*<Translator note: blue denotes additions or modifications of the source text for clarity or style; purple in chevrons* *denotes my comments and questions; 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.>*

**Chapter Eight: Facing Reality**

# “Something Trampled on by All”

The challenges and frustration faced by many community rabbis only grew more pronounced as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Secularization had begun to make inroads into the Jewish towns of Eastern Europe, the political climate was unstable, pogroms swept across the Pale of Settlement, and Jews were immigrating overseas in massive numbers. All these factors contributed to the notion that the Jewish world of old was quickly disappearing. The rabbi himself, looking around him, could not help but feel the winds of change which left their mark on the two social circles to which he belonged. First and foremost, the rabbinical milieu itself, populated by many of his fellow community rabbis, had become virtually unrecognizable. For young members of the Jewish intellectual elite, new horizons more attractive than those offered by the study hall were opening up – academia and law, to name two examples. There were also community rabbis who sought ways to transcend the accepted scholarly-cultural boundaries associated with their vocation. For example, as explained by Rabbi \*\*\* in a letter penned in the late 1890s: “Every wisdom is primed and capable of developing and coming into fruition in a wise heart in a sheltered <<מקורה>> space. I will make an effort to climb the ladder of European enlightenment and to complete the scientific and linguistic studies that I require.” Likewise, many talented individuals with rabbinic potential found a home in the attractive ideological movements that had begun to thrive in the Jewish street; others made their way to America. With talents diverted elsewhere, the spiritual and intellectual profiles of many rabbinic candidates saw a steep decline. The severe repercussions this had on the rabbinic world as a whole (which of course effected the world of the individual community rabbi as well) were described by \*\*\*, the community rabbi of \*\*\* in \*\*\*:

One of the main causes that has led to declining honor of Torah in the eyes of many of our people is the lightheadedness with which our brethren treat the receiving of a rabbinical post. The young-married men <<האברכים>> and the slaughterers have cast down the yoke of our great leaders in every place. They have made themselves leaders <<העושים להם קרן>>, ask themselves [halakhic] questions, <<מולכים>> and have built themselves their own platforms, doing as they see fit in their own eyes. They have taken a great part <<חבל רב>> in desecrating the honor of Torah. The rabbinate has become something trampled on by all.

In addition to the rabbinic world, the rabbi’s immediate surroundings were also undergoing rapid and sometimes radical changes; i.e., his community was not what it once was. Rapid processes of secularization, extensive migration, and the all-encompassing popularity of nascent mass-movements and ideologies – all of these irrevocably changed the face of traditional Jewish society. Thus, for example, \*\*\*, community rabbi of \*\*\* described the changes taking place around him and expressed his despair in the face of this new reality:

The Sabbath is desecrated in public: shops are open from morning until dusk as if it were a weekday. I have appealed to them and warned them in vain about this failing – in both sermons and private conversations. But my voice is like a voice in the wilderness. Judaism here has reached a breaking point; the spirit of the Torah is in a state of decay and is caught in its death throes; school children are snatched out of “Heder” in their youth. The new generation accepts secular enlightenment and slowly distances itself from Judaism. To my great despair, I have seen this sight throughout the cities of \*\*\* and in large parts of \*\*\*.

According to Rabbi \*\*\*, the inevitable outcome of this new reality was that “it is difficult to take a mountain, lift it like a cauldron above the heads of each one of our brethren the children of Israel and say: submit to our decisions!” A similar sentiment was voiced by \*\*\* in an article published in the Spring of 1899: “The conditions of life and the views of our brethren in these times nullify the power of rabbis if they try to rule over [their community members] with a mighty hand.” Or as Rabbi \*\*\* put it: “I know many [rabbis] who when they see their lowliness and inability to carry out any proper action are seized by awful despair. Their eyes speak their sorrow <<פניהם נפלו בעיניהם>>, and they dwell among the people in fear and awe <<בדחילו ורחימו>>, each one [restricted] to his immediate surroundings <<כל אחד בד’ אמותיו>>; outside of this domain, their influence cannot be discerned at all.” The enduring sense of disillusion, rooted in the gap between the spiritual world of the religious functionary and the changing circumstances of his community members, was not unique to the community rabbi or even to the period described in the present book. Similar expressions of exasperation emerge from the writings of community rabbis in earlier periods. For example, the bitter words of Rabbi \*\*\*: “And I find more bitter than death the matter of the rabbinate. I have been drowned in the depths of the rabbinate which has become a stumbling block for my body and soul. I am weary of my life because of the rabbinate. Many corpses has the rabbinate left in its wake.” Local rural priests of the time as well as community rabbis outside of Europe voiced similar sentiments. We can even note a modern parallel. Rabbi Marc Angel, rabbi emeritus of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York in the second half of the twentieth century, once claimed “\*\*\*.” For this reason, it seems that such sentiments represent an inseparable part of the job of a religious functionary. I will discuss one of the main consequences of this below.

Various proposals were raised in the rabbinic discourse of the time to contend with these growing feelings of disillusionment and despair. For example, some proposed the creation of a broad organizational network of rabbis; others called for the convening of a congress of rabbis from all ends of the Russian Empire. As described above, rabbinical assemblies did convene from time to time to discuss the “state of the rabbinate”. Unfortunately, both organizers and participants could not help but notice that such initiatives generally failed to produce concrete solutions. Another way of responding to a world in flux, a method that became particularly popular at the turn of the twentieth century, was through Orthodox print media. The first attempts to use the print press to give a voice to the disillusionment pervading the rabbinic world can be found in the newspaper *Halevanon* (1863–1886), due in no small part to the intensive efforts of \*\*\*, as well as the newspaper *Qol Mahziqei Hadat* (1879–1914) which appeared in \*\*\*. This trend grew more pronounced at the beginning of the twentieth century with the appearance of the periodical *Hapeles* (1901-1905) and somewhat later in the newspaper *Hamodia* (1910-1915). The editors and many of the writers of these papers emphasized the importance of an Orthodox newspaper, touting it as an important medium for discussing the fundamental issues plaguing the rabbinic world at the time as well as a way to meet the challenge of so-called “free writers” – that is, more secular Jewish journalists. In this context, *Hamodia* was described as “laying the straight path for Orthodox literature, to inspire hearts, to awaken those asleep, to stand strong before the breach – [resisting] with great strength and might immoral/irreligious <<פרוצה>> literature. For Orthodoxy has power and vigor yet; it has valor and force to stand before the gate and defend Judaism.” However, while the Orthodox print press certainly constituted an important forum for rabbinic discourse, it is difficult to point to any cases of it actually solving the fundamental issues afflicting the community rabbinate.

# “They camp in the place they have arrived but then move on”

One of the identifying marks of community rabbis, a practice unique to their vocation, was the use of a specific acronym to sign their letters: *hupaq* – *honeh po qehilat*... (encamped here in the community of...). It is unclear when rabbis began to append this phrase to their signatures; in our time period at least, it was already an established convention. This is particularly interesting because no other job-holders in the Jewish communities of the time used analogous terminology, i.e., no other figures viewed themselves as merely encamped – as opposed to settled – in a community. An explanation for this strange phrase was offered by \*\*\*, author of \*\*\*, a figure very close (in both kinship and mentality) to the circles of community rabbis in Eastern Europe:

Therefore, rabbis traditionally embellish the signatures of their name and city with the wording “encamped here in the Jewish community of ...”. And this language should be understood as follows: The rabbi’s mission is to camp, rest, and relax in his city and then move onwards. This is similar to the camps of soldiers: they camp in the place they have arrived but then move on.

In other words, the use of this terminology reflected a concrete historical reality. It meant that the rabbi regarded himself not as a permanent resident of the community that he served but only a temporary visitor. This conception was embedded in the community consciousness of the time and was even given expression in contemporary belles-lettres. <<ספרות יפה>> Thus, for example, in \*\*\*’s book that discusses rabbis and their wives, the author portrays a head of a community voicing his bewilderment at a local rabbi who has never even considered moving to another community as done by many of his colleagues. The practical implications of this transitory lifestyle were that at any given moment at least one out of every two community rabbis was uncertain about his future. This could be due to his own initiative (his desire to move elsewhere), or due to internal community politics leading to his dismissal or an initiative to appoint another rabbi. Thus, the obvious question arises: what was the cause of this phenomenon? The rabbi, as we have described, invested significant time and effort to receive his position; surely something especially compelling was necessary to force him to relinquish it? One such motive was offered by \*\*\* who quoted his father, the community rabbi of \*\*\*. He characterizes the duties of community rabbis as follows: “to keep a watchful eye and an attentive heart over the spirits of their community members, to consider, investigate, critique, examine, and mend every damage and breach in their moral lives, [to correct] their behavior towards Heaven and towards other people, in morals and ethics, in their modesty and proper behavior, to rectify and benefit, to remove evil and prevent wrongdoing, to teach them and guide them upon the path of the Torah and its commandments.” A rabbi who had accomplished his goal, who had helped the members of his community reach their full religious potential, could go on his way and begin the process anew in another community.

One can certainly paint the itinerancy of rabbis, their perpetual travels from one community to the next, in a positive light. On the one hand, this reality afforded the rabbi some degree of independence; in theory at least, he was unbeholden to any local figures. The ability to move to another community, especially in cases when the rabbi’s relationship with the members of his community had soured, afforded him the opportunity both to reevaluate his task as well as granting him a second chance to implement it. Furthermore, such moves often offered the rabbi the opportunity to refresh and enrich his ideological and spiritual world <<התחדשות רעיונות פנימית>>. Like the Talmud student who attended different yeshivot and was thus exposed to different discussions, discourses, and scholarly methods, the rabbi as well, could, through his wandering, make inroads into new circles of discourse, and receive many chances to realize his aspirations. From the community’s perspective, this situation had some potential advantages as well. First, the fact that every few years saw the replacement of the dominant religious leader of the community, provided an opportunity for those who lacked a common language with the presiding rabbi – sometimes regarding questions of an existential nature – to find a more receptive ear in his successor. Second, and no less important, when a rabbi’s tenure was associated with internal communal tensions, his departure had the potential to douse the flames. These considerations aside, we find that approximately half of the rabbis reviewed in this study, preferred the familiar status quo over the unknown, and served their entire lives in a single community. For this reason, it seems that what we have presented represents an idealized picture of the world of the community rabbi during this time and place. There were rabbis who were happy with their position and saw no reason to go seek their fortunes in other communities, while others, feeling they had fulfilled their duties in their current community, looked elsewhere.

The problem is that even if we do accept this approach, an analysis of contemporary sources demonstrates that in more than a few cases the rabbi and his community failed to reach such an ideal situation. As described by Rabbi \*\*\*: “Many rabbis of [this] generation might as well be proclaimed dead <<לברך עליהם ברוך דיין האמת>>. Woe to the rabbinate that buries its members, they who hope for nothing but to breathe their last breaths.” Assuming that the challenges described in some detail in the previous chapters of this book represented an inherent part of the rabbinate, the rabbi had at his disposal four possible courses of action:

1) To remain at his current position while reconciling himself to a difficult reality. Reasons for this could be the low supply of alternative positions, an aversion to the intense competition necessary to earn a new rabbinic post, or the assumption that other communities would pose similar challenges and difficulties.

2) To leave the rabbinic vocation all together and to choose either an entirely new vocation or one related in some way to the rabbinate (such as teaching, serving as a dayyan, acting as a preacher, or ruling on halakhic questions). This was the course chosen, for example by rabbis \*\*\*. Naturally this choice entailed no small amount of hesitation and indecision. We can name several disadvantages: the psychological toll of giving up on a dream cultivated over the course of many years; the fact that choosing this option represented concession to failure; the equally short supply of such positions; and the less-than-prestigious social and economic status they offered; the memory of failure burned into the minds of those who had tried their luck in other pursuits before turning to the rabbinate; or conversely, for those without experience in other vocations, the fear of embarking into the unknown.

3) A possibility that became increasingly relevant and even attractive beginning in the 1910s was immigration, usually to America. This choice also came with its difficulties: most notably abandoning a well-known cultural and familial setting; the conception of America as a spiritually impoverished country; and the uncertainty that a suitable position could be found there.

4) The most popular option among these four was to leave one’s current community and seek a rabbinical position elsewhere. It should be noted that already upon their first job-search, rabbis internalized the mentality of transience associated with their vocation. Therefore, the movement from one community to the next was considered an inherent component of a rabbinic career. Furthermore, there is reason to assume that sometimes the initiative to move to another community originated from none other than the rabbi’s own wife. Regardless, this course of action was also not free of grave concerns, be it because of the chronic shortage of open rabbinic positions or because those available were offered by communities notorious for their mistreatment of their rabbis. Plotzk, for example, was infamous as “the city that consumes its rabbis.”

As with other facets of the rabbi’s life discussed in this book, it is important to draw a distinction between famous rabbis and their average or obscure counterparts. For the former, the move from one community to another usually represented the aspiration to serve a larger more prestigious community, or alternatively a desire to serve a community that offered significantly higher pay. Some were also interested in moving from a more traditional conservative community to a community that included “sinners and public violators of the Sabbath.” <<why?>> However, the other group of “wandering” rabbis included less-famous figures who were serving small communities but were interested in finding positions in larger ones. An example of this appears in an advertisement published in *Hamodia*: “A great rabbi in Torah, a famous Hebrew author, a public activist, serving a small city, seeks [a rabbinic position] in an important city. Recommendations [can be provided] by the great leaders and the great Hasidic masters.” It can be assumed that besides the economic pressures described above, the decision to move to a larger city, and to some extent to a less traditional/remote <<סביבה מנוכרת?>> environment, was motivated by a desire to escape the limited intellectual-cultural space offered by town-life, or, in some cases, by the adoption of modernist ideas about living in a non-homogeneous human society. This was despite the advice of Rabbi \*\*\* that “it is great foolishness this running from a small city to a large one when there is no need to do so. [Such people] bring upon themselves greater troubles – living in a large metropolis is difficult – and it [is ridiculous] to specifically make efforts to this end.” In general, the aspiration itself was viewed as legitimate – even when one gave up the position of community rabbi in favor of a lesser position – such as a *maggid meisharim* or a *moreh tzedek* – because it was in a larger community. Another related reason that rabbis wished to move to different communities was their desire to improve their working conditions, as Rabbi \*\*\* described “the circumstances of rabbis dwelling in medium and poor communities”. <<כפי שתאר הרב \*\*\* את מצב ישיבת הרבנים בקהילות בינוניות I don’t understand what this sentence means, are you quoting himועניות ???>> Considering the challenges faced by many rabbis in their communities, such as their payment being withheld or suffering general economic hardship, it is not surprising that some preferred the unknown. One such rabbi was \*\*\* who served the Jewish community of \*\*\*. After having not received a salary for two years, he decided to leave the city and to move to \*\*\*. Some rabbis moved for personal reasons: their own marriage, a desire to improve the marriage prospects of their children, or when the community was, due to objective challenges, unable to continue paying their salary.

Worthy of note is the role played by famous rabbis in these processes of itinerancy and wandering. Due to their public status, such figures would sometimes receive appeals from rabbis in towns, requests for assistance or advice in their attempts to extricate themselves from this less-than-ideal situation. From the historian’s perspective <<yes?>>, these rabbis and their correspondence are an invaluable source of information about the treatment of rabbis in different communities, their working conditions, and the like. One such example is the letter of \*\*\*, the rabbi of \*\*\*: “the matters of the rabbinate are distant from me, except when they seek [my assistance]. Rabbi \*\*\* asked for advice whether to travel to \*\*\*. I stopped him for I know the city and its people from my youth, and [I know] that [it is a city] steeped in controversy.” These famous rabbis would often provide others looking for new communities warm letters of recommendations, usually at the initiative of the latter.

From \*\*\*’s words cited above, one can see that the decision to end the relationship between the rabbi and his community was, ideally <<לכתחילה>>, the prerogative of the rabbi alone. However, it should be recalled that \*\*\*, a member of a rabbinic family, was less than an objective observer. While the prevalent view in halakhic literature was that a presiding rabbi could not be dismissed, the reality was often quite different. As we have shown in the first part of this book, when the rabbinic writ of appointment was drafted and signed, the community made sure to preserve its right and the authority to end a rabbi’s tenure – subject to the principles and agreements reached between the two parties. This was enshrined already in \*\*\* and was manifest in clauses that limited the period of the rabbi’s tenure. In practice, the relevant clauses in rabbinic writs were not merely relegated to empty words on paper. In various communities, they were implemented – for example, if a rabbi grew too old to fulfill his duties. I do not mean that rabbis were regularly dismissed by their communities but rather that the community was very careful to preserve the right to implement such a measure and sometimes did so in practice. This was, of course, well known to the rabbis themselves. An echo of the phenomenon even exists in responsa literature. For example, Rabbi \*\*\* expresses his concern that “when the [rabbi] does not give the halakhic rulings they desire, and does not act according to their will, the bourgeois will go and choose another rabbi whom they accept.”

Likewise, that the rabbi should serve a second or third tenure was not a certainty. Various communities were meticulous about conducting a selection process every few years – as mandated by community ordinances or when the contract of the incumbent rabbi came to an end. \*\*\*, in his book about the rabbis of Poland, writes the following: “for it was their practice in those days to appoint a rabbi and head of court for a defined period of time, 3 years or at most 6. And after this time had elapsed, or when the rabbi’s watch has ended, they would accept another rabbi or הרויחו לו זמנו?? <<don’t know what this means?>>” And indeed, this was exactly what happened in the sixteenth century in \*\*\*, the seventeenth century in \*\*\*, the eighteenth century in large communities such as \*\*\*, as well as \*\*\*, and in the late nineteenth century in the small community of \*\*\* in the vicinity of \*\*\*. When these rabbis completed their tenure in one community, they would look for an open position elsewhere and so on. Some served various communities within a specific region, others wandered farther afield. For example, in the sixteenth century, Rabbi \*\*\* served in communities across Europe and the Mediterranean: Egypt, Cyprus, Italy and Poland.

A review of extant sources shows that rabbis were not only required to leave their position after their contracts had expired. Sometimes they were forced to leave in the middle of their tenure – prompted by direct or indirect pressures that left them no choice but to abandon the city. Such measures were exercised against various rabbis, both famous ones who served in large urban communities as well as those in smaller towns and villages. Among the many examples one can cite the trials and tribulations suffered by one of the great rabbis of Poland, Rabbi \*\*\*; the struggle of Rabbi \*\*\* in \*\*\*; in the mid-eighteenth century, the expulsion of Rabbi \*\*\* from the community of \*\*\*; as well as Rabbi \*\*\*’s abandonment of his position in the community of \*\*\* a mere year after receiving it. During the time period discussed in the present book, the rabbi’s opponents did not always wait until his tenure had come to an end. In some cases, communal institutions or other powerful figures took pains to discontinue the rabbi’s tenure long before its scheduled expiration. This could unfold in two major ways. The one was formal – i.e., an attempt to officially end the rabbi’s tenure prematurely. As seen above, conflict between rabbi and community was not something new to the nineteenth century. In order to defend rabbis from unfair dismissal it was ruled by \*\*\* that no other rabbi shall be accepted until “justice is properly served between the head of court and the community.” During this time period, proceedings followed a fixed process which included arbitration by three non-local rabbis. This took place, for example, in the town of \*\*\* in North Lithuania in the late nineteenth century. In 1870, \*\*\* was appointed rabbi of the community. Shortly after receiving the position, he apparently found himself embroiled in conflict with the communal institutions regarding his exclusive right to sell salt as the basis of his income. According to \*\*\*’s opponents, not only were local government officials responsible for his appointment, forcing it upon the community; they were also his business partners. \*\*\* For this reason, the two parties turned to \*\*\*, rabbi of \*\*\*, and presented before him their respective claims. Stern, who claimed that he was forced to “intervene in this dispute against my will,” suggested that the disputants present their cases before a rabbinic court accepted by both parties. He concluded by expressing the hope that “they would make an effort to walk the path of peace.” We do not know how this stage of the dispute ended. However, ten years later, after the rise of new community leaders, the conflict re-erupted with greater intensity. At this point, the opponents of \*\*\* struck at his income and apparently publicly shamed him as well. As was the practice, the dispute was handed over to the arbitration of three of the most important rabbis of north Lithuania \*\*\*; they were later joined by Rabbi \*\*\* of \*\*\*. In the arbitration ruling, which was published in full in the Hebrew press, the four agreed that “while we found no reason to cast aspersions on the rabbi’s honor,” they accept his decision to leave his rabbinic post. Reading between the lines, it can be assumed that in exchange for his concession, Dimant received some kind of compensation. Regardless, his opponents ultimately prevailed, and he was forced to travel far to the south to serve as community rabbi of \*\*\*.

Another example took place in the Jewish community of \*\*\* in north Lithuania in the 1880s, during the tenure of \*\*\* who served as both rabbi and local head of court. It seems that two years prior to the event, relations between the rabbi and the community institutions had soured. According to one source, over the course of this period, the rabbi did not receive his salary. At the same time, a group of locals attempted to hire a paid *moreh tzedek* – representing the de-facto appointment of a second rabbi. When Rabbi \*\*\* traveled to \*\*\* to tend to issues related to the residence-rights of Jews in the surrounding villages, his opponents seized the opportunity to send a rabbinic offer to Rabbi \*\*\* who at that time was serving as the community rabbi in the town of \*\*\*. \*\*\* accepted the offer – even though he had met with \*\*\* to discuss the issue. The latter had refused to reject the offer even when \*\*\* explained to him that this could mean that he would never receive the money owed to him by the community. <<קצת קשה לדעת מי עושה וטוען מה פה.>> When \*\*\* returned to \*\*\* he informed the community leadership that he was willing to step down provided he would receive the money owed to him. However, the community leaders not only had no issue with the arrival of \*\*\* but also agreed to nothing except “to pay back what is owed to him over a long period <<הרחבת זמן>> and in installments.” \*\*\* turned again to \*\*\* and requested that “he not cut off his livelihood,” or alternatively that he refuse to assume the position until his debt was settled. Once again, \*\*\* refused the request and \*\*\* was officially dismissed. With no other choice, he was forced to leave the rabbinic throne and to move to \*\*\* where he had been offered a similar position.

The second non-formal type of dismissal took place when locals exerted pressure on the rabbi, believing that he had harmed them in some way. Such an event was described by Rabbi Eliyahu \*\*\*: “A person who was not acquitted in a court case, or a strongman whose counsel about city matters [was not heeded] threatens the rabbi with a day of reckoning soon to arrive – ‘I will show the rabbi who and what I am! I will seal his source of livelihood and that of his family.’” The result was, as he describes, that these figures succeeded in “forcing the rabbi of the city to leave without any alternative rabbinic position. And this famous rabbi was forced for many days to wander about with no bread.” This reality was the fate of several rabbis. For example, Rabbi \*\*\* was forced to leave his position in the community of \*\*\* after seventeen years due to a movement to depose him initiated by the locals. Likewise, Rabbi \*\*\* was forced to step down from the rabbinic throne in the town of \*\*\*, a mere seven months after his appointment. Rabbis threatened with dismissal could, directly or indirectly, marshal in their defense the stance of the great halakhic authorities. And as described above, these types of controversies were sometimes presented to contemporary rabbis and halakhists. A review of the rabbinic discourse of the time shows that most halakhists did not see anything essentially wrong with limiting a rabbi’s tenure. As noted by Rabbi \*\*\*: “In a place where it is the custom to accept a rabbi for a predetermined amount of time, or the custom is to choose whomever they wish, they are allowed to do so.” That being said, when it came to actually dismissing a serving rabbi before the end of his tenure, things were somewhat more complicated. A prevalent view among halakhic authorities was that while the rabbi could choose to step down from his position whenever he wanted, the community could only dismiss him when his tenure, as stipulated in the writ of rabbinic appointment, came to an end (unless, of course, “they found in him some wrongdoing <<פסול>>”.) Replacing one rabbi with another was impossible according to some of the participants in this discussion. The serving rabbi is considered to have “ownership” (*hazaqa*) over the rabbinic position, they claimed. Another relatively rare approach stated that local customs were the determining factor: “If it is the local custom to [remove] the rabbi when the time comes and to appoint others in his stead, then there is no place to doubt [the legality of such an action.]” However, even if the prevalent halakhic approach maintained that one could not simply force a rabbi to leave his position, attempts to exercise or appeal to these halakhic rulings were quite limited.

It seems that the reason that rabbis forced to leave their position rarely appealed to the Halakhah in their defense can be attributed to two factors: The one is that halakhic authorities, or at least some of them, ignored the historical reality or at least pretended to do so. It is difficult to take seriously Rabbi \*\*\*’s claim that : “We have never heard such a thing that after his time has elapsed, he should go out penniless <<יצא נקי>> from his rabbinate” or Rabbi \*\*\*’s assertion that “This is the custom in all of the Jewish Diaspora.” They surely were aware of the halakhic and historical discussions revolving around the dismissal of rabbis – not to mention that this was precisely what was taking place around them. Therefore, it seems that the halakhic discourse on this issue was essentially disconnected from reality; its relevance to real-life events was consequently very marginal. The second factor is that community rabbis understood well how little powerful locals felt subject to the rulings and instructions of great halakhists, at least when it came to the question of the rabbinate. As we have seen at length, such figures simply ignored the halakhic prohibition of buying and selling rabbinic positions and the political and economic elites flagrantly ignored such instructions. Likewise, locals did not seem too concerned that in failing to pay the salaries of their rabbis that they were committing some halakhic wrongdoing. One can certainly assume that those participating in rabbinic arbitration councils, who were often called to preside over such cases, were well aware of the halakhic discourse revolving around this issue and even cited such precedents in their rulings. However, they also knew the reality and the limits of their power. Therefore, their primary goal was to bring the two sides to compromise.

In some cases, the rabbi’s departure was a traumatic event for the community – especially if the rabbi had been admired by the locals and when he left on good terms as opposed to controversial circumstances. In such cases, community members did everything in their power to stop a rabbi from leaving – and sometimes even succeeded. For example, due to the fact that “I am in their hands in matters related to money” <<?הנני בידם גם בדברים שבממו>> as described by Rabbi \*\*\* when he tried to leave the community of \*\*\*. In other cases, when the community rabbi decided to accept a position elsewhere, the locals made peace with his departure. For example, in 1858, when Rabbi \*\* informed the community of \*\*\* that he planned to leave and serve as the rabbi of the community of \*\*\*, the locals “begged the rabbi not to leave them like sheep without a shepherd or pathfinder.” Ultimately, however, they did not stand in his way.

To demonstrate the extent to which nomadism was an essential component of rabbinic life, it is worth reading how \*\*\*, son of Rabbi Levi \*\*\* describes the employment-history of his father:

He receives a rabbinic writ from a settlement in \*\*\* and he makes his dwelling there. Then they call him to be a rabbi in \*\*\*, in a suburb called “the factories” << בית החרושת???>>. However, because of the dispute and strife that prevailed there, and which caused improper causes <<גרמו לסבות בלתי הגונות???>> he picked up and received a rabbinic position in \*\*\* of that region. Because my father was a God-fearing man and his heart truly trembled before God’s word, he could not remain a rabbi while watching wrongdoing from afar; he could not watch as men, whose *kashrut* we relied on and who were the heads of the community, willfully violated the laws of the Torah. And so, he fought with them and they embittered his life, persecuted him, and robbed him of peace until his soul could no longer bear them. Then he received a position in a large settlement in \*\*\*. This settlement was notable for its constant disputes – and the rabbi as a hired laborer of the community was the target of their arrows. So my father could not dwell there and left. Then his soul was weary of the rabbinic position. Then the members of his home town of \*\*\* called him to fill the position of their rabbi who had passed away. However, when the members of his household began to multiply, and his salary was not enough to sustain them, he accepted a rabbinic position in \*\*\* and from there he was called to \*\*\* to serve as rabbi. There was the end of his wanderings.

And as described above, \*\*\* was not alone. A review of our data demonstrates that only half of the community rabbis examined in this study (about 1,500) served only one community over the course of their life. 26% served at least two communities, 13% three communities, and 21% four or more. A similar picture arises from a review of contemporary literature, especially hagiography. A careful examination of this data does not point to a correlation between the wandering-patterns of a rabbi and the extent of his fame or prestige, the size of the community he served, or the existence of a tradition of bequeathing the rabbinate within the community he left or within the community at which he arrived.

The very fact that almost half of the community rabbis examined in this study served in one community alone does, it seems, point to some degree of stability. As far as we know some community rabbis succeeded in forging good relationships with their community members and some even were honored and valued as a result. However, given the greater number of accounts testifying to the difficulties that faced the community rabbi, his shaky public and social status, and his interminable financial woes, it seems likely that this reality did not necessarily derive from the great satisfaction his present position provided. Aversion from the long and complicated process of finding a new rabbinic position as well as the fact that the average age for finding one’s first rabbinic position was 28 <<מה קשור?>> may also have been important factors. Given these circumstances, it appears likely that a rabbi forced to choose between serving a community under complex and sometimes even impossible circumstances on the one hand or the tiring process of contending for a new position, with small chances and unpredictable results on the other, would often favor the former. Nevertheless, if we take into account the period of yeshiva-study, the long journey in search for a position, as well as the fact that about half of the rabbis served in two or more communities, we can safely say that community rabbis represented one of the least stable groups in Jewish society at the time, if not the least stable of all. While religious functionaries frequently moved from one community to the next (slaughterers for example), no other group in Jewish society viewed itself as one that should not, a priori, strike permanent roots in a community. It was the only vocation that lived with a mentality of instability and peripateticism.

At this point in time, the rabbi who decided to leave his position or who was dismissed, could seek alternative employment in three other domains:

1) Other communities in Eastern Europe, including Galicia. It can be assumed (and is suggested by an analysis of our data) that this was the preferred area for job-searching for most rabbis. This was due to the (relative) geographical proximity as well as the familiar cultural milieu. In fact, an analysis of the travels of fifty rabbis serving in four or more communities indicates that in the vast majority of cases the communities in which they served were in the heartland of the Jewish-Lithuanian cultural sphere. Rabbis from Lithuania usually left the region – traveling to Poland or southward within the Pale of Settlement (Ukraine) – because they were in search for their first rabbinic position or because they had been offered a prestigious or well-paying position in one of these regions.

The problem was that the chances of finding an alternative position close-by were relatively low. There was a surfeit of young talmud-scholars and experienced rabbis who contended for every open rabbinic position. Chances became even more hard to come by in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. This was because of the declining numbers of open rabbinic positions, a result of the massive trans-Atlantic migrations which led to a concomitant decline in the size of the Jewish populations in this region. For this reason, some rabbis found positions in far-flung communities in the depths of Russia, regions in which residence required a special government permit. While receiving such a permit could take a long time and was not always guaranteed <<yes?>>, some nevertheless took the risk. This was despite the anxiety this entailed. As attested by one contemporary: “The rabbis always fear the sound of a fallen leaf, and always have one foot where they are and the other elsewhere. All their dwelling is temporary, and the rabbis have no rest day or night. The only reason they travel into the heartlands of Russia is because of the daily challenges in the Pale of Settlement where it is extremely difficult to find a rabbinic watch.”

b) Jewish communities in central and western Europe. The downside of this area was that it was part of the German-Jewish cultural sphere which had undergone far-reaching religious and cultural changes over the course of the nineteenth century. Because many communities had adopted Reform Judaism, there was a drastic drop in the demand for Orthodox rabbis. Thus, the chances of finding a rabbinic position there were low as well.

3) New Jewish communities across the Atlantic Ocean, primarily in North America.

Regardless of whether our protagonist turned to a nearby town, made his way to another community in Eastern Europe or in German-speaking lands, or traveled far across the sea, our discussion clearly demonstrates the sense of temporariness that characterized the rabbinic vocation. The rabbi’s signature on his letters, “*hopaq*,” encapsulated an important component of his identity, his desire not to abandon the rabbinate despite the heavy price of perpetual instability and a life of constant wandering.