# **Chapter 2:**

# **“So that his honor may dwell in our midst”**

*<Explanation: blue denotes additions to the source for clarity or style; purple denotes my comments and questions; yellow denotes two alternatives. Please feel free to be in touch with any questions or comments and/or to send me back the text if you would like me to make any corrections -Avi K. >*

**1. Finding a Rabbi**

Delays and obstacles aside, at some point the community institutions <or perhaps just: “the community”> would decide to appoint a community rabbi. Generally, this was not motivated by any concrete impairment to religious life in the community but rather by a hallowed tradition that regarded the rabbi an inseparable part of Jewish communal life.

In some places, this tradition was enshrined in explicit ordinances, defining any Jewish collective with a minimum amount of families or tax-payers as a “Kehilla” and obligating it to appoint a *moreh tzedek* or a rabbi. The organized selection process that became prevalent in the Ashkenazi cultural sphere – e.g., who was considered a suitable candidate and whether to appoint a local or someone from elsewhere – can already be discerned in the early fourteenth century. Sometimes local ordinances even dictated criteria for the selection process, such as restrictions on familial connections between candidates and those entrusted with choosing them, prerequisites for candidates, such as a minimum age or a minimum number of years of marriage, and terms of employment such as whether the rabbi could be allowed to have another source of income during his tenure <I restructured the preceding sentence>. As was the practice in the Middle Ages, the selection of the rabbi was the prerogative of the Kahal, the highest institution of local Jewish community. Sometimes another, broader body also needed to provide its assent to the appointment, such as the council of “tovim” <yes?> or all the tax-payers in the community. However, it should be recalled that in earlier eras the Kahal was not an entirely autonomous body. In fact, until the late eighteenth century, the appointment of a community rabbi in Poland was dependent, first and foremost, on the approval of local government officials (and this continued to be the procedure in Austria up until the nineteenth century). For the Jewish communities in the Tsarist Empire, the need to receive government approval was dispensed with gradually after the final partition of Poland and the Russian take-over the area which would be later known as the Pale of Settlement. At the beginning of the Russian period, the rabbi still carried an official, recognized status and approval from the authorities was still required. However, beginning in 1835, with the creation of the institution known as the Crown Rabbinate, the Spiritual Rabbi (Duchovny Ravin) lost his official status (except in the Congress of Poland). As a result, government authorities had no say in the latter’s appointment. This trend became more pronounced in the early 1850’s with the publication of an ordinance which required all weddings and divorces be officiated by the Crown Rabbi. Ceremonies performed by anyone else – including the Spiritual Rabbi – were not considered legally binding. There was not even an super-communal body with any kind of authority over the various communities and their appointment choices as was the case in France or in Moravia (in the form of the State Rabbi). Thus, by the mid-eighteenth century, each Jewish community in the Pale of Settlement had complete autonomy to choose whomever it saw fit to serve as its Spiritual Rabbi.

It is important to emphasize that selecting a community rabbi meant more than simply filling an organizational role. Prevailing in the collective consciousness was a holistic conception of what a rabbi ought to be, be it his character or the tasks he was expected to fulfill. As described by \*\*\*:

Every community which [decides to] select for itself a rabbi or a *moreh tzedek*, wishes to find a spiritual man who will lead them with a life of Torah to which they are accustomed <המפורשים וידועים להם> and who will rule on matters of kashrut. <איסור והיתר> [...] The rabbi or *moreh tzedek* must be like a watchman leading his community. He must observe and know what they lack. He must awake them and induce them to do all that is good and beneficial [for themselves]. He must oversee the education of the boys and steer a path for the fathers to raise their children on the basis of Torah, morality, and good behavior [*Derekh Eretz*] <it’s hard to translate מוסר and derekh eretz separately; or does he mean hear derekh eretz in the sense of a career?>, the latter being superior to Torah itself. [...] This is the obligation of the rabbi and *moreh tzedek* and it takes precedence over ruling on matters of kashrut.

It is safe to assume that not every community had the same set of priorities when it came to selecting a rabbi. Nevertheless, during the period under discussion, the process of selecting a rabbi did follow some relatively uniform conventions. Those who considered themselves suitable candidates were expected to submit their application and to present *semikha* certificates and recommendation letters. They were also expected make their debut before the local community in the form of a public sermon. Applicants were ranked and sorted, and a final candidate was selected. <here I made a new paragraph>

It is important, however, to distinguish between the process as conducted in large, prestigious urban communities and communities in smaller towns or *shtetlach*. In the former, the practice was to offer the rabbinic throne to famous, well-known figures, who were also expected to serve as the community’s chief rabbinical justice (*Rav Av Beit Din*). This practice, based on large communities’ own sense of self-importance and facilitated by the financial resources at their disposal, had already become a norm in previous eras. Accounts from communities such as \*\*\* and others clearly support this. Likewise, important communities in eastern Europe, such as \*\*\*, followed the same procedure. <new paragraph added>

A characteristic example was the appointment process of the rabbi of \*\*\*, in the second half of the eighteenth century. In 1862, after the deaths of Rabbi \*\*\* and Rabbi \*\*\* who served as head of court, it was announced <התפרסמה הידיעה; was it in a newspaper? Or do you just mean word got out?> that “the community of Jews in this place have deliberated and decided to call upon the rabbi and great genius/leader \*\*\* from [the community of] \*\*\* to be head of court, and a rabbi preacher/teacher<ר”מ = רב מגיד?> in our city. In the coming days they will petition him with an open letter to accept this post.” However, the heads of the community in \*\*\* did not sit idly by. They decided that “great is the honor of our rabbi in our eyes, and we will hold onto him and support his endeavors so that his honor may continue to dwell in our midst.” Due to this opposition, \*\*\* ultimately failed to appoint \*\*\* as their community rabbi.

The lengths to which the community of \*\*\* was willing to go to appoint a prestigious rabbinic figure is illustrated by the behaviors of communal institutions <or perhaps just: “by an incident which took place”> in the 1880’s. After the post had remained vacant for some twenty years, it was decided that the time had come to appoint a community rabbi. At first, “the idea was born in the hearts of prestigious members of our community to search for and request a *gadol hador* [a great leader of the generation]; they selected fifteen men, granting them the power and authorization to find a great leader.” The “great leader,” in this case, was none other than Rabbi \*\*\*, the community rabbi of \*\*\*, one of the most prominent and famous rabbis in Europe at the time. According to several sources, to convince him to take the position, the community of \*\*\* presented him with the following offer: “[in order] to support the great leader’s needs, he will be given between 2 and 3 thousand rubles [a year] <yes?>, besides [what will be provided] by the income of the city which will provide a regular <בעתה> sum of money as is the practice to [give to] rabbis <כמשפט הרבנים>. They also were willing to give the chosen [rabbi], a fine home <דירה נאה> with fine furniture, payed for by the community.” This was a very generous offer. And considering the great prestige ascribed to the rabbinate of \*\*\*, it is no surprise that on principle \*\*\* “was inclined to accept the rabbinic scepter” offered to him. He, however, had one condition: that “our community would provide him 2,000 rubles in advance as a loan לקרן קיימת.” <I’m not certain what this means in this context perhaps it means without interest?>

However, upon hearing that \*\*\* might leave their city, the community of \*\*\* began to publicly discuss the possible consequences of such a move. \*\*\*, the rabbi’s loyal, personal secretary, made an concerted effort to scuttle the negotiations with \*\*\*. As was his practice, \*\*\* avoided discussing the personal interests driving \*\*\* to consider accepting the offer from \*\*\*. \*\*\* instead explained \*\*\*’s deliberations by pointing to communal issues such as \*\*\*’s ill treatment of Torah scholars in the city, or the poor economic conditions suffered by local rabbis and *morei tzedek*. If \*\*\* was to leave \*\*\* (so \*\*\* argued), this could have a detrimental effect on the community’s welfare system. The obvious conclusion was that every effort should be made to keep \*\*\* in the city because: “a community which appoints a great rabbi in Torah as its chief, will find him to be a vessel filled with the blessing of unity; and there shall be peace for he who is near and he who is far.” By turning the focus of the discussion to the poorer classes of the community and the circumstances of local *morei tzedek*, \*\*\* diverted community attention from \*\*\*’s monetary demands, depicting him as a figure chiefly concerned with the good of the community. \*\*\*’s personal motives should, however be kept in mind; as \*\*\*’s personal secretary, he wielded significant political clout and had every interest to keep \*\*\* in \*\*\*. <added new paragraph>

Whether or not \*\*\*’s claims had any substance, the community of \*\*\* acceded to at least some of \*\*\*’s demands. The problem was that the members of the finding committee in \*\*\* were willing to acquiesce to these demands as well. Ultimately however, public opposition in \*\*\* – it seems, due to the financial strain it would place upon community funds – prevented the plan from moving forward: “The great rabbi declined to take the money or the rabbinical post, for those who opposed [him] sent letters and telegrams to dissuade him from coming to our city.” Once the community leadership had failed to attract \*\*\*, the finding committee continued its efforts and turned to another “great leader,” Rabbi \*\*\* from \*\*\*. Once again, however, they failed to attract him to accept the position. The question of who to appoint rabbi was only resolved two years later. Rabbi \*\*\* one of the most talented Torah scholars of the time and later even known as the “great leader from \*\*\*,” was chosen to fill the rabbinic throne of \*\*\*.

The example of two communities fighting over one rabbi was neither unique nor exceptional. A similar incident took place 1914. In this case, the two sides were the Jewish communities of \*\*\* and \*\*\*. The affair began in 1908, when Rabbi \*\*\* was chosen to serve as the community rabbi of \*\*\*. This was after the city had not had a rabbi for many years. His appointment was renewed in 1913. However, during this period, a small group of his opponents in \*\*\* maneuvered to withhold his salary, traditionally funded by the kosher <yes?> meat tax. While the community made sure that his salary would not be affected, this lack of faith prompted \*\*\* to search for a rabbinical post elsewhere. Among others, he turned to the community of \*\*\* in Poland, which just so happened to be searching for a prestigious, famous rabbi at the time. During the negotiations, which took place without the knowledge of the community of \*\*\*, a preliminary contract was drafted. According to the members of \*\*\*, \*\*\* even helped draft the contract although it was never actually given to him. \*\*\* sent an emissary to \*\*\* on his behalf, “to spy on all the matters of the city.” At the same time an emissary was sent by \*\*\* to \*\*\* to receive \*\*\*’s explicit assent. \*\*\* did not just agree, he gave his commitment in writing, which was delivered to the heads of the community in \*\*\*. In this context, “the writ of rabbinic appointment was written and signed in accordance with the will of the rabbi and great leader, by all parties in the community.” When word got out in \*\*\*, a communal effort was made to dissuade \*\*\* from carrying out his plan. Among other things, they claimed that the writ given to him by the community of \*\*\* was only signed on the condition that the community of \*\*\* would agree. Their efforts proved successful, and \*\*\* informed the members of \*\*\* that he could not move to their city. He proposed that the dispute be resolved in a rabbinic court.

The leaders of \*\*\* did not, however, give up easily. A selection committee was convened <in source: the elections which took place in the community, but was it a communal election or just a committee?>, and \*\*\* was chosen by a clear majority. They therefore quickly sent a delegation to \*\*\* with a writ of rabbinic appointment. While the delegation was in \*\*\*, both sides agreed that the issue should be resolved in the court of Rabbi \*\*\* of \*\*\* and both agreed to accept the court’s ruling. The arbitration process began in the beginning of March 1914. \*\*\* ruled that the community of \*\*\* “had won the case, both legally and morally <יושר>.” Despite its earlier commitment, \*\*\* decided not to obey the ruling, and even refused an offer by the community of \*\*\* to hold another court case headed by three of the most prestigious rabbis in Poland. The community of \*\*\*, took measures to prevent the ruling being implemented; they turned to the Russian authorities, asking them to prevent \*\*\* from leaving the city before the end of his tenure, as stipulated in his original appointment. <shouldn’t you say what happened? was this successful was this the end of the controversy?>

Despite the picture described, it is clear that both in the case of \*\*\* and that of \*\*\*, in addition to \*\*\* and \*\*\*, there were many other rabbis who considered themselves suitable candidates for the position. In other words, the problem of filling rabbinic posts was not from want of suitable candidates. It was rather a consequence of the high bar set by communities who expected a community rabbi with a prestigious image and a high public status. While things were different in communities with less stringent criteria, reputation and experience were certainly sought after. Because a rabbinical post in a large city was considered an honor, a vacancy meant a large number of people considered themselves suitable/ a vacancy meant many rabbis would apply for the post. For example, during the selection process for the rabbi of \*\*\* in 1913, no less than ten candidates, some of the most prominent and famous rabbis of the time, were proposed. Because the demand for rabbinic positions far outweighed the supply, the community had an acute advantage, which was also reflected in the status of the rabbi who was chosen. < דבר שניכר גם במעמדו של הרב שנבחר, I’m not sure I understood this> Here we should note that smaller communities sometimes also aspired to appoint a “great leader,” even when they were unable to bear the heavy financial burden this would entail. The claim, prevalent in Orthodox hagiography, that some rabbis preferred to serve in small communities so they could dedicate the majority of their time Torah study, is an idealization of the past. The reality was quite different. A rabbinic post in a large, prestigious community was considered the culmination of a rabbinic career. From the cases described above, it is clear that the elitist self-perception of large communities considerably limited the chances of certain candidates from receiving the job. Talented rabbis who were either young, at the beginning of their careers, or had only served in small communities and failed to push their way into the collective consciousness of the public, had trouble finding positions that matched their talents.

**2. It is Difficult to be a Prophet in One’s Own City <**אין נביא בעירו since it’s not used in the text I think a different expression should be used here for the English reader; perhaps dispense with the quote and write: **2. Inheritance of the Rabbinate>**

If we return to medium and small communities, sometimes, the first option was to fill a rabbinic position by exhausting the most available and immediate option – that is, by bequeathing the rabbinate to the son or son-in-law of the previous rabbi. This practice was a venerable one, deeply rooted in the history of Jewish communities; the subject was discussed extensively in community ordinances, rabbinic literature, and public discourse, and has featured prominently in academic scholarship. In fact, many sons and sons-in-law of incumbent rabbis, considered themselves natural successors and eagerly awaited for the position to become open. They sometimes assumed that a rabbinic post rightfully belonged <חזקה> to a father or father-in-law and maintained that he had the right to pass onto his heir. Until the position became vacant, many of these would-be successors would serve in various community positions (as described above) or even as the rabbis of smaller communities. They considered this both a training period as well as a springboard to the position they desired. <new paragraph>

With the death of the incumbent rabbi, the possibility of bequeathing his position to his son or son-in-law was considered, and sometimes even realized. This could be for one of the several reasons mentioned above or due to the rabbi’s explicit request, a clause in his will, pressure from his widow, or a recommendation of a famous rabbinic figure. In some cases, while it was decided, on principle, that the position be bequeathed, the heir was still too young or had yet to receive *semikha*. The community was sometimes willing to wait for the heir to attain the training or age required. During this time, the rabbi’s family did everything in its power not to lose its hold on the rabbinic position, <חזקת הרבנות> sometimes hiring a *moreh tzedek* who filled the position of the future-rabbi until the latter was suitable to serve. Similarly, if the deceased rabbi was childless, or if none of his children was a suitable candidate – as happened, for example, in 1899 in the town of \*\*\*, Lithuania – it was sometimes stipulated that the successor marry the daughter of his predecessor. We can see the prevalence of this practice from a bulletin/advertisement published by the Jewish community in the town of \*\*\* after the death of Rabbi \*\*\*. It stated: “the people of the city have decided not to accept just any rabbi <I omitted יהיה מי שיהיה to make it flow better>. Rather they will search for an unmarried man with *semikha* <omitted “להוראה” as I think *semikha* covers that in English>, one suited to the rabbinic crown, to marry the daughter of the rabbi, may his memory be for a blessing, and [receive] with it the rabbinate, as is already the custom in the cities of Israel.”

As far as appointing the heir, in many cases the deceased rabbi’s family would enlist the aid of famous rabbinic figures attending the funeral, having them essentially force their opinion on the community. This happened after the death of \*\*\*, rabbi of the town of \*\*\*. During his funeral, attended by Rabbis \*\*\* and \*\*\*. They asked those present “to gather together and make plans to care for the orphans, [...]to consult with one another, and to send for the son-in-law of the rabbi and great genius/leader, our teacher Rabbi \*\*\*, that he should come here and accede to the throne of his deceased father-in-law, and educate the orphans. They [=the members of the community] did not leave the synagogue until they had drafted and signed the writ of rabbinic appointment.” Although \*\*\*’s son-in-law, Rabbi \*\*\*, lacked any experience as a community rabbi, and even though there were other candidates who were no less, if not more qualified, \*\*\* and his two partners based their decision on other criteria – it was not the scholastic excellence or the public status of \*\*\* that mattered to them, but rather his familial connections and the importance of assuring the financial welfare of the deceased rabbi’s orphans.

In this context, a certain conception developed – in the public discourse of the time as well as in academic studies – that many communities considered inheritance of the rabbinate preferable to other options. Some scholars have even pointed to several advantages yielded by such an option; most significantly, the appointment of an heir bypassed internal communal tensions and thus avoided a rift in the community, a common occurrence in such cases. It should be further borne in mind, that if the rabbi had passed away, the appointment of an heir was supported by the rabbi’s widow and her associates in the community. It would, among other things, guarantee her financial future. <new paragraph>

According to the statistic presented by \*\*\*, inheritance of the rabbinate was the practice in no less than a third of the communities in \*\*\*, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, the present study found the contrary to be the case: in the time and place studied, inheritance of the rabbinate was not common. Of the 1,500 community rabbis examined, only 150 (10%) were the son or son-in-law of the previous rabbi. This was despite the position espoused by many halakhic authorities that children should inherit the rabbinic positions of their fathers. Thus, it seems that there is no evidence to back-up \*\*\*’s claim that the rabbinate was frequently inherited in the late nineteenth century. The vast majority of rabbis examined in this study were chosen from a wide selection of candidates, including the sons and sons-in-law of incumbent rabbis, who had grown up in rabbinic families, but who nevertheless had to vie over the position just like everyone else. In the Jewish-Lithuanian cultural sphere the phenomenon of the rabbinic family – that is, a family in which rabbinic activity was passed down from one generation to the next – was certainly a reality. That being said, it is important to distinguish between a rabbi’s son who inherited the actual rabbinical *post* of his father, and one who inherited the *vocation* of his father but filled a rabbinical post elsewhere. Findings from an analysis of the biographies of sons and sons-in-law of community rabbis indicates that many of them served as rabbis in other communities – not the community in which their father or father-in-law had served.

A close reading of contemporary sources can help us understand why this was case. First and foremost, it should be borne in mind that the selection of a rabbi constituted an opportunity for various elements in the community, especially those belonging to the local elite, to exercise their political and economic power and to strengthen their influence over the community’s central religious authority. One of the many people to discuss this was Rabbi \*\*\*:

In their haughtiness, the leaders and rulers of the city consider it beneath them <רם בעיניהם?> to appoint over themselves a famous, respectable, and righteous man. This would require them to submit to him, and to give him the power to punish wrongdoers for their crimes. <לעושי רעה על כל דבר פשע, it’s hard to capture the turn of phrase in English so I’ve just simplified> They prefer to choose a rabbi who will submit to them, one with no power. And when the rabbi wishes to correct some matter pertaining to the law in the city, everything will be done by consulting them. He will have to speak to them softly and flatter them [in order to convince them] to agree with him.

In some cases, appointing the son of the previous rabbi actually served the interests of this group, especially if he was young and inexperienced. Nevertheless, during the second half of the nineteenth century, with the rise of communal “crowd politics,” the power equation was complicated by the intensive involvement of the masses in local political processes – including the selection of the community rabbi. The idea that bequeathing the rabbinate to an heir depended on the assent of the people actually had a strong basis in halakhic literature. In any case, appointing a rabbi based on a system of inheritance, rendered the selection process unnecessary, preventing various power players, including the “masses,” from taking advantage of the opportunity. We can also note that plans to appoint the son or son-in-law of the previous rabbi could prompt sharp opposition depending on his character and personality, which did not always place him in an advantageous position to follow in his father’s footsteps. Furthermore, opposition to inheritance of the rabbinate could sometimes be provoked by ill will between the late rabbi and other figures in the community. In such cases, they considered the transition period an excellent opportunity to publicly voice their grievances and call for a change in “direction.” In some cases, opposition to appointing the rabbi’s designated heir could also heighten tensions within the deceased rabbi’s family – for example, a power struggle between the rabbi’s son and one of his sons-in-law. When opinions were so divided, opponents of the heir would present an alternative candidate (or candidates), selecting them based on their superiority to the heir – in terms of age, knowledge, or public status. In light of the aforementioned, it seems that the conclusion of Rabbi \*\*\* (who actually did inherit the rabbinic throne of his father in \*\*\*) that “it is not good that the rabbinate should be handed down as inheritance,” sums up well the sentiment which prevailed in the time and place under discussion.

**3. “And They Travelled from the Four Corners of the Earth”**

We have shown that bequeathing the rabbinate was not a widespread practice during this time. In most cases, communities sought candidates elsewhere. The news of vacant rabbinical posts was disseminated through various channels, such as letters sent to various communities or word-of-mouth from merchants and wagon drivers. In the second half of the nineteenth century, information began to be disseminated via a new medium – the nascent Jewish press. For example, the following advertisement was published in *Hamagid* in 1875:

We, the Jewish community of \*\*\*, seek today a man with much insight and fear of God, a man in whom wisdom, knowledge, and understanding are combined, a man who is good and does good to others, who speaks peace and has grey hairs, from forty years and up, and who has been crowned with *semikha* from the great geniuses/leaders of our time. He must also know how to respond to questions posed to him about the laws of the peace of the kingdom <להשיב לשואליו דבר בחוקי שלום המלכות, below you explain this as “know Russian” but I’m not sure I understand how it fits into the words>, as he will sometimes need to stand before the authorities. And after he is examined and searched and found to have these virtues, then he will have the pleasure and satisfaction to sit upon the rabbinic throne and head our community, and we will crown him with its crown and fully provide his wages. Every rabbi and *moreh tzedek* who desires this position should send us copies of his recommendations from those who gave him *semikha*, and inform us about details of his yearly salary, and then we will present him with a fitting document. <תעודה נכונה do they mean a writ of rabbinic appointment?>

Such advertisements were common in the Jewish press of the time, significantly expanding the pool of potential candidates for any vacant rabbinic post. In this case, the majority of necessary information has been provided, allowing a young yeshiva student to consider whether or not he met the requirements to contend for such a post. Thus, for example, this notice required applicants to be over forty years old, to be able to prove their skills in sermonizing and to have some proficiency in Russian; this significantly reduced the number of suitable candidates. On the other hand, no previous experience as a community rabbi was required. In other words, even someone who had only served as a *moreh tzedek* or dayyan could submit his application. At the same time, newspapers were also used to disseminate, in parallel, details about young yeshiva students who wished to present their candidacy for vacant rabbinical posts. <new paragraph>

When a young student, or a community rabbi searching for a new post elsewhere, found potential vacancies, he could take several measures to begin advancing his candidacy. Some did this by corresponding in writing with influential authorities in relevant communities. Others turned to famous rabbis living nearby. Thus, for example, in a letter written by Rabbi \*\*\* in 1892 to Rabbi \*\*\*, the community rabbi of \*\*\*, the former implores him to help him receive the rabbinical post of the community of \*\*\*, by providing “a letter or travel costs <נסיעה I assume he means costs>”

However, many young students searching for rabbinical posts preferred to embark on job-hunting searches, sometimes lasting for a long time, hoping in the end to receive a signed writ of rabbinic appointment. These travels, which became part of the public landscape in the Jewish-Lithuanian cultural sphere, are described vividly by a contemporary:

And they traveled from all four corners of the earth and camped in \*\*\*, and they travelled from \*\*\* and camped in \*\*\*, and they travelled from \*\*\* and camped in \*\*\*. This is the path of the wandering rabbis in our time, and they move about the four corners of the earth, and to all the places in which they are not known.

The young student, however, soon realized that his way would be far from paved. For example, he would learn that just because a vacancy was being advertised did not mean it actually existed. Sometimes the post had already been filled. Other times, the advertisement was the work of disgruntled individuals in the community, embroiled in a dispute with the incumbent rabbi, publishing the advertisement with the sole purpose of humiliating their opponent. During his wanderings, the young student also learned that he was not the only one vying for the position. Until the nineteenth century the number of contenders for any given rabbinic post was on average five. In the first half of the nineteenth century by contrast, this number rose dramatically, sometimes reaching dozens for each position. A number of factors contributed to this trend: a decline in Jewish employment opportunities; a significant drop in the number of available rabbinic posts – the result of economic hardship and the decline in population due to trans-Atlantic immigration; the expansion of the yeshiva system, and the concomitant rise in graduates who sought employment befitting their studies; and the greater availability of information regarding vacancies thanks to the wide dissemination offered by Jewish newspapers. This change was widely commented on in the public discourse of the time. Notably, those most intimately familiar with the problem took part in the discussion – i.e., the community rabbis themselves. Thus, for example, the rabbi of the town of \*\*\* in northern Lithuania, \*\*\*, wrote that “in these difficult times <בצוק הזמן?> teachers and those learned in the laws of kashrut have abounded sevenfold from what was, so much so, that every small city which has a vacancy, is courted by hundreds with *semikha*.” Likewise, \*\*\* the rabbi of the town \*\*\* in north-eastern Lithuania, also bemoaned that “whenever the question of the rabbinate in any city arises, dozens and dozens of rabbis come through its gate, and many come all at once, one in the evening and another the next morning.” Because of the surplus in demand for rabbinic posts, young students were even willing to accept positions in small remote communities; some were even willing to leave their wives and children behind. This influx was only exacerbated when a vacancy opened in prestigious, well-known communities “many of the rabbis of the generation are jumping [at the opportunity] to ascend the throne,” in Rabbi \*\*\*’s words. In a broader context, these young students searching for rabbinic posts, can be compared to permanent immigrant/itinerant workers – a phenomenon which prevailed in the time and place under discussion in both Jewish and non-Jewish society. This practice has been studied not only in the context of rabbinic circles but also in wider circles <who? When? scholarship?> who have seen it as a sign of the economic decline of the institution. The low public image of the community rabbinate, which was associated with this reality, also exposed these hosts of competitors to satire, such as in the following text:

Nothing can compare to the joy felt by yeshiva students when they hear that one of the rabbis has died. They all move from their place and are [spurred] into action. [Those] bent over [books] awake <השדרות הכפופות מתעוררות I assume he means that they’ve been studying and bent over books and now are getting up and doing things>, those with *semikha* begin to whisper, hats are ironed, Sabbath cloaks are cleaned, sidelocks are curled, travel bags are packed. And they will move, and wander, and run, and travel, and deceive one another, and surpass each other, and seven students will seize hold of rabbinic honors with force and trickery.

When they arrived at the town with a vacancy, young students would begin to promote their chances of receiving the job in a frenzy. This was accomplished by availing themselves of the services of “local agents,” such as inn owners, by requesting intercession from other rabbis <שתדלנות?>, or by presenting their letters of recommendation. To bolster their candidacy, some would travel with a prestigious relative or rabbi, who served as a sort of “promoter.” Such a promoter was known to sometimes play a decisive role in the final choice of candidate. Such was the case of \*\*\*, who was interested in a rabbinic post in the small community of \*\*\* in northern Lithuania. To promote his candidacy, Kook arrived with his father in law Rabbi \*\*\*, a famous rabbi at the time. According to account of the latter, the young candidate delivered a sermon, as was the practice, “and [the community members] were satisfied by my guarantee that he is suited for halakhic ruling, and I also showed them his *semikha* papers; they immediately crowned him rabbi.”

Those who could not boast such an impressive advocate as \*\*\*, found themselves facing a number of challenges. One source of disillusionment among young students was the number of experienced *morei tzedek* and existing community rabbis seeking their fortunes in new locations and contending for the same position. Because of their previous experience, good connections, or prestigious image, they were considered preferable to candidates who were young and inexperienced. As a contemporary describes it: “every community in Israel desires to appoint a rabbi who has already served as a judge in one of the cities of Israel; a rabbi with extensive experience who already has a reputation in the world – not a new rabbi who has never used the crown of Torah.” Thus, for example, Rabbi \*\*\*, the rabbi of the Jewish community of \*\*\*, arrived in \*\*\* to attend a wedding of a relative and was petitioned by “the heads of the community to accept the rabbinic crown in their community.” Furthermore, many communities actually preferred older candidates nearing the ends of their rabbinic careers:

It is an accepted opinion in large and medium cities alike, that when it comes time to appoint a rabbi, they will [pass over] a [candidate] with a black beard, whose hairs have yet to grey, and who has never served [as a rabbi] previously; they think little of him and [instead] priviledge old-age [...] [They prefer] an old rabbi who has assumed the rabbinic throne in some small town, who has already experienced toil and hardship (and shortage), whose hands and spirit grow tired from this work, who has given up on performing wise acts/great feats <עשות תושיה>, who wishes for the rest he deserves after so many years of hardship.

The preference for older rabbis was unrelated to whether or not they had the skills for the job. As explained in a letter penned by Rabbi \*\*\*, who served as a rabbi in small community and searched for a rabbinic post in a larger one: “for I know the practice in the large communities of our land: they will not deign to accept a young rabbi, even if his virtues and knowledge be as lofty as cedar trees.”

In such a “buyer’s market,” some young candidates would resort to every method at their disposal to achieve their goals – so much so, that “the battle over the rabbinic throne is like the battle of merchants in the market; everyone will spill the blood of his fellow for nothing, each one will honor himself at the expense of his friend.” We even hear of would-be rabbis who went so far as to try deposing incumbent community rabbis, especially those who had grown old. <you mean the candidates would try to make a job position for themselves by deposing an old rabbi?> In any case, the prevailing mood was that “almost all the rabbis in the small towns of Lithuania and \*\*\* and many of those from the cities of Poland and Russia, are appointed by virtue of their own lobbying/efforts when they come to assume a rabbinic throne,” as attested by one rabbi.

The large supply of candidates created problems not only for the potential candidates. It also disrupted life in the communities. They had trouble withstanding this onslaught and found it difficult to conduct a decent, orderly selection process. To solve the problem, communities had to contrive creative strategies for conducting the selection proceedings. As described by Rabbi \*\*\*:

In small towns, a practice has spread to cast [the names] of the candidates into a box; whoever’s name is drawn wins the rabbinate. [...] It is, [however,] well known that the “lucky” man who wins the “lottery” is the one whose perseverance and success have allowed him to spread a net of conspiracies and guiles, and all sorts of open and secret “recommendations,” which only men lacking self-respect are capable of.

The many accounts about the difficulty of receiving a rabbinical post, especially those pouring forth from the hearts of rabbis who had experienced the challenge themselves, leave no room for doubt about the historicity of this picture.

**4. “Matchmakers of Cities with Vacancies”**

Given this reality, a new factor emerged – the phenomenon of agents or mediators, “matchmakers of cities with vacancies,” in the parlance of the time, who offered their services to candidates and communities alike. These agents played an important part in the publicization of vacant rabbinic posts; in parallel, they represented different candidates in the selection and filling of these positions. Availing himself of an agent, a rabbinic candidate received a dual benefit (at least so it seemed): besides the hope that the agent would successfully promote his candidacy, he could also save the time and effort needed to travel to cities with vacancies, some lying far-afield – sometimes only to find that a desired position had already been filled. Moreover, the sum paid to an agent was usually not more expensive than the costs of travelling frequently to conduct “job-talks” in various communities. Likewise, because of this system, a community seeking a new rabbi could also save itself the trouble of bargaining with a number of candidates. <new paragraph>

These agents were usually concentrated in a large city, such as \*\*\* or \*\*\*, to which young students and rabbis searching for jobs would arrive from neighboring locales. The character of these agents and their works practices can be learned from the (generally critical) portrayals of the time:

Messengers and matchmakers travel from city to city and perpetuate dispute in Israel. The majority of these matchmakers are large and fat <בעלי כרס ובעלי צורה>, talented [scholars] <מופלגים> who have forgotten their studies, or rich men who have become impoverished, and they stand between the rabbi and the community. It is enough to simply announce that in such-and-such a city the rabbi has died, and they will swarm there like locusts, each one bearing recommendation letters and endorsement letters on behalf of his rabbi, and blackening the reputation of the other rabbi, who likewise wants, through his matchmakers, to attain the position.

Even though this system should have benefitted both sides – candidates and communities – in actuality it proved to be mostly obstructive. Some agents represented many candidates all vying for the same position; the connections they forged with communal authorities were not always free from “favors”; the claims that matchmakers conveyed to candidates about their level of influence on the decision makers of a given community sometimes proved exaggerated or unfounded; and some were even accused of blackmailing candidates who refused to avail themselves of their representation. Nevertheless, many candidates employed them – especially if they lacked any connections in other communities or did not have the time to travel in search of posts. With time, the use of this institution, as problematic as it was, became widespread. This was despite the negative effect it had on the character and image of the community rabbinate. Rabbi \*\*\* describes well the prevailing situation at the beginning of the 1910’s: “if the matter is a free-for-all <הפקר>, and the rabbinate is to be handed over to messengers and ‘diligent matchmakers’ who turn it into a laughingstock in the eyes of the community, then I worry that Torah will be forgotten from Israel.”

Whether caused by agents promoting their candidates or by the candidates themselves, the commotion surrounding the appointment of a community rabbi meant that an organized selection process was practically impossible. Therefore, some communities would announce through Jewish newspapers that interested candidates should submit their candidacy in writing only, and should not arrive in person to promote themselves. These announcements were reinforced by sanctions, ranging from penalizing a candidate who arrived without an express invitation by not paying his travel fees <did they usually?> to disqualifying a candidate who did not follow procedure. Some communities preempted this by announcing, sometimes along with the announcement of a rabbi’s departure or death, that the entire process would be conducted and initiated by the community, directly or through agents, and that therefore, candidates should not apply or visit at all.

**5. “There is no shame, no justice, and no belief in love” <אמונת אוהב? Or perhaps “no trust in a friend.” This quote is not mentioned below>**

One would think that choosing the community rabbi would be conducted in an orderly fashion, dictated by well-defined criteria, and that the ultimate goal was to fill the position with the most suitable candidate. Disagreements as to how suitable different candidates were, is of course, unavoidable. Moreover, when it came to selecting a rabbi, who would not only serve as a judicial and halakhic authority but also as an ethical role-model and an ideological leader, arguments would, one would think, revolve around ideas and abilities. And in truth, we can reasonably assume that many of those involved in the selection process genuinely did want to find and appoint the most suitable candidate according to these criteria. Thus, for example, to promote the selection process and manage it in an organized fashioned, the Kahal in certain communities would create a “finding committee” entrusted with sorting candidates and voting as to who was most suitable. The finding committee would sometimes even consult prestigious rabbis and request their opinions about which candidate to choose. That being said, because there were concerns that certain candidates would receive special treatment – because they were relatives of a committee-member or because of the personal interests of one or many committee members – the trust placed finding committees was very low. Therefore, there were repeated attempts to minimize their influence, in many cases, turning the process into a convoluted and heated battlefield, becoming the nexus of conflict between different local power players and other parties who considered the process an excellent opportunity to promote personal, familial or political interests. By virtue of the power they wielded (usually financial in nature), such parties tried to take control of the process and divert it to follow a course more to their liking. Thus, for example, local butchers were particularly interested and involved in the selection process. As a future rabbi’s decisions about the kashrut of their wares could have a significant impact on their livelihood, they naturally preferred a younger less experienced candidate, one entirely subject to the whims of the community for his income. A rabbi known for his lenient halakhic rulings on kashrut was also an attractive option. Likewise, nepotism was not unknown; rabbis, especially famous ones, would take pains to have their sons, sons-in-law, or relatives appointed as rabbis (unrelated to the question of inheritance).

One of the central questions discussed time and time again in this context, was the identity of those who comprised the selection council. In earlier eras, the practice was that the community’s elected leadership would select the rabbi, sometimes in conjunction with the bourgeoisie tax-payers. In our time period, however, the privilege of this elite – which had sometimes manifested itself in the institution of the Kahal in the form of body which selected the community rabbi – had almost entirely disappeared. From the nineteenth century onwards, especially after the dissolution of the Kahal by the Russian Empire in 1844, Jewish communities in the Pale of Settlement were overtaken by what amounted to anarchy. This was especially true in terms of the many powers once held by the Kahal which now lacked any centralized guidance. We therefore see a growing trend of democratization in the selection process. A new contender joined the fray: the “masses,” that is, community members who did not belong to any political, economic, or intellectual elite but who still participated (fully or partially) in the final decision who to appoint as rabbi. Their influence on the final decision was significant: “and when the time comes, when our turn has arrived to choose from among us people who will lead us, then even those who are empty-headed, mischievous and young, who know not how to distinguish between good and disgusting and evil, arrive in our community to spread their grace on the candidate they wish. And with their arrival comes both disdain and shame.” The political power of the masses is demonstrated by cases in which they would select a candidate without consulting the “honorable ones of the city.” Thus, for example in certain communities, local groups would organize themselves and send a writ of rabbinic appointment to their preferred candidate, bypassing the accepted communal selection process. A well-known case is the controversy which attended the appointment of a rabbi for the community of \*\*\* in 1897. The details are documented in the following letter which was sent to one of the candidates, Rabbi \*\*\*, by a group of local community members:

As we gather together [and discuss] the differences of opinion [which prevail] in our city regarding the selection of a rabbi and head of court for our community, we have seen fit to inform the honorable scholar <כת”ר which I assume means כבוד תורת רבנו>, that for reasons best known to us, the honorable scholar cannot be chosen as the rabbi and head of court for our community. And when we find people who go from house to house and gather signatures from individuals to appoint the honorable scholar and place him upon the rabbinic throne without [convening] a general assembly, why this is against the regulations and laws of our community! And it could [lead] to strife and quarrel in our community, which would besmirch and disgrace the honor of the Torah and would be a public desecration of God’s name. Therefore, we request from the honorable scholar that such a writ of rabbinic appointment not be accepted until it be the unanimous opinion and will of our entire city, according to the community regulations and according to the law and the rulings of the Torah. Then there will be peace for us and all of Israel and may it be pleasing to the listener. <ולהשומע ינעם>. We the undersigned (sixty-nine people).

Despite this unambiguous message, \*\*\* had every intention of acting upon the writ he had received. His correspondents, however, explained to him that some opponents “are men of arms and fists” who would do more than just publish letters in newspapers… During this controversy, both sides employed a range of tactics, conventional and otherwise. As one contemporary put it: “some do not abhor even deceit, flattery, and bribery.” Likewise, to make clear to one candidate or another that it was worth his while to withdraw his candidacy “one from this group will leap forward and criticize/check <ויבקר> [the rabbi’s] shortcomings, and even if none are to be found, he will nonetheless wickedly libel him.” Another way to obstruct a candidacy was to publicize a commitment to oppose in every way possible his appointment, affixed with signatures of community members. As can be expected, such disputes did not remain confined to the Jewish community. At times, a side would use a familiar, old weapon, one famous from the Misnagdic battle against Hasidism – informing on their opponents to the authorities. At other times, the police were even called in to separate the disputing parties. Thus, there were rabbis who had gained the community rabbinate, and even received a writ of rabbinic appointment, but nevertheless decided not to accept it and to continue their search, mainly because they were signed by people who assumed that “the rabbinic writ is not a binding contract.”

In the winter of 1869, \*\*\*, a young rabbi who had grown up and been educated in the Lithuanian-Jewish cultural sphere, began to publish a series of articles in the Hebrew press dedicated to evaluating the state of the community rabbinate. In these articles, \*\*\* explicitly and publicly touches upon some of the fundamental problems plaguing the rabbinic institution, including the selection and appointment process. As was his practice, \*\*\* had no qualms about showcasing the most problematic elements of the process. Such is the case in the following passage, published in the summer of 1870 in *Levanon*, the mouthpiece of conservative Jewish circles in Eastern Europe:

A rabbi or teacher of halakhah, when he is old and sated with years, when he rises heavenward to the divine courts, or to the mountain of God to settle holy soil <לחונן עפרות קודשyes? does he mean literally go to Israel or is this a metaphor for the afterlife?>, when he departs, a storm will approach, uprooting mountains and breaking cedar trees. Old rabbis along with new, those rich in their knowledge and those small[-minded] and [mentally] impoverished, fearers of God along with those who deny him, humble and ascetic, those lenient in judgment along with those small-minded like women – all together in a tumult, they will sour like eagles to the city and its masses, increasing commotion, in anger and rage, in confusion and bedlam, sewing discord and strife between a slave and his master. They will spark discord between families, and a city with eighteen prayer quorums will be split not into 18 factions but into 180. One [person] will rise up to be zealous for the Lord and for the honor of Torah when he sees his son in law has learned halakhah but does not [yet] make rulings; another one cannot bear that a young one, whose fathers merits aid him from the heavens, should be rejected in favor of a low-born man who [merely] knows how to rule something kosher or not. A fire burns in Jacob and a dispute has been ignited in Israel.

With these words, \*\*\* revealed to all one of the main facets of the selection process – dispute. It could be argued that this was nothing new. Disputes had raged in Jewish communities from time immemorial and examples abound in the sources. Numerous factors could spark a dispute, and disputes could be expressed in myriad ways with diverse results. Already in the fifteenth century, Rabbi \*\*\* wrote: “we have seen communities been destroyed by disputes.” Or as \*\*\* put it: “the disputes and quarrels have destroyed the communities. And were we to document all the squabbles and disputes in the communities, five large books would not suffice.” In the Eastern-European context of the present study, intra-Jewish disputes had historically revolved around the hasidim and mitnagdim. One, therefore, might think that the basis of disputes in Eastern Europe was primarily ideological. However, a review of the sources shows that the tradition of dispute, confrontation, controversy, and quarrels had deep roots in Jewish communities in Eastern Europe even before the conflict between the hasidim and mitnagdim. Conflicts were, in fact, often unrelated to religious conceptions or ideology at all. <new paragraph>

The scope of the phenomenon seems to have been comprehensive. As one contemporary lamented: “there is no city or community in which its people live in peace and in which a man helps his fellow. Nothing good or useful has been produced from <בעבור?> the hatred, jealousy, and dispute which constantly prevails in our midst. And unfortunately, this terrible disease has struck roots in the hearts of our brothers, the Children of Israel, so much so that there is almost no cure for them.” The many reports of this phenomenon allow us to understand the variety of causes which could spark disputes – competition over livelihood, fighting over community positions, leasing the meat tax, conflict between artisan guilds, discord over the renovation of the local bathhouse, etc. The impression arising from these sources is that dispute was an inseparable part of Jewish society. One Jew from the community of \*\*\* wrote in despair that “people do not only quarrel over food and livelihood, over community issues, because of the rabbi, the slaughterer, the beadle or the like – they fight for the sake of fighting, as if they were adjured by oath to constantly fight with one another.” Or as \*\*\* put it: “after a year or two of peace, without pogroms or harsh persecution, life in the town became grey and boring, and as a cure for this boredom, dispute was kindled.” These disputes, which it seems reflected deeper social trends, were not limited to the public discourse. Sometimes matters could devolve into physical, even violent, altercations, slander to the authorities, and endless proceedings in courts. This of course, all came at a personal and communal cost. These conflicts were also known to have a negative influence on religious life. For example, in one case, due to a dispute between two local groups regarding the renovation of the bathhouse, one of the groups barred women from entering to perform their ritual immersion. Elsewhere, because of a dispute revolving around hiring a preacher for the community, the rabbi stopped issuing kashrut rulings and the dayyanim stopped presiding over court cases. In a third community, a marriage ceremony became the nexus of a struggle between the supporters of two different candidates, each side arguing that their rabbi should officiate. In a fourth community, the sale of Hametz to a non-Jew before Passover was dragged into a dispute between two candidates. <end of paragraph>

The main place in which disputes took place publicly was in the synagogue. Most arguments actually broke out on the Sabbath or on festivals, days on which the majority of community members attended synagogue. It should be recalled that in the community life of Jewry in Eastern Europe, the synagogue and *beit midrash*, were the almost exclusive communal spaces which could be considered Jewish in all their respects, not just physically and practically but also in the communal consciousness. In the minds of the Jews of a city, these were the only places with a clear and visible Jewish significance, a sort of extraterritorial space, removed from the secular/general milieu. To a considerable extent, the synagogue and *beit midrash* were considered by local Jews a second home, a place to express their Jewish identity in all its respects. Moreover, the internal organization of the synagogue, in terms of seating placement and positions filled, constituted a microcosm of the socio-economic hierarchy of communal society. It is therefore not surprising that internal communal debates, whether personal ones or those with communal significance, would come to the fore in a time and place in which most of the local Jews were gathered – that is, during prayers in synagogue on the Sabbath. Thus, besides serving as a place of prayer, many synagogues became “conflict zones,” a place for local Jews to argue and struggle over matters related to the prayer itself, as well as anything else on the public agenda. As described colorfully by \*\*\*: “Why should the prayer houses of the Hebrew people differ from those of other peoples of the world? Only chaos is heard therein, robbery and fragmentation, elders are not respected even by children. Over [honors in the synagogue,] הוספה <not sure what this is? perhaps giving extra aliyot?>, *hagba*, and aliyot, people will come to blows.” And indeed sometimes, “conflict zone” could take on a very literal meaning when differences of opinion deteriorated into physical violence. The long-term significance of such a reality was that dispute came to be seen as something permanent, and sometimes prominent in the collective life and historical memory of the local community.

The presence of dispute as a permanent fixture had a concrete impact on the selection of the community rabbi. Thus, the public space in many communities turned into a battlefield, upon which supporters of different candidates for the rabbinate clashed. As one contemporary describes:

The once quiet and peaceful city quickly turns into a killing field; peace is put away, and strife and contention, aggressive curses, and a wicked fist assume its place. The members of the town who had once lived in silence and tranquility now fight with each other, and rabbis are gathered to the city to conquer it like generals; the pyre grows larger and scandal abounds.

We can see how common the phenomenon was from \*\*\*, one of the most prominent spokesmen of the world of the community rabbinate in Eastern Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century: “We can count more than twenty respectful towns and villages in which the fire of dispute and unwanted deeds are performed due to the rabbinate and its corruption.” If someone like \*\*\*, who had dedicated many years of his life to defending the good name of the rabbinate, decided to publicly showcase this reality in print, we can conclude that circumstances had deteriorated significantly and had reached a nadir. This is also the impression one gets from the following passage, written by \*\*\*, the rabbi of the community of \*\*\* in Lithuania, published in *Hamelitz* at the beginning of 1903:

I shall not speak about a certain city in which, before it had the chance to place a rabbi on the throne, [had] forty [of its] people placed on the bench of the accused in the magistrate’s court. I will also not tell of what took place in a certain city, in which the *beit midrash*, last Festival of Blasts [Rosh Hashana], was turned into a killing field and filled with the blasts of war because the masses had chosen a rabbi without first consulting with the honorable members of the city. And who knows what would have become of this war in the end had the police not intervened – they are the only ones who these people fear; only they can silence them. Likewise, I will not speak about one city, where, last Simhat Torah, those on the “side” of one rabbi, led him to the canopy in the *beit midrash*, as is the practice, and were set upon by his opponents, who in their rage tore the canopy from above the rabbi’s head. Many staffs were broken on the shoulders of these two lovely sides.

The sentiment was shared by Rabbi \*\*\*, who in 1911 lamented the selection process as follows: “there is not a day in which a rabbi is not being chosen in one of the communities of Israel, large or small, and the question ignites the fire of dreadful dispute within the community.” These statements from \*\*\*, \*\*\*, and \*\*\* came from the very heart of the rabbinical world – not as an external critique, reflecting an anti-rabbinic agenda – and were published in community fora with a wide dissemination. This attests more than anything, to the nadir to which the community rabbinate (as well as social and communal institutions in general) had descended during our time period.

The general impression from all of the above, is that these bitter, protracted conflicts could have a long-term effect on the ability of communities to properly function. From a sociological perspective, these communities represented forms of social organization suffering from significant weaknesses in terms of basic norms and values. The institutions of these organizational structures were essential unable to function and impose order and discipline, a catastrophic state of affairs inevitably leading to dissolution. <do you mean that this actually happened?> Due to the importance of ensuring the future of the community and preserving its ability to function, when selection process reached a dead end, there were attempts to calm tempers and settle disputes with the aid of external arbitrators. <I simplified this previous sentence a bit to make it more readable in English> Usually this was arbitration managed by famous rabbis who were considered prominent public figures whose opinion would be accepted by both sides. One approach taken by these rabbis was to propose a third candidate as a compromise. In other cases, such as the dispute over the appointment of a rabbi in the community of \*\*\* in 1888, the dispute came to an end only with the involvement of prestigious Jewish personages, mainly those belonging to a higher economic class.