*<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 Seven: The Rabbi and His Home**

**Humility is Virtue for a Rabbi**

As discussed above, during negotiations over the writ of rabbinic appointment, the rabbi’s salary was one of the issues addressed. Communities provided rabbis a variety of sources of income, both direct and otherwise. A review of the incomes of most community rabbis from this period shows that rabbis of small and medium communities tended to earn salaries that equaled those of middle class families. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the nominal wages of rabbis rose consistently, but without keeping pace with the rising cost of living. To get an idea of the community rabbi’s real wages, it is important to examine the data presented in the first part of our book which relates to the issue of inflation.

As shown by \*\*\*, over the course of the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire suffered a chronic deficit that it covered by printing massive amounts of paper money. This resulted in steep devaluation of the Russian ruble and thus, real wages lagged behind the rise in basic costs of living (housing, heating, food, clothing) as demonstrated in the studies of \*\*\*. This lag was only exacerbated in the 1850s and 1860s when the Russian banking system was beset by a disastrous financial crisis. While these circumstances can account in part for the numerous complaints about the steady decline in the financial wellbeing of rabbis, it should be borne in mind that they were no worse off than other members of their society. Some rabbis actually made a very reasonable living – usually those who had other sources of income at their disposal – for example, a business managed by themselves or by their family members. Nevertheless, one of the oft-discussed issues in the nineteenth century (both in internal rabbinic discourse and public discourse) was the difficult financial straits that beset more than a few community rabbis. This was certainly not a new phenomenon; many accounts attest to similar difficulties in earlier periods. However, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, a significant decline is evident. For example, in a petition published in \*\*\* in 1823, the local *morei tzedek* complained of financial woes so dire that “their wages alone are not enough to cover even the most basic expenses, and they have already gone into significant debt.” This difficulty was showcased in the newspapers of the time. As described by \*\*\*: “I am the son of a rabbi who was the son of a rabbi; how can I raise my head to rebuke them <<who? the rabbis?>> when I see their poverty and lack? Most rabbis are impoverished paupers and are as good as dead.” In this context, it bears noting the great similarity between Jewish rabbis, especially those in rural areas, and priests of the Russian Orthodox church who suffered analogous financial hardships.

What caused these financial woes? Sometimes, it is true, objective financial difficulties were to blame. Many Jews in the Pale of Settlement suffered during the financial crises of this period – not just the rabbis. Recessions had a direct impact on the funds available to the community, and small communities were particularly hard pressed to come up with money during such times. Thus, for example, during an economic crisis in the Russian Empire during the 1890s, we find a concomitant rise in complaints about delayed payment of community rabbis. Sources also point to cases in which a second or third rabbi was appointed in the community. Sometimes supporters would set aside comparable community funds for this second rabbi, leading to an immediate and significant drop in the income of the first. <<as I understand it you mean that there was just simply not enough money to go around for both rabbis.>> Likewise, disputes between the community members and the rabbi, which could have a direct impact on his income, were exacerbated as the masses became more heavily involved in public life, including the selection process. For example, if an individual was unhappy about the rabbi’s halakhic or judicial ruling, he could retaliate by trying to delay payment of the rabbi’s salary.

It seems that another element contributing to the rabbi’s financial straits, was the specific payment system adopted in Jewish communities – a system which ideally should have guaranteed the rabbi’s financial wellbeing but which in practice was clunky, inefficient and exceedingly problematic. The root of the problem according to most community rabbis was that “they are appointed not by the government but by the people. Therefore, their incomes come from unreliable sources.” To highlight this point, some noted the difference between themselves and the rabbis serving in the Congress of Poland. There, unlike in the Pale of Settlement, there was no dual rabbinate, no “spiritual rabbi” and “crown rabbi.” The single rabbi enjoyed an official, recognized status in every sense of the word. The unofficial status of the spiritual rabbi in the Pale of Settlement had a concrete influence on his salary. As \*\*\* wrote at the beginning of the 1890s: “the salaries of the rabbis of Poland are not from yeast taxes or candles; [the rabbis] do not depend on the opinion of the masses and are not required to bow their heads to every despised and rejected person. Most rabbis in Poland live comfortably, with little difficulty, and lack almost nothing.” The spiritual rabbis that served communities in the Pale of Settlement, were not recognized by law, had no formal status, and therefore could not be paid directly by community funds. To bypass this bureaucratic obstacle, communities developed a system by which the rabbi’s salary was paid indirectly. For example, various communities granted the rabbi’s family a monopoly on the sale of basic items such as candles, salt, and yeast. In another popular model, the rabbi’s salary was paid by community-taxes levied on basic items such as meat, yeast, salt, oil, alcohol and candles. The right to sell these items, as well as the permit to provide public services (such as running the bath house) were leased to those who won tenders <<מכרז>> issued for this purpose. Whoever won the tender would collect the tax associated with the sale of these products. In the terminology of the time these were called “tax-leasers of the meat tax” “tax-leasers of the candle tax” etc. The tenders stipulated that part of the sum collected would not be transferred to the community coffers but rather directly to the rabbi. This not only provided an economic basis for maintaining a spiritual rabbi, it also allowed a certain amount of flexibility in using the community budget which was controlled, at least partially, by the government.

This arrangement was in theory supposed to assure the spiritual rabbi a stable income. However, in practice things were far less ideal*.* Sometimes objective issues were at fault, such as when the payment method designated – for example a monopoly on the leasing of certain products – was simply not enough to support a larger rabbinic family. Likewise, the rabbi’s salary could suffer if it was he who personally leased a certain tax: this could sometimes lead to direct competition with a wealthy individual interested in leasing the same tax.

However, a review of contemporary sources reveals that the problem was not necessarily a low salary or a lack of resources, but rather the sometimes-significant gap between the money the rabbi was promised and the money he actually received. Thus, for example, a common claim appearing in the public discourse of the time was that the rabbi’s salary would be withheld for weeks, months, and sometimes even longer. In rare cases, the rabbi’s salary was discontinued altogether, as befell Rabbi \*\*\*, the rabbi of the Jewish community of \*\*\*. It should be noted that this phenomenon was not unknown in earlier periods and the issue was even addressed explicitly in certain community ordinances. However, due to the sheer number of accounts discussing the issue in our period, there is no doubt that things became drastically worse during the nineteenth century. The prevalence of this phenomenon, even in large communities such as \*\*\*, can be seen from an article written by \*\*\* in *Hamelitz* in the 1880s:

According to the prevailing law, the salaries of rabbis come from the coffers of charity, an unreliable well of sustenance. For if the rabbi does not find favor in the eyes of one of the appointees, they will cut off his salary, as already happened to the rabbi of [this] city, who for many years received his sustenance <<השפעתו>> from the study hall. But now [new] beadles have arisen; they cut off his salary as soon as they assumed their positions. And his food was provided only with great difficulty by the [taxes collected by the] slaughterers.

However, the aforementioned explanation for the difficult financial circumstances of community rabbis does not exempt us from asking the follow-up question: *why* did the funds allocated for the rabbi’s salary not reach him? Again, objective challenges were certainly an issue. For example, when the government placed restrictions on how the money raised from the meat tax could be used; when the community suffered a deficit; or when the bath house, which had served as a source of the rabbi’s income, collapsed. In such cases, attempts, not always successful, were made to shift the onus of the rabbi’s salary to other tax-leasers. This process could take some time and, in the short term, could take a significant toll on the rabbi’s salary. It bears mentioning that sometimes payments were not discontinued due to a direct confrontation between the rabbi and community members. Sometimes disputes between different figures in the community, even those not directly related to the rabbi himself, were responsible: for example, a protracted conflict over the taxes that leasers were required to transfer to the community or a dispute between the meat-tax leaser and individuals. It should be recalled that the meat tax was a set rate based on the amount of meat purchased, regardless of the financial power of the buyer. It is only natural that such a taxation system, which was essentially regressive, and which required low-income households to pay a relatively larger percentage of their income than those better-off, could financially harm the middle and lower classes – especially during an economic crisis or a recession. This led to growing discontentment among the weaker classes, especially as Jewish society in the nineteenth century began to be exposed to socialist ideologies. Those belonging to lower socio-economic demographics felt that the rabbi was partly (or even primarily) responsible for the financial burden they were forced to bear. The significance of this problem was noted by Rabbi \*\*\* who served the community of \*\*\*:

The rabbi spills his money <<דמי or blood?>> like water until he merits to see his meager salary. And he is the target of every brazen-person’s arrow. How can we expect great things from [these rabbis] suffering a decline in their livelihood? How can we expect them to stand at their posts and wage war against sinners? If there is no flour, there is no Torah!

These grumblings were sometimes translated into action. Local entrepreneurs both Jews and non-Jews (who were not subject to the community’s authority), competed with Jewish tax-leasers by lowering prices. This could lead to drastic drop in the income of the latter, thereby impeding their ability to keep the terms of their tender agreement and to transfer to the rabbi the funds allotted to him. Another issue could be growing public pressure to lower tax rates. Regardless of the specifics, such uncertain circumstances impacted the income of Jewish tax-leasers, which in turn impacted the income of the rabbi – and to make matters worse, some locals simply ignored the rabbi’s exclusive right to sell certain products, undercutting him by offering more competitive prices.

In most cases, however, the root of the problem lay elsewhere. As mentioned, in many cases, the rabbi found himself between <<בין הפטיש לסדן>> those with whom he had cordial and proper relations and those who opposed him and his actions. >> איך זה בין הפטיש לסדן? פה יש דבר טוב ודבר רע לא שני דברים רעים?>> The latter tirelessly looked for ways to prevent the rabbi from garnering any independent power. One common and relatively easy strategy for attaining this end was to assail the rabbi’s salary. For example, despite their formal agreement, many tax-leasers did everything in their power to avoid paying the rabbi the required amount, usually in a bid to raise their own profits. A well-known example relates to the economic hardships of the rabbi of \*\*\*. It had been agreed that the rabbi’s salary would be paid by the tax-leaser of the bath-house. The leaser, wishing to explain why he had not fulfilled his obligation, simply claimed that the “money has disappeared.” Attempts were made to cover this deficit by raising the meat tax placed on the butchers. The butchers, however, flatly refused. In another case, the source of the issue was “a slaughterer who hatched a plot with the butchers to steal the tax [money]: he would slaughter for them without collecting the tax, and they would split the profits between them.”

Of all the sources of the rabbi’s income, the most unreliable was the tax on slaughtering and selling meat. As described previously, the relationship between the community rabbi and the butchers and slaughterers was often fraught and was thus naturally predisposed to constant conflict. Therefore, it is not surprising that when tensions reached a peak, usually because the rabbi had invalidated one of the butcher’s or slaughterer’s animals, they would retaliate by striking at his salary. Sometimes this would manifest in a delayed payment. As Rabbi \*\*\* wrote: “there was once a rabbi who was appointed in a city and was to be paid from a set amount from every animal [slaughtered]. The slaughterers solemnly swore that they would give him the allotted amount and even added that were they to withhold his salary, their slaughter would be considered invalid. However, the slaughterers broke their word and did not pay him. And they claimed that it was their prerogative to decide when they wished to pay the amount levied from every animal, for no time-frame had been stipulated.” From other sources we learn that completely discontinuing the rabbi’s salary was not an uncommon occurrence.

For all these reasons, it is not surprising that rabbis complained that their salaries were insufficient to pay for basic medical care and certainly unexpected expenses such as dowries for their daughters or travel fees to attend rabbinical conferences. It should be further noted that more than a few rabbis had already borrowed money to purchase their rabbinic position, exacerbating an already unreliable financial situation. Some rabbis could not even support their families. The problem was so pervasive that no one blinked an eye when one rabbi, who had served his community for twenty years, hung notices in the synagogue “beseeching and pleading like a pauper, begging for mercy, so that neither he nor his family would die of starvation.” As a rule, and as described by Rabbi \*\*\*, the prevailing view was that “anything given to the rabbi is too much.”

The rabbis did not have any effective tools for contending with this reality. It is true that “During the convening of the Kahal, [an agreement is drafted] signed by every member, not to mention an oral agreement, enforced with an oath and [a threat of] excommunication, agreed upon by community and rabbi alike, and reinforced by a community ordinance carrying the penalty of excommunication – that no slaughterer should slaughter animal or fowl without payment reaching the rabbi or without his permission.” However, to the rabbis’ dismay, no system existed for enforcing this agreement, or, as one contemporary put it, “it is true that the rabbi’s salary is allotted by the members of the city. However, this salary is more akin to ‘money with no definitive claimant.’ [=none wish to bear responsibility for it].” As recommended by halakhic literature, the rabbi could theoretically force the slaughterer to pay his designated salary by issuing a sweeping disqualification of his meat. However, this approach was problematic for two reasons. First, by forbidding the consumption of the slaughterer’s meat, the rabbi was essentially cutting off his nose to spite his face – he was effectively blocking his very source of income! Second, such a tactic would place the rabbi in outright conflict with both the slaughterer and the butchers – a situation best avoided. For this reason, most rabbis did not avail themselves of this strategy, sometimes paying the price by agreeing to a halakhic compromise which they did not favor. As far as powerful community members were concerned, it was best that the rabbi be completely dependent on them. It is likely that even if the rabbi did complain to them about his wages, he was unlikely to receive a sympathetic response. For example, as seen in the following case that took place in the community of \*\*\*:

In this time, notes have been posted in synagogues and study halls, a “call for help” – the voices of the rabbis in our cities who complain before the leaders and rich men of our city due to their bitter lot and urgent situation <<נמהר>>, for their souls melt from hunger and they have not the means to manage their households; their bread is scant and their water meager. Thus, they beseech the rich men that they agree in their great beneficence to pay heed to their dire circumstances and find some way to support them – even if it be just enough to get by.

The authors of this text go on to explain that similar calls for help had been published three times previously, but to no avail. Considering these circumstances, some rabbis reconciled themselves to this reality: “the rabbi must speak softly to sinners and somehow appease them, asking that they do him no harm. And he must use all the means at his disposal, even those that are unpleasant and which cast his honor into the dust. For the rabbi knows that if he is to destroy this one support, then he and his household will be doomed to starvation, for how else will the members of his community feed him?” Others abandoned the rabbinic world entirely for this very reason.

A small minority, however, embarked on a veritable “campaign” to get what was rightly theirs. One method was to enlist the support of famous rabbis to pressure the community to stand up to its obligations. Another possibility was to bring in external authorities as arbiters. This is what took place in the community of \*\*\* in the vicinity of \*\*\*. There a conflict erupted over the issue of slaughter. Three arbiters, rabbis from nearby communities, were brought in. In this case the arbiters ruled that “the butchers should pay the rabbi for his efforts and rulings, both for animals ruled to be kosher and those that are not, and thus reach a compromise. Alternatively, the rabbi should receive from the slaughterers [a set rate of] 3 rubles each week, and then they will be exempt from paying for his halakhic rulings. The rabbi may choose by which system he shall be paid for his work.” However, the fact that rabbis continued to complain about delays in their payments throughout the period shows that the effectiveness of such measures was small to non-existent.

Another method to break the deadlock was to go on a halakhic “strike.” Rabbis who believed all hope was lost and felt that no one paid them heed could threaten to stop answering halakhic questions related to kashrut and other prohibitions. If the rabbi served as a dayyan, he could also refuse to preside over court cases. The assumption underlying such a move was that Jewish society cared about the laws of kashrut, the Sabbath, and family purity and would be unable to function without the regular rulings of the rabbi. However, due to the consequences of such a drastic course of action, and certainly because there was a real concern that such a strike would force people to eat non-kosher meat or to transgress other halakhic prohibitions, it was not a choice taken lightly. As Rabbi \*\*\* put it:

Although it pains me, I have been forced to adopt this strategy. And rabbis greater and better than me in Torah and good deeds, even rich rabbis, do this all the time. Nevertheless, I did not have the audacity to do so until I had consulted the elder and great leader of the generation from \*\*\* (\*\*\*, M.Z.). He answered me that there is no concern for prohibition and that he too has done thus, and this *is the practice throughout the Jewish Diaspora*.

We thus learn that this was not a rare phenomenon, and issues such as those encountered by \*\*\*, and other rabbis in the Jewish-Lithuanian cultural sphere, were present in other Jewish communities in other locales as well. With this background we can better understand the threat to launch a halakhic strike which was included in a petition drafted by the *morei tzedek* of \*\*\* in 1823. Similarly, when the rabbis in the community of \*\*\* in \*\*\* felt that the “call for help” they had published (cited above) was failing to yield results, they publicly informed the community that “if they shall not rise up to take pity on them and support them, then they will be forced to cease giving halakhic rulings on questions related to kashrut.” If the threat itself proved ineffective, it could be implemented. Thus, in the community of \*\*\*, “the rabbi stopped answering questions of kashrut or giving judicial rulings, because for several months he had not been paid.” Likewise, in the community of \*\*\*:

And when the rabbis saw that evil had befallen them, that none paid them heed or made efforts on their behalf, then they ceased to issue rulings on the questions of slaughterers and butchers regarding invalidate meat; they removed their supervision from them. They also hung notices in all the synagogues to publicize the matter – so that those who tremble before the word of God would be wary of a case of possibly invalid meat. Then the people of the city gathered together to find some source by which to pay the rabbis’ salaries. But what was the result of the assembly? As soon as they convened, they dispersed, and nothing was achieved. The butchers knocked on the rabbi’s doors every day with their questions. But no one would answer them. And a cry rose up from the city: “who shall feed us kosher meat?”

However, as occurred in \*\*\*, as well as \*\*\*, economic considerations overpowered, at least temporarily, halakhic ones. For example, \*\*\* described what happened to his father, the rabbi of the city, when his source of income, the sale of yeast, was attacked: “The righteous one roared in vain to the residents of the city that they should not withhold the livelihood of their rabbi. In vain did my father cease to give halakhic rulings or preside over court cases for several weeks.” Thus, in practice these strikes generally failed to achieve their goal. For this reason, there seemed no choice but to heed the advice of \*\*\*: “the words of the butcher who provided you bread you shall observe, and his voice you shall heed. If you do thus, you will be able to endure.”

What saved many rabbis from complete destitution was the payments they received outside of their regular salary for presiding over various religious functions (for example, weddings, funerals, divorces, or arbitration of disputes in neighboring communities) as well as income from the work of the rabbi’s wife. Other rabbis supplemented their income with side jobs. However, such payments were meager at best. And therefore, to endure day to day expenses, some rabbis were forced to borrow large sums of money, to subsist on charity gathered on their behalf from individuals, or to simply beg. Thus, it is no surprise that some rabbis beset by difficult times found themselves engaging in unsavory practices. “Despite the rabbi’s will and nature” Rabbi \*\*\* explains, “he grows accustomed to receiving gifts and afterwards [begins to] pursue and even demand bribes – for he is forced to do so to preserve his life.” For example, some rabbis demanded money in exchange for giving the slaughterer “certification.” This is likely the reason why in popular folklore, the rabbi, who often served as a judge, was also portrayed as prone to taking bribes.

Persistent want and the need to depend on donations and charity could place the rabbi on the lowest level of the socioeconomic ladder. A heart wrenching account of this reality was offered by journalist \*\*\*, editor of the newspaper *Zeit* \*\*\*, in an article published in 1903:

It is the practice of rabbis in small cities to wander about the neighboring towns and to collect donations. It is worth seeing, if only once, how the rabbi will arrive in a city and knock on the doors of philanthropists [נדיבים], asking them to collect a sum of money on his behalf. Each time, they tell him to come back later, and he leaves that city retracing his steps, having gained nothing. The origin of this custom is the conditions of rabbis in small cities. They have no standard salary from a reliable source and sustain themselves from irregular wages; their side-jobs become their main livelihood. Therefore, where else will they receive their bread if not by begging in the towns?

Because of these circumstances, in the late 1880s several rabbis launched a public campaign to gain official government recognition of the spiritual rabbinate, hoping that this this would help regulate salaries. The very willingness to raise such a proposal attests to an acute sense of desperation in rabbinic circles: official government recognition of the rabbi’s position would undoubtedly bring government intervention in the selection process – a move with significant consequences. This, it seems, was the reason why others sought to solve the problem “at home,”: convening rabbinical assemblies, as took place a few times in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Thus, as part of a plan to establish a rabbinic union, proposed at a rabbinic assembly that convened in \*\*\*, it was suggested that the “issue of [the rabbis’] livelihood which is owed to them by their community should be regulated, so that it shall be forbidden for anyone to cut off their livelihoods.” Another option discussed in the public discourse of the twentieth century was to establish a central assistance fund for rabbis. According to this plan, every rabbi would be required to transfer to the fund a yearly premium: a set rate or whatever he could afford. The funds would be used to support rabbis with low incomes, those who were sick and old, or those who needed help “when their daughters had matured [and required a dowry] and the like.” However, this model – a combination of the traditional charity system and concepts of mutual assistance stemming from socialist ideology – never became a reality. Thus, some rabbis decided to seek their fortunes in another community, one that was known to be more reliable in making payments. Others left the rabbinate all together, pursuing a more stable living in other trades.

The picture emerging from all these descriptions is that when it came to funding the rabbi and his activities, the community institutions functioned less as a financial system and more as a regulatory system. The problem was that in many cases those entrusted with ensuring the necessary funds reached the rabbi failed to uphold their duties, whether it was because they could not stand up to powerful tax-leasers or because they simply had no interest in making the effort. An example of someone who suffered from this situation is Rabbi \*\*\*, who served as the community rabbi of \*\*\*: “a great rabbi of Israel lives there with no trustworthy source of livelihood,” was how one contemporary described his predicament. “The people of his city pay him no respect and no one pays heed to his circumstances. And after much suffering, want, and poverty, the *tovim* of the city convened more than twice and decided to collect donations every month on his behalf. Until this day, the rich men and leaders of the city have found no other source of income for the rabbi and his family.” The following words written by Rabbi \*\*\* capture well the feelings of many rabbis in small cities at the turn of the century:

What is the life of a rabbi? It is a life of poverty and pain. He is like the arrow target of every boy and ignoramus, he is oppressed and plundered by these “archers”; neither the fire of his religion nor his vision can be spread. His meal is a dry crust, he is thin from want, and his daily sustenance is the yeast in the dough. <<שאור שבעיסה not sure if this is literal or a metaphor>>

It is unsurprising that this constant economic hardship was what prompted more than a few rabbis to make drastic life changes. For example, an advertisement published on the last page of \*\*\* in the late 1910s, said the following:

A message to rabbis: I wish to travel from here to the community of \*\*\* in the Holy Land, but the men of the city require money for the debts I owe, <<בעד החובות המגיע לי ועוד>> approximately 2000 rubles. Therefore, any rabbi that has this amount can come here and receive the rabbinic position \*\*\*. <<was this Yiddish originally? If so should be compared to source>>

Nevertheless, and despite everything described, most community rabbis preferred to fill out their tenure. If we take into consideration all the interests and pressures describe, it seems that the dilemma can be boiled down to a single fundamental conflict: authority versus responsibility. In other words, how willing was the rabbi to give up on certain prerogatives – be it those granted to him in his rabbinic writ or those traditionally associated with the position – in order to fulfill his most basic communal responsibility: preserving Halakhah as the basis of local Jewish social life? The biographical accounts cited in this study show that in most cases greater weight was given to responsibility than to authority, despite the personal and communal toll this entailed.

**His Helpmate: The Rabbi’s Wife**

The obvious question after discussing the relationship between the rabbi and his community is the role played by his wife. A detailed answer to this question is impossible: the subject has received scant attention in scholarship on the history of Eastern European Jewry. True, \*\*\* have highlighted important aspects of the lives of Jewish women in the traditional societies of the time. Their studies allow us to describe in broad strokes certain aspects of the life of the rabbi’s wife: her average age of marriage, how she and her husband conceived their respective roles, her spiritual world, as well as factors contributing to family crises and divorce. Nevertheless, given that the community rabbi’s family life had a unique character, relying on these broad studies of Jewish women to present a full picture of the “rabbinic family,” is unsatisfactory. We lack good statistics about the average age of marriage of both rabbis and their wives. Likewise, we know little about the socio-economic profile of the rabbi’s wife, about her employment habits, or her views about whether her husband should accept a given rabbinic position. Whether or not she was the daughter of a rabbi herself, it can be assumed that the problematic aspects of a rabbi’s life, which must certainly have had a concrete impact on his family life, were, at the very least, a matter of interest to her. Furthermore, in cases of rabbis who saw in their vocation a calling, a conflict could arise between the attention paid and time dedicated to these two obligations – his position and his family. For example, as described above, not only was the rabbi’s home a public space, but also, as described by \*\*\* “doomed to calamity, bickering, and fighting.” In other words, even the one area of life under her control, the home, was taken away from her. It is worth mentioning that in the conflict between a feeling of mission and economic stability (real or imagined) on the one hand, and a feeling of subjugation to the community on the other, the low salary and the travels every few years were the most important factors. Likewise, it is not entirely clear how willing a rabbi’s wife was to play the role of “rebetzin,” due both to the expectations from community members as well as her own personality.

The main obstacle to answering this question is the small imprint the rabbi’s wife has left in our sources. True, in sources from the beginning of this period, specifically collections of communal ordinances from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which addressed the rabbi’s position, there are some references to the rabbi’s wife. For example, in \*\*\* of the community of \*\*\* it was ruled that when certain restrictions on dress were placed on the men and women of the community, the rabbi’s wife would be exempt. Likewise, she would be allowed to receive “fish and cakes from pregnant <<?>> women.” As for our period, in more biographically oriented sources – personal as well as hagiographical – the rabbi’s wife was sometimes described as the typical “woman of virtue.” Her primary role was to support her husband and help him carry out his task to the best of his ability – primarily by dedicating her time to supporting her family financially. Furthermore, the rabbi’s wife features prominently in popular folklore: there she is described either as a sage woman whose common sense and practical wisdom far surpassed that of the rabbi himself or alternatively as a reprehensible figure. However – as in sources that discuss the lives of the Eastern Orthodox clergymen during this period – most Jewish sources, including the Jewish press, barely mention the rabbi’s wife as an independent individual. Very few even bother to mention her or to discuss the tasks with which she was entrusted. This phenomenon is equally true in rabbinical letters – the exception being a few mentions such as those in the letters of Rabbi \*\*\* who laments that “my delicate and intelligent partner is very limited in her ability to lead the life of a rebetzin.” It is likely that the absence of the rabbi’s wife from sources, as well as her portrayal in folk literature, derives from the status of women in Jewish society in general during that time and place: i.e., her complete exclusion from public communal life. Therefore, even rebbetzins who played a significant role in turning the rabbi’s home into a public space, were effaced from communal memory – neither they nor their activities were deemed worthy of mention in any form of discourse taking place outside of the home. For this reason, it is difficult at this point to present even a preliminary picture of this elusive figure, especially as far as her involvement and influence on her husband’s ability to serve as the rabbi of the community was concerned.

However, the figure of the rabbi’s wife does appear in some sources, primarily the Jewish press, in a very specific context: when the community rabbi passed away and left behind a widow and sometimes orphans. Because the financial agreements reached between the rabbi and his community usually did not address such a contingency, and because the rabbi’s wife was usually not a local and thus was not supported by her immediate family, she and her children could find themselves facing economic hardship. The rabbi, who was aware of this possibility, sometimes included in his will a request for the community to care for his widow. In some communities, attempts were made to contend with this situation by making a formal commitment to support the rabbi’s family after his death with a single sum of money, a yearly allowance for a certain amount of time, or a condition that the new rabbi be required to marry the wife or daughter of the deceased one. However, even when such monetary arrangements were agreed upon, the community had limited financial sources at its disposal and therefore could not support both the former rabbi’s widow and orphans while also paying for the salary of a new rabbi – at least not for any extended amount of time. Therefore, some communities limited the support that could be provided to a rabbi’s widow to a year (the amount of time usually required to find and appoint a new rabbi). Alternatively, some communities stipulated: “so long as the widow and orphans are living here with no support, no [new] rabbi will be accepted in our city,” as was done in the town of \*\*\*. But even the promise to support the rabbi’s widow did not always translate into reality. An example is the community of \*\*\*, which already in the seventeenth century experienced this issue:

The widow of the great leader our teacher the late Rabbi Moses loudly cries out due to the debt owed to her by the congregation. She lays down her pride and goes from one leader to another every month asking for support. But none pay her heed and she is rebuffed time and time again. Therefore, the Kahal gives her every first of the month thirty rubles, and the [members] of the Kahal also obligate themselves to treat her with justice <<לעשות עמה חשבון צדק >>

Thus, one can see that even if there was a ratified agreement to support the rabbi’s widow, the communal institutions did not have to adhere to it. In this case, the widow was left with no choice but to turn to a higher authority, the \*\*\*. While they tried to settle the issue and did their best to guarantee her financial future, the issue resurfaced again five years later in communal ordinances. These attest not only to her difficulty exercising this right but also her social status: “every holiday, the Kahal is obligated to collect money to distribute among unmarried women and the poor, as well as to attend to the needs of the widow of the great leader, the late Rabbi Moses.” Thus, just a few years after her husband’s death, Rabbi Moses’ widow found herself at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, associated with the weakest classes of the community!

Such occurrences were a recurring feature of the nineteenth century, as attested by descriptions of the funerals of community rabbis. The practice was that the rabbis of neighboring communities would attend a rabbi’s funeral, showing their respects and delivering eulogies. When they realized that no arrangements had been made for the rabbi’s widow, they would sometimes meet with the heads of the community to discuss the issue and do their best to guarantee the financial stability of the deceased rabbi’s wife. In these discussions several options were considered, and only after the subject had been settled would the funeral ceremony proceed. This delay was akin to the practice of *ikuv qeriah*, a form of protest by which a community member would voice his or her opposition to an egregious wrongdoing by interrupting prayers in synagogue and refusing to allow them to continue until his or her problem was addressed. In our case as well, the funerary ritual was intentionally delayed until a solution was found to the predicament of the rabbi’s widow. It is important to note that in most sources that describe this delicate and complicated element of the rabbi’s family life, it is not the locals who launch the initiative to tend to the rabbi’s widow – it is rather his colleagues. As we saw above, the rabbi’s livelihood was far from stable. It is therefore not surprising that those who were not meticulous about paying the rabbi in his lifetime acted no differently after his death. His widow had no tools to enforce the clause in the rabbi’s will that asked the community “to provide for my wife for the rest of her life.” She had no way to force the community to care about even the most pressing needs of her family. The extent to which rabbis who attended the funerals of their colleagues were justified in their interference and concern is attested to by the following cases:

After the death of Rabbi \*\*\* of the community of \*\*\*, the community failed to pay to his widow the rabbi’s salary, which had been withheld for several months prior to his death. In response, his widow refused to vacate her house which belonged to the community. Another example is the widow of Rabbi \*\*\*, of \*\*\* who died in 1891. In negotiations that took place between the heads of the community and four rabbis from neighboring communities who attended his funeral, the rabbi’s widow was promised the following: a stipend of 3 rubles a week for a period of two years; payment of the rabbi’s salary that had been withheld for the last half year of his life; and additional payments amounting to 744 rubles in total. The rabbis involved insisted that the agreement be put in writing and signed. However, for the next five years the heads of the community did everything in their power not to fulfill the terms of the contract. Only after the elderly widow resorted several times to *iquv qeriah* in synagogue, and when the details of her predicament were publicized in the Jewish press, did she manage to gain a measly 60 rubles. The woman therefore requested legal aid from the local magistrate’s court. This threat finally prompted the heads of the community to resolve the dispute via arbitration with three rabbis from neighboring towns. Because the arbiters failed to appear, the woman returned to the magistrate’s court. The court however refused to accede to her request because she did not have in her possession the written agreement. Her attempts to receive the original documents from the heads of the community were greeted with excuses. At this point the elderly widow was willing to reduce her claim to 55 rubles; even this, however, was met with refusal. In desperation she turned to Rabbi \*\*\* of \*\*\*, one of the rabbis who had originally negotiated the terms of her support. Rabbi \*\*\* for his part sent a letter to the heads of the community of \*\*\*, beseeching them to bring the affair to a close and to give the widow the reduced sum. To exert pressure on them, Rabbi \*\*\* published the letter in the Jewish press. We do not know how this controversy ended. Nevertheless, this case clearly attests to the kind of relationships that communities had with the widows of their rabbis. The fact that this episode, which was widely publicized, failed to elicit any public outcry, neither within the community itself nor elsewhere, demonstrates that this was not an uncommon occurrence.

Two years later, Rabbi \*\*\* passed away. In this case, because he was a popular figure in the community, the initiative to tend to the financial wellbeing of his widow was taken up by the “heads of the community as well as its rich men and generous donors.” After a short discussion, it was decided to establish a fundraising campaign to cover the expenses. When the required sum had been reached “they put [the terms] into writing and signed [a contract] to provide the widow with the rabbi’s salary for three years. After this time, they would give her a yearly stipend of 500 rubles for a period of seven years.” It should be noted that although in this case the initiative was spearheaded by locals, the funeral was nevertheless delayed until the widow’s future had been resolved.

Like other aspects of the community rabbinate, the financial prospects of the rabbi’s widow were still a relevant issue at the beginning of the twentieth century. We know this from the fact that the issue resurfaced in the public discourse of the time, as well as from the attempts to come up with a concrete solution to the problem. Thus, for example, when Rabbi \*\*\* of the community of \*\*\* passed away, his rabbinic position was passed onto his son. It was stipulated that “he shall divide his salary equally with his mother.” Likewise in 1910, two years after his involvement in the financial dispute between the community of \*\*\* and the widow of Rabbi \*\*\*, Rabbi \*\*\* proposed to establish a pension plan for community rabbis: “Just as every city provides for the livelihood of the rabbi and his family, so too shall they insure his life, such that when he is old or after he has passed away, his family can support itself with the insurance money.” However, the proposal, like most proposals aimed at improving systemic problems within the community rabbinate, was left unanswered.

Considering the above, we can characterize the community’s attitude toward the rabbi’s widow as paralleling their attitude to her husband when was alive. In the minds of community members, the right of the rabbi and his family to even basic support, not to mention anything beyond this, was not a “vested right.” At best it was viewed as an act of charity that the community might be inclined to provide if it so chose.