to perfect a student’s rabbinic practicum under the tutelage of local rabbis and *morei tzedek*. As a result, many young members of the Kehilla studied in these institutions, and it was in them that the future cadre of the community rabbinate was trained, a fact attested to by various rabbinic biographies. A quantitative review proves that a considerable number of young men preferred to study full time in these yeshivot and *batei midrash*, over large study halls in \*\*\*. In other words, institutions of learning in towns and cities were the primary context in which Torah study took place in nineteenth century Lithuania. Thus, for example, more than 800 rabbis examined in this study testify, explicitly or implicitly, that they studied exclusively in a town yeshiva or *beit midrash*. This group includes, besides those already mentioned, famous and influential community rabbis who, for one reason or another, have been forced to the margins of collective memory.

Why did these Torah scholars and rabbis, like many others, choose the old *beit midrash*, which stood on the verge of collapse (in both a literal and figurative sense) over the bustling study halls of other, more renowned, yeshivot? Several explanations can be offered, some familial, others sociological and economic. First and foremost, this phenomenon must be viewed in light of what local institutions offered – private study in a local *beit midrash* or in a local yeshiva. The independent student was unrestricted by the demanding organizational structure of the yeshiva and could decide for himself how much time he dedicated to study. This was an important consideration for the many students who needed to work, concurrent with their studies, to support their families. In addition to financial considerations, studying in a local yeshiva student allowed a student to circumvent the inherent hardships of “exiling oneself to a place of Torah,” an important consideration, especially for students with wives. However, we must also not discount the explanation offered by Rabbi \*\*\*, specifically if we wish to discuss members of the intellectual elite, the “*iluyyim*,” to use the terminology of the time. Describing the life of Rabbi \*\*\*, Rabbi \*\*\* writes: “He barely studied with a teacher and did not study in yeshivot and therefore the honor of his intellect was novel and the rote of teachers and colleagues was not imposed upon him. And, therefore, when he departed on his own path in the wisdom of the Torah, he had but one goal, and that is the truth.” Naturally, each super-communal yeshiva developed its own unique learning style, exerting a concrete influence on the thought patterns and analytical methods of its students. Most students internalized the methodology of their yeshiva and, with time, associated themselves with it, both mentally and societally. The independent Torah scholar, by contrast, was characterized by his unconventional method; seeking a methodologically open-minded framework, he had trouble fitting in to a structured yeshiva. He wanted to set out on his own unique path and sought to contend with textual and exegetical difficulties without falling back on conventional methods. Due to their greater flexibility, the local, community *beit midrash* and yeshiva were the ideal environment for those belonging to the intellectual elite even if they were not perfect for everyone.

However, there was a problem. Due to the social realities of the time and the traditional importance ascribed to tutelage under a rabbi, time spent in a famous yeshiva or in the vicinity of a famous rabbi was still considered important. Therefore, independent scholars adopted integrated study models. Most notable, was the practice of combining study in a town yeshiva with a period of study in a super-communal yeshiva. This need explains the itinerancy of many yeshiva students in the nineteenth century.

Halakhic knowledge, was a prerequisite for receiving a rabbinic post, and this knowledge was acquired during this period in a Torah scholar’s life – whether it was in a town yeshiva or a super-communal one. However, Jewish society did not offer the aspiring rabbi-to-be a structured curriculum for his training. Traditionally, the Jewish education system did not set as a goal the training of young men to become rabbis. Moreover, the constant movement of students from one yeshiva to the next precluded the formulation of a coherent curriculum with a pre-defined timeframe. This was how Rabbi \*\*\*, himself a product of this system, saw matters: “The education of rabbis, the leaders and teachers of the nation, is devoid of order or regimen. It is nothing but a great tumult, and those who falter outnumber those who remain standing. In the vast majority of yeshivot, from whence Torah comes forth, there is neither system nor path, each one goes in his own direction, especially the student who learns one *zman* (semester) here and in the next *zman* moves to another yeshiva and so on.”

These considerations notwithstanding, the question remains, to what extent did the yeshiva and *beit midrash* serve as *de facto* institutions of rabbinic training. Although the yeshiva was not formally defined as such, in practice a student began his training (in the broadest sense of the word) to receive *semikha* and become a rabbi, in its halls. It was here that the student memorized the necessary sections of the *Shulhan Arukh*; it was here that his scholarly repertoire was molded, a place where he learned for heaven’s sake; it was here that his personal and public profile was crystallized, determining whether he would become an expert of large swathes of Talmud or an adept at in-depth dialectics (or both); and it was here that he internalized his self-identity as a member of the rabbinic milieu. By frequenting various yeshivot and *batei midrash*, he could earn himself a reputation as the disciple of a famous rabbi. All these factors were calculated at that crucial point in which a rabbinical candidate would contend for posts in different communities. We should also note that in the biographies of community rabbis, great importance is ascribed to the fact that the subject of the biography received rabbinical *semikha* from a famous rabbi who studied in one of these *batei midrash* or yeshivot. This attests to the gulf between the role of the yeshiva as perceived by its founders and students and its role as perceived in the rabbinic milieu and in popular memory. Nevertheless, even though it was clear that study in a yeshiva or *beit midrash* was a necessary stepping stone on the way to the community rabbinate, the working assumption behind this conception was that the primary task of the community rabbi was halakhic adjudication. In other words, the more he studied Talmud and the writings of halakhic authorities in yeshiva, the better he would be able to carry out his future duties. Thus, regardless of where our protagonist studied for several years – be it a town yeshiva, a city yeshiva, or a super-communal yeshiva – he always embarked afterwards on the same path: the long route towards serving as a community rabbi. It is also the next stage of our discussion.

**2. *Semikha***

The first step towards the rabbinic throne was to receive *semikha.* A student who had spent some years studying in a yeshiva and was interested in receiving *semikha*, generally turned to the dean/head of the yeshiva. Another option – which while common at the beginning of the period under discussion, became far less so – was to receive *semikha* from the rabbi of the town or city in which he grew up. However, due to the importance ascribed to the figure conferring *semikha*, many sought to receive their rabbinical ordination from someone of renown. For this reason, many of those who studied in a local *beit midrash* would travel to a more famous yeshiva, Volozhin for example, for a limited amount of time, with the express purpose of receiving *semikha* from the dean/head of the yeshiva. Others would turn to rabbis who were known to be “generous” in conferring *semikha*, ordaining even those who only knew the required talmudic material superficially. For example, some rabbis would freely ordain “those who had no relatives to speak on their behalf. Or they would take pity on a [candidate], for he was a destitute and well-intentioned pauper, [thus hoping] to afford him the ability to make an honorable living.” This was the practice of rabbis such as \*\*\* (who in the second half of the nineteenth century was described as the leader of the generation), Rabbi \*\*\* (the dayyan and *moreh tzedek* in Vilna) as well as \*\*\* the rabbi of \*\*\*. These rabbis did not invent this practice; it was actually a venerable tradition hailing back to previous ages. This was possible for the simple reason that no clear criteria for receiving *semikha* were ever developed. Earning *semikha*, was solely dependent on the ordaining rabbi’s estimation of the candidate. Because yeshiva study in general usually included subjects considered relevant to the adjudication of Halakhah – such as tort law, the laws of sabbath, marital laws, and kashrut – someone who had studied a number of years was, for all intents and purposes, considered to have undergone the basic training necessary for the job. Some, however, did not look favorably on the ease by which anyone who desired *semikha* could receive it. For example, already in the fifteenth century Rabbi \*\*\* complained that “there are many with *semikha* but few with knowledge.” In this context, we can point to two factors which may have contributed to the growing prevalence of this trend:

1. The persistent deterioration of the status of the rabbinate, and the assumption, held by a considerable number of rabbis, that one’s chances of receiving a rabbinic post were dependent on trivial factors, many irrelevant to the nature of the job itself or to the candidate’s level of halakhic expertise.

2. The fact that unlike in earlier periods, in which *semikha* was subject to the authority of the local Kehilla, in this time period, it took place in a neutral zone – i.e. the yeshiva, which was not subject to community oversight.

The significance of this trend and its consequences cannot be emphasized enough. Perhaps most problematic was the abundance of rabbis who held the title without deserving it. “Due to our many sins” writes Rabbi \*\*\*, already in the sixteenth century, “there are many with *semikha* but few with knowledge [...] None knows his [proper] place and as soon as he has received *semikha* he begins to lord over [others] and to amass disciples with his great wealth [...] Thus there are elders who, due to our many sins, cannot even properly understand a piece of talmudic discourse [...] And having acquired no wisdom, they nevertheless lord over the community.” The growing number of unqualified rabbis during the nineteenth century resulted in a growing number of candidates for each available rabbinical post. As lamented by \*\*\*: “As the certificates of the rabbis diminished in value, so did swindlers, hypocrites and frauds abound; with their tricks they would produce certifications and befoul sacred, priestly virtues/values.” Against this backdrop we can understand the acrimonious critique emerging from the ranks of rabbis themselves – for example, Rabbi \*\*\*, who signed a document sent to the rabbinical assembly convened in Krakow in 1903:

Some married man, or even a bachelor who has learned the laws of prohibited [foods], who has neither status or honor in his own city, will travel to whichever rabbi he chooses and will request to receive *semikha.* The one receiving *semikha* does a great favor to the one conferring it, [spreading the latter’s] fame as one who [freely] ordains rabbis in Israel.

In an attempt to resolve this problem – which, as we have mentioned, was already prevalent in earlier centuries – some in the late nineteenth century proposed establishing a basic set of criteria for determine a candidate’s eligibility for *semikha*. This, however, failed to yield any results.

We can thus assume that at an early stage in his career, the young Torah scholar realized that the number of potential candidates far outnumbered the number of available jobs and realized that his path to the rabbinical throne, would not be easy. For this reason, some rabbinical candidates took the trouble to receive *semikha* from two, sometimes even three, rabbis, hoping to improve their chances of prevailing over competitors. In parallel, and for the same reason, many took pains to receive letters of commendation from famous rabbis “packages of certifications from the geniuses/great leaders of the time with much exaggeration of titles” to quote \*\*\*. Such letters would include an accounting of a young rabbi’s scholarly virtues as well as his excellence in preaching and interacting with the public.

**3. “Do not give your strength to the rabbinate!”**

While still learning in a yeshiva, or in a community *beit midrash*, the young student had to make decisions about his future. One would think, given his options, that the community rabbinate was the most logical choice; it was a position in which he could implement his studies, realizing ideology and religion while also making a living. However, a review of the data available to us demonstrates that most yeshiva or *beit midrash* students eschewed the rabbinate. We can propose a number of reasons for this reluctance: 1) Cultural sphere: Villages/Shtetlach and small towns, especially those without a local yeshiva, did not generally enjoy a social level that could provide a proper scholarly and cultural environment for those who had spent two or three years studying in yeshivot such as \*\*\*, \*\*\*, or \*\*\*.

2) Standards of living – among some of the more talented students, those who seemed most worthy of filling the roll of community rabbi, were those who felt that their scholarly talents may reflect analogous talents in trade and finance. Such students naturally turned to the latter vocations which, at the time, were considered more prestigious than and preferable to the rabbinate. In addition, it should be noted that successful merchants and businessman seeking good marriages for their daughters specifically sought yeshiva students. Thus, many yeshiva students, who found such a marriage, would soon find themselves working in the businesses of their in-laws.

Interestingly, we often see these young men who had opted to pursue careers in business, filling rabbinical roles in towns and communities, years later. This was not, however, due to a retrospective realization of the importance of the rabbinate or disillusionment from the world of business, but rather something far more trivial – failure. This could be the result of a young man’s inability to successfully navigate the intricacies of the business world, or due to the business failures of his in-laws. The extent of this phenomenon is attested to by Rabbi \*\*\* who writes “I worked in business and I, like most students, did not succeed in business.” Only at this stage, after they had lost everything and were seeking a livelihood, would these students turn to the almost only option available for monetizing their scholarly potential and knowledge garnered from years of study – the community rabbinate. As described by the rabbi of the Jewish community in \*\*\*:

In my youth, I fled from the rabbinate and eschewed the use of the crown of Torah. [Instead,] I chose to try my hand at trade. But man’s thoughts are vanity and God did not bless my trade. And so, in the year 5622 [1861/1862] I lost thousands of rubles and was left with nothing. Finally, I was forced to make a living from the rabbinate.

A review of the biographies of community rabbis in the time and place under study shows that even some of the most prominent students and rabbis of the period underwent a similar process, some of whom even went on to occupy a central place in the “rabbinic republic.”

3) Terms of employment – the community rabbi’s life was, to a large extent, dominated by his communal work. The following description, written by \*\*\*, who was himself a member of a rabbinic family, portrays this reality vividly:

The house of the rabbi is designated for punishment, trouble, and strife. Every man who is bitter and distressed, every itinerant, and every beggar, whoever has had his house or store burnt down, every exile and wanderer, every man receiving charity from the *gabbai* and every member of bourgeoisie, [from them all] emerges the same refrain: “to the rabbi! He sits tranquil and quiet, he has his bread, his life is secure, and he has expertise!”

A firsthand account of this difficult aspect of the community rabbi’s life appears in a letter from 1899 written by Rabbi \*\*\*:

The rabbi (head of the court) is enslaved with his entire and body and soul to his Kehilla, days as well as nights, without proper regulation and order [...] And at any time, anyone can enter his chambers and disturb him from his studies, to pester him to their hearts’ content. Ever since I have arrived here, I have been unable, despite my best efforts, to rid myself of people and disturbances, to relieve myself of the hindrances and wasting of time which trouble me.

It is therefore quite understandable that some students viewed the rabbinic route favorably, and even received the training necessary to fill this role, but ultimately failed to realize their dream in light of the difficult life a community rabbi was expected to lead. In summary, it seems that Rabbi \*\*\*’s bitter lament, certainly did not encourage the young student to choose the career of a community rabbi:

Good man! Do not come hither. Do not give your strength to the rabbinate! Flee from it! Be a craftsman or a trader. Whether you make more money or less, you will eat your bread and [benefit from your] handiwork, in peace. Do not worry about the public. Do not be joined to idols. Rather mingle with the people; see but do not be seen. Fear God, and do not hate others.

In fact, spending an extended amount of time in yeshiva was considered an ideal, albeit not necessary, stage in the life of the young Jew who displayed a talent for learning; it was perceived as the fulfillment of the ideal form of learning: Torah study for its own sake. As described by Emmanuel Atkes, the consensus among yeshiva students in nineteenth century Lithuanian was that “it is not fitting for a young student to study Torah with the goal of becoming a rabbi.” We can thus see in the high demand for *semikha*, a long-term investment, an attempt to ensure one’s ability to contend with other candidates over rabbinical posts in the future and a contingency plan if other opportunities failed to materialize.

That being said, throughout the period studied in this book, there was no shortage of rabbinic candidates, even in small or remote communities. We can provide a number of reasons: 1) A sense of calling - the rabbinate was conceived as the highest and ultimate expression of internalizing the religious ethos, as well as an opportunity to actualize this ethos by sharing it with the wider public. Those driven by such an ethos saw in the position a calling, and therefore ascribed little importance to the troubles described above. 2) Employment – in the period under study there was a consistent deterioration in Jewish employment. Because of the growing difficulty in finding sources of income, young yeshiva students were forced to seriously consider the possibility of becoming community rabbis, even if the vocation was not their first choice. This is also the reason why some were willing to compromise and receive a rabbinical appointment in small or remote towns. For example, we can cite the case of Rabbi \*\*\*, born in \*\*\* in \*\*\*, who due to financial straits was compelled to search far and wide for a rabbinical post, going so far as \*\*\*. In addition, there is no doubt that the constant growth of the yeshiva and *beit midrash* – which in turn led to a growing number of potential candidates, especially in the nineteenth century –contributed to this trend. 3) Exemption from draft – the exemption from being drafted into the Russian army, enjoyed by those who served as community rabbis, was, without a doubt, an important factor for those considering pursuit of the rabbinic vocation.

Given these considerations, many students must have suppressed their reservations and concerns. Due to the reasons mentioned above, many of those vying to be community rabbis did not hale from the scholarly elites, and were even far from the ideal candidates, whether in terms of their personalities or their ability to contend with the halakhic challenges. Nevertheless, and as opposed to the claim of Uriel Gelman that real talmudic scholars eschewed rabbinic posts, the community rabbinate in the nineteenth century, in small communities and large, boasted some of the greatest talmudic scholars of the time. Some were invited by communities, often large ones of high repute, to fill the rabbinic throne, some saw in the position a calling – even a challenge – and others accepted the job due to financial straits. This latter category is described vividly by contemporaries:

In his youth, the boy will go through stages of forgiving yeshivot; he will eat bread with salt but not be sated; he will sleep on the ground and live a life of pain. Afterwards, he will find a redeemer, a man who gives him shelter and gives to him his daughter as a wife, who promises him [wealth as great] as mountains. Immediately after the wedding [his father in law] will say to him, “I have nothing to do with you; I have already given you a wife, what more do you want from me!? You have your cloak/prayer shawl and your watch. Take your staff in hand, and exile yourself to a place of Torah, prosper and ride on until you attain a rabbinical post. As for I, this is the kindness I am willing to do for you: I will provide for your wife for a year or two until you attain a rabbinical post. [However, in truth] you are obligated to sustain her [yourself] as is written explicitly in her Ketuba.” Our groom, what will he do? He will take his staff in hand and walk until he arrives at the refuge of the Pharisees or one of the large yeshivot [...] until rabbis rest their hands upon him [=give him *semikha*], and he becomes an ordained rabbi.

Thus, after vacillating and deliberating, the young scholar would finally embark on his long journey, hoping to find himself, at its end, sitting upon a rabbinic throne.

After receiving *semikha*, and before actively searching for open rabbinic posts, some young scholars would spend time further preparing themselves for their future role. Some, such as \*\*\* and \*\*\*, spent time in the local *beit midrash* in the town of their in-laws, studying with the town rabbi, and assisting him in his tasks, sometimes even filling in for him during his absence. Others would spend this period serving as *morei tzedek*, or as *magidei meisharim* (preachers), dayyanim, teachers, lecturers in yeshivot, synagogue rabbis or sermonizers in various communities. In some senses, this period was a compensation for the lack of theoretical rabbinic training received during a student’s study in yeshiva, as well as an opportunity to receive practical experience, preparing him for future challenges and familiarizing him with the position. Finally, this period could significantly contributed to the advancement of a scholar’s candidacy as a potential heir to the local rabbi after he finished his tenure – especially if the young scholar was his son or son-in-law.

**4. “An Absent Rabbi is the Norm”**

When word spread that a rabbinic post had become vacant, whether because the previous rabbi had moved on to another community or passed away, it may have seemed to the young scholar that his road to the rabbinic throne had finally been opened. However, he quickly learned, to his dismay, the lack of necessary correlation between a vacant rabbinic post and the intention – or willingness – to fill it. Some have attributed to the community rabbi a central role in the molding of Jewish communal life. This is the prevailing conception in Orthodox historiography which views the rabbi as the leader of the community. One would think, therefore, that with the opening of a rabbinic vacancy the community and its institutions would frenetically scramble to find a new candidate to fill the position. This was indeed the case in some communities where residents would swiftly take measures to fill the post as soon as possible. In some rare cases this was even done soon after the death of the previous rabbi. Such was the case for example in the Jewish community of \*\*\* in \*\*\*: when Rabbi \*\*\*, passed away “they appointed for themselves as rabbi and teacher the son of the Rabbi, genius/great leader and sage Rabbi \*\*\*, and already in the cemetery all agreed unanimously, and all signed upon it.” However, if we examine the rabbinic appointment process in more than sixty communities, the average time it took to select a new community rabbi after the opening of a vacancy, was one year. In some communities, things were very different, and the rabbinic appointment process would be deferred for an extended period, sometimes even lasting a number of years. Like many of the phenomena discussed in this book, this unwillingness and lethargy in finding a new rabbi was nothing new, having deep roots in the history of Jewish communities in Central and Eastern Europe and even in the Middle East. Early evidence of this can be gleaned from the fact that the delegates of the Council of Four Lands saw necessary to publicize a decree obligating “every Kehilla to appoint a head of court and a *moreh tzedek*.” Such an injunction shows not only that this was a reality already in the seventeenth century, but also that it was a prevalent enough to require public censure from an authoritative body. Thus, for example, after the decree was issued, the community of \*\*\* selected a rabbi in 1666, after “much time with no rabbi in charge.” We can further learn about the prevalence of the trend from decrees issued by the “Council of Moravia” (1656) and the “Council of the State of Lithuania” (1664) regarding the obligation of a selected rabbi not to delay his arrival for a period of more than three months. Furthermore, an analysis of the sources demonstrates that in many cases the absence of a community rabbi was not limited in time or scope, and that the interim between rabbis could extend to a number of years.

The case of a communities, whether small ones or large ones with an important status in the Jewish world, not rushing to fill rabbinic posts, has not eluded the attention of scholars of Jewish society in Eastern Europe. Haim Gertner and Saul Stampfer have already noted the significant number of small communities which had no community rabbi in the nineteenth century, especially towards the century’s close. However, whereas Gertner (who studied the phenomenon in Galicia) attributed this reality to the lack of candidates who met the formal requirement set by the government, Stampfer attributes it to the declining status of the community rabbinate already in the late eighteenth century, a trend which would only be exacerbated in the nineteenth. As mentioned, Gertner’s explanation is irrelevant as far as the Russian Empire is concerned, there being no formal requirements to be a “spiritual rabbi,” standards being reserved for the official “crown rabbi.” As far as Stampfer’s claim, even if we accept that the community rabbinate suffered from a diminished status, an examination of the relevant sources reveals additional causes behind the phenomenon – some of which, were not related to a principled stance towards the rabbinate but rather to personal, political, economic and social factors. To demonstrate this, I will present some of the most common of causes:

1. In many cases, a deceased community rabbi would leave behind a widow and even several orphans. Because the financial agreement reached between the rabbi and committee did not address such a contingency, widows and orphans could expect to suffer from debilitating financial woes. In some communities there were attempts to address this issue by creating a formal obligation on the community’s behalf to financially assist the family of a deceased rabbi. However, because the funds designated by the community to support the rabbi and his family were limited, it was impossible to support a widow and her children while also paying the salary of a new rabbi, especially not for any protracted period. Given these circumstances, various communities decided to defer the appointment of a new rabbi for a number of years, using the rabbi’s salary, or part of it, to support the previous rabbi’s widow. Such a situation could leave a community without a rabbi for an indefinite amount of time.
2. One of the issues faced by many rabbis in the period and location under discussion was irregular payment of their salaries; sometimes rabbis would receive nothing for long stretches of time. I will discuss the causes of this phenomenon in later chapters, but here we should mention two of the most common. One is the community’s inability to pay salaries. This could lead, among other things, to the appointment of one rabbi for two or more nearby communities. Thus, for example, in the late eighteenth century, Rabbi Aryeh Leib Schalmen served as rabbi of Kretinga, Palanga, and Draubean in north western Lithuania, at the same time.

The second reason, was the unwillingness, or in some cases the inability of leaseholders of taxes on various goods (meat, salt etc.) or the provision of vital services (such as bathhouses) to pay their dues. This was despite the fact that they were expected to set aside predetermined sums from their income to pay the rabbi’s salary. Due to these interests, various sectors in the community actively worked to delay, as much as possible, the appointment of a new rabbi. This was made possible by the political and economic status of such circles as well as the extent of their influence over the local community.

1. However, the primary and most common reason for delaying the appointment of a new community rabbi, was the internal dispute associated with the process (see more below). A review of the many sources describing the appointment process demonstrates that controversy over rabbinical candidates was an inevitable part of the selection process. As Rabbi \*\*\* describes it: “when a rabbi is missing from a city, opinions abound. One will pick one rabbi, another will pick another rabbi, and thus dispute will arise.”

As shown by scholars of the rabbinate in Germany, Holland, Italy, France and even the Middle East, this phenomenon was certainly not unique to Lithuania. Nevertheless, the picture arising from the following descriptions, suggests that the extent of the phenomenon grew over the course of the nineteenth century in Eastern Europe, reaching unprecedented proportions:

Who does not know of the divergent opinions and the schism of hearts which has overtaken this community [\*\*\*] because of the selection of a rabbi and teacher? Who does not recall the strong [opinions] and the arguments exchanged for years between the different groups? Who is not astonished by the multitude of rabbis who have applied for this position? They came to be tested, but their desire to be selected was left unfulfilled. This [rabbi] did not find favor in someone’s eyes, and this rabbi was not considered upright. Another [rabbi] was not accepted by those whose hearts throb with the spirit of the [modern] era, and another [rabbi] was not deemed suitable and fitting. And thus, an important Jewish community sat like a widow, despairing, for many years.

Another account echoes this account:

It is a weighty/great matter to select a rabbi. Even in peaceful cities it will empower the satan, summoning him to dance and incite men and families against one another. [The selection of rabbi] has turned our community [\*\*\*] into a medley, susceptible to hardship and condemned to dispute. And the discord within it has burst into flames, reaching the heavens. The rabbis who came to our city left as soon as they arrived, and the masses know that it is a time of strife.

While in many communities in central Europe the source of such disputes was a conflict between conservatives/traditionalists and innovators/modernists/maskilim, in Lithuania discord over the selection of the rabbi generally lacked an ideological component. Moreover, as already mentioned by Saul Stampfer, in many cases the dispute did not even revolve around the qualities or shortcoming of a specific candidate. The controversy was instead an extension of local power struggles between opposing interest groups, especially those divided along economic lines. For example, one group would claim that the son or son in law of the previous rabbi had the right to succeed him whereas others wished to curtail this right, or two influential families in the community would vie over who would control this prestigious position. Regardless of underlying causes, these conflicts and disputes caused constant delays in the appointment of a new rabbi, so much so, that some potential candidates were unwilling to even apply for the post. A notable example of the latter was Rabbi \*\*\*, rabbi of \*\*\*, who described for the readers of *Hamelitz* the reasons why he declined to compete over a rabbinical post in a larger community:

As a rule, I will not bestir myself to wander about in new locales and to rise through the ranks of the rabbinate. In my opinion, many people better and greater than me stand in the shadow of the ladder, at the heels of those who grab and who jump ahead, passing them in every way [...] And I do not feel that I have any talent for prevailing in the terrible competition which today dominates the rabbinic market.

One way to overcome the challenges posed by a vacant post was to appoint a temporary rabbi for a short period of time. Alternatively, some communities would employ the services of a rabbi from nearby town or city. Nevertheless, and as argued correctly by Saul Stampfer, a Jewish community could function even without a community rabbi and without significantly harming the basic religious lifestyle its residents. Answers to halakhic questions – primarily those related to kashrut and family purity – could generally be provided by a local Torah scholar or, in other cases, by a *moreh tzedek*. A *moreh tzedek* was a yeshiva student/Torah scholar sometimes even with *semikha*, who was appointed to this position by the community institutions. His income was based on payments in exchange for providing services to those seeking their halakhic advice. The *moreh tzedek* took the place of the community rabbi when it came to officiating at weddings as well as in other areas under his authority. As David Schifman describes in the case of the Jewish community of \*\*\*:

They realized that the absence of a rabbi had become a fact, and that its maintaining it would be a loss. In this time, many rabbis in small cities, besides failing to improve the prestige of their people, would also incite factions to fight with each other. [This being the case,] why should they appoint a leader who in his haughtiness and superiority would trample on the heads of the people, while failing to accomplish anything? They concluded, therefore, that they should appoint a *moreh* [*tzedek*] to rule on issues of kashrut, who would have no responsibility over community issues.

This also applied to the judicial system which operated in large urban or rural communities. The local court, which was also comprised of local Torah scholars, occupied itself with sundry subjects, for example, presiding over monetary disputes or issuing a divorce document. Like the *morei tzedek*, the court was also not supported by community funds. The disputants in a court case would pay the salaries of the dayyanim, beadles and court scribes. The community sermon, which was also one of the rabbi’s traditional duties, could also be filled by others: whether by a local preacher, referred to in the contemporary parlance as a *magid mesharim*, or an itinerant preacher. Thus, a community could operate for an extended period of time without a community rabbi. His absence was marked primarily by the sight of his empty chair in synagogue as well as communal discourse which would continue to ruminate over the subject of his absence.

We can thus understand young Torah scholars who favored the option of serving as a community rabbi but failed to pursue this goal once they had concluded their studies in yeshiva. In fact, if we examine the system of the various rabbinic job-holders in communities – such as *morei tzedek*, preachers, dayyanim, and synagogue rabbis, who all studied for a number of years in yeshivot and *batei midrash* – we see that many scholars began their rabbinic career after filling one of these positions. Some would continue serving in such positions for the rest of their lives, while others saw it as a springboard to a rabbinic post.

Let us return to our protagonist, the young yeshiva student, searching for an open rabbinic post. All of the factors discussed in this chapter must have had an influence on his decision making, directly or indirectly. If the rabbinic post he desired lay in a community which was lethargic in its attempts to fill the position, then our yeshiva student would have to expand the scope of his search. However, even if the cases described did not affect him personally, they still impacted the number of available rabbinic posts available and thus reduced the likelihood that he would attain the object of his desire – a rabbinic post.