*<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.>*

**Epilogue: Master of the City?**

In this book we explored the status of the community rabbi in the Pale of Settlement during the nineteenth century and his relationship with his community. He was known as the “master of the city,” a title originally limited to the halakhic aspects of his position – i.e., his exclusive right to issue local halakhic rulings. However, as time went on, the term began to transcend the boundaries of Halakhah, and some began to view the local rabbi as a figure whose views should carry decisive, and perhaps even exclusive clout, when it came to social and political issues as well. Regardless of the the halakhic basis for such a view, this conception rose to prominence in rabbinical and hagiographical discourses; the rabbi came to be seen as the final word on a wide number of issues on the public agenda.

Indeed, in both popular memory as well as hagiographical accounts, the “master of the city” was remembered as a distinguished and powerful force in local Jewish communal life. This can be seen for example in the words of \*\*\*:

Ever since Israel became a nation, the flag bearers of the Torah have been commanders of the nation, leaders of the camp. The Torah sages in every generation did not limit their activities to the four cubits of the laws of kashrut and family purity – but rather cast their gaze upon the spiritual and material needs of the nation. Israel, the holy nation, did not stray left or right from all that the elders and scholars of Torah instructed them; all the words of these flag-bearers of Torah were to them like the [dictates of the] *Urim Vetumim*. The spirit of Torah was sovereign throughout the House of Israel, in private lives, communal affairs, public needs, and issues pertaining to the nation as a whole. And the entire people bent its head, submitting to the general discipline <<משמעת הכללית>> in the spirit of Torah and according to its flag-bearers.

It should be noted that this conception has extended beyond the confines of the popular and hagiographical discourses emerging from an Orthodox milieu; it has gained traction in academic discourse as well. This is exemplified by the claim: “For more than a thousand years, the rabbis served as the leaders of the Jewish people.” The materials gathered, and conclusions reached by this study cast substantial doubt on the accuracy of the term “master of the city.” That is to say, this study undermines the idea that the rabbi was an exalted and venerated figure – at least in the time period and geographical region discussed in this book. “Master of the city” is one of the most prevalent titles used in both rabbinic literature as well as the Jewish public discourse to characterize the community rabbi’s position. However, as I have shown, even before this time period, the community rabbi’s authority, whether it was his communal influence or even his halakhic power, was heavily curtailed by the community and its representatives. This was accomplished through formal rules and measures as well as social and political power structures. In the period discussed in this book, the rabbi’s power was, in other words, severely limited – a fact that had an important influence on his public status. This was a consequence not only of the many issues discussed at length in this book, but also due to the fact that beginning in the 1860s, the rabbinic institution as a whole was targeted as part of a wider assault on traditional institutions – launched in the public discourse and the Jewish print-press, spearheaded at first by those subscribing to a post-maskilic worldview, and later by socialists. True, this criticism was not specifically aimed at *community* rabbis. The rabbinic world as a whole was targeted. Nevertheless, as the rabbinic world of the time was comprised primarily of community rabbis, it was they who bore the brunt of these critiques. There is currently no dedicated study that describes the level of influence that this anti-legitimization campaign had on the rabbinic world as a whole. There is, however, little doubt that its influence was felt primarily among the young generation – those who grew up during the *Sturm und Drang* era <<בימי הסער והפרץ>> at the end of the nineteenth century. It is true that some community rabbis – by virtue of their personality, erudition, or cordial relations with their community members – earned significant public authority and recognition with their communities and farther afield. However, as indicated by the public discourse of the era, as well as the many sources revolving around this issue, many of the rabbis of small and medium communities were forced to serve under the limitations and constraints described in detail in this book, preventing them from leaving their mark on a reality in flux. Thus, describing what he called “second-rate” rabbis, author and publicist \*\*\* wrote the following: “The rabbis have ceased to be honored by the people. Business partners and merchants no longer turn to the rabbis to judge their cases or to help them to reach a compromise. Even the middle-class bourgeoise, not to mention members of the upper-middle class and the rich, have no desire to align <<להשתדך>> themselves with the rabbis. When it comes to communal issues or the public needs, the voices of rabbis are not heeded. All in all, the state of rabbis is awful, both materially and spiritually.”

This feeling was not limited to spectators. Those within the rabbinic milieu were equally aware of this reality and feared that the very existence of the rabbinate was in peril. This can be seen clearly in the desperate appeal of \*\*\*, rabbi of the Jewish community in \*\*\*. Already in the 1860s he attests that: “only with difficulty are the voices of any of the rabbis heard. Let those who will hear, hear, and let those who refuse to hear, refuse.” Likewise, Rabbi \*\*\*, whose voice was a ubiquitous presence throughout the Jewish public discourse at the beginning of the 1910s, wrote:

The rabbinic question demands an immediate and complete solution, a radical solution, a solution that will dispel controversy and incoherence and will showcase the rabbinate as a strong, paved road, so that it will no longer hang upon air alone. My friends! The rabbinate will be turned into stomping grounds for every ignoramus and boor; every untalented person who cannot succeed in other trades [will want to] become a rabbi. The lowliness of the rabbinate will lead Torah to be forgotten; the rabbinate will be abandoned by those fruitful talents that are in our midst. Can we really demand that the people venerate rabbis whose rabbinic character is so inadequate? [Can we do so] if they have lost the honor that is accorded to them by virtue of their Torah [learning]? The time has come for the great leaders of our nation to gather together and save the rabbinate which is in danger of decay.

It can be argued that these writers were less concerned about rabbis than they were pained by the general state of the Jewish community at the time. Discussions of the community rabbinate were, in effect, discussions of the Jewish communities, and especially the local economic and political elites. These elites were responsible for shaping every facet of the community rabbi’s professional life: from the moment he applied for a position up to his final days when he made plans for the future of his wife and children. It was they who essentially determined the character of the community rabbinate during the time period discussed here. Thus, one of the main conclusions of this study is that the community rabbi was a tragic victim to the social, political, and economic circumstances of the time – an embodiment of the lament of the talmudic sage, Rabbi Yohanan: “Woe to the rabbinate which buries its possessor.”

As \*\*\* wrote/writes, “the historian cannot know what transpired in the souls of history’s protagonists – their hidden motivations, the movements of their subconscious.” Nevertheless, we can say with some confidence that, left to his own devices, the rabbi would have preferred to dedicate most of his time to study, teaching, halakhic adjudication, and shaping the religious and ethical world of his community members. Instead he was forced to contend with a reality in which his views were a lone voice in the wilderness.

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In this context, it seems that the “trial period” of many rabbis, the protagonists of our book, was extremely short. The powers opposing the rabbis greatly outmatched them; the odds of successfully contending with such adversity – of realizing their calling, of doing what they had imagined they would do as rabbis when they had studied in yeshiva – were astronomical from the onset. One can say many things about the community rabbi. However, it appears that, when it came to anything lying beyond the narrow confines of Halakhah, he was seldom accorded the status of a “master of the city.” It is likely that his voice was sometimes heard in discussions of a public nature. But it was one voice out of many. This reality also had an impact on the rabbi’s status outside of the community and influenced the general character and perception of the community rabbinate during this period.

If indeed, as argued above, the community rabbinate was in a state of crisis during this time period, this raises the question: How and why did this reality persist up to the end of the period? The answer to this question is related, in my opinion, more than anything else, to community interests. First, it should be recalled that this was a society in which religion and Halakhah constituted inseparable parts of its culture and consciousness. Even when some members of a community became secular, the majority of the community still required – on a daily basis – a religious-halakhic authority who could be consulted regarding questions of kashrut, family purity, sabbath observance, and more. True, as we explained in the first part of this book, this communal need could be satisfied through other channels as well: for example, by a local scholar, as opposed to an appointed rabbi. Nevertheless, a community’s maintenance of a rabbi without a doubt contributed to its image and prestige – certainly to outsiders. Second, in light of everything discussed in this book, we can conclude that the weaker the socio-economic and public status of the rabbi was, the easier it was for a community to maintain him. A powerless rabbi with little influence posed no meaningful threat to powerful community figures. Furthermore, as described above, quite often, the rabbi did not even constitute a financial burden. From another perspective – that of the rabbis themselves – the existence of a community rabbinate, however weak or feeble, nevertheless guaranteed some level of employment for hundreds of yeshiva graduates. Likewise, it offered a chance, even if it was a very small one, for some amount of social mobility – be it improvement in one’s economic conditions or meriting prestige and status within the “rabbinic republic” of the time. All of these interests guaranteed that the community rabbinate would be maintained one way or another – even if it was by virtue of nothing more than inertia.

As described in the introduction to this book, this study was limited to an exploration of the social and economic aspects of the community rabbi’s life in a specific time and place. It seems, however, that much of the data presented here, as well as the discussion and conclusions, can serve as a basis for the exploration of a wide range of issues that have yet to be broached. For example, future studies could explore the ideological orientations that characterized these rabbis: their scholarly-halakhic discourse; the relationship between their position and their conservative or liberal leanings; the status and public image of the community rabbi throughout the twentieth century; and the ways in which the community rabbinate was shaped in new Jewish communities – those communities established by the millions of Jews who emigrated from Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Likewise, the relationship between the world of the rabbinate and that of the community clergy, only glossed upon in this book, deserves a more detailed study – certainly in places where the geographical, and sometimes even cultural, divide between Jewish and non-Jewish communities was less than rigid. Another subject, which naturally lies beyond my expertise as a historian, is a discussion of the psychological aspects of the community rabbi’s world. Studies of this type, which have gained greater attention in scholarship on the clergy, would, without a doubt, be an important contribution to completing the picture which I tried to sketch in broad strokes in the present study.

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When I first embarked upon this long journey to trace the footsteps of these rabbis, I believed that my research subjects would be important and influential figures within their communities. I also thought that community members would do everything in their power to honor and respect them. However, due to everything discussed in this book, when I reached the end of this exciting journey, I felt the same as \*\*\*, a scholar whose contribution to the study of the rabbinate is invaluable: “We are used to viewing the community rabbi as the pillar of the Jewish community and its internal religious life, a counterpart to the leaders who represented the community in its secular life. The fact that religious life was a critical factor in the lives of nineteenth century Jewry planted the seeds for the view that, in previous centuries, the rabbi was a powerful communal force. The documents which I have discussed here will undermine this prevalent outlook.” Likewise, I believe that the words of Rabbi \*\*\*, written in the early 1920s, clearly and sharply encapsulate the conclusions implied by this book:

In years to come, when a historian decides to write a history of the Jewish people and to chronicle its different time periods, he will study the cultural life of each generation, evaluating and rendering judgment according to his own opinion and perspective. When he arrives at the activity of rabbis in our time, he will find empty pages, sheets devoid of writing. When he arrives at our present day, he will find rabbis who neither move nor act, rabbis who neither influence nor do anything at all.