# **Introduction**

The history of the rabbinate, a relatively young branch of Jewish historiography, is a field with many facets. In its first stages, scholars focused on providing detailed descriptions of the rabbis who served in different communities, producing a long series of rabbinic chronicles which have played a crucial role in future studies. The next stage—the transition from collecting and classifying data to modern historical research—included a small number of studies which explored the world of the rabbinate as a whole. In parallel, the genre of hagiography came to the fore, its primary focus the description of the scholastic, spiritual and public worlds of major, famous rabbinic figures. With the rising interest in social history in recent decades, some scholars sought explore societal and economic aspects of the community rabbi, attempting to explain the institution’s evolution and societal repercussions, using a variety of research methods. These scholars, most notably \*\*\*, predominantly focused on the world of the community rabbis in medieval Germany and France. At the same time, some scholars directed their attention to the world of the community rabbinate in modern Europe such as \*\*\*’s studies of the rabbinate in France, \*\*\*’s studies of the rabbinate in Italy, \*\*\*’s studies of the rabbinate in Hungary, and the studies of other researchers in other Jewish population centers in Europe. The institution of the rabbinate has also aroused great interest among scholars of American Jewish history, such as \*\*\*, as well as scholars of Middle-Eastern Jewry, such as \*\*\*.

The rabbinate in Eastern Europe, one part of which will comprise the main discussion in the present book, has also entered academic discourse, being discussed from three major perspectives: geographical, chronological and thematic. Geographically speaking, scholars have paid the most attention to the rabbinate in Galicia and Poland—for example, the studies of \*\*\* (on Galicia) and \*\*\* (on Poland). Notwithstanding these studies, research on the rabbinate in Jewish communities located in the Pale of Settlement—the region in which the majority of the Jewish population at the time was concentrated, and which included the Jewish-Lithuanian cultural sphere—has been almost entirely excluded from scholarly literature. In terms of chronology, researchers of the Polish rabbinate, have focused on the late eighteenth century (such as the studies of \*\*\*), or on various aspects of the Polish rabbinate in the first half of the twentieth century as in the studies of \*\*\*. The world of the *community* rabbinate in the nineteenth century, both in Poland and the Pale of Settlement has barely attracted any scholarly attention whatsoever, being sidelined by other time periods.

In terms of thematic aspects, scholarly interest has been focused mainly on well-known rabbis who lived and were active in large, famous communities, such as \*\*\*, as well as rabbis who though famous did not have an official status, such as \*\*\*. Another group of rabbis to merit scholarly discussion and research are the heads of the large yeshivot established in Eastern Europe from the beginning of the nineteenth century, such as \*\*\*. However, those belonging to neither of the above-mentioned two groups—that is, the rabbis of urban communities or communities in the Pale of Settlement, the majority of the rabbinate at the time—have received scant attention. With the exception for the few studies by \*\*\*, the world of the rabbinate in the Pale of Settlement, especially the Jewish-Lithuanian cultural sphere, and even more so the worlds of rabbis of small or medium communities, have been excluded from scholarly purview. The nature and extent of this lacuna, were already described almost a decade ago by \*\*\*.

This lacuna reflects a wider phenomenon: the inadequate and meager scholarly treatment of the societal and economic aspects of traditional Jewish society in this geographic region from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. This can be attributed to the objective challenges posed by limited access to archival records until late twentieth century, as well as the magnitude of ideological, political and demographic shifts undergone by the Jewish society in the Pale of Settlement during the nineteenth century. These processes, which radically transformed the character of this society, naturally drove researchers to direct their focus on weightier issues such as the conflict between Hasidim and Mitnagdim, the pogroms of the late nineteenth century, trans-Atlantic immigration, the Jewish enlightenment, and the rise of new Jewish ideological movements, such as the Bund and the Zionist movement. The “old” world—traditional Jewish societies which included the institution of the community rabbi—were, therefore, pushed to the periphery of historical interest and discussion, and those scholars who did pay the topic mind, only did so within the context of the larger trends mentioned.

Naturally, a discussion of the world of the community rabbi in the nineteenth century should begin with a description of its institutional predecessor. This is, however, problematic. With the exception of the few and limited studies mentioned above, we know very little about the character of the community rabbinate in this area in the periods preceding those discussed in this book. This book therefore does not add a *new* layer to the discussion of the rabbinate in these communities and does not seek to trace the transformations and changes undergone by the rabbinate in the nineteenth century. It instead offers a new and focused perspective on a pre-defined area and time. While during research, sources related to the world of the rabbinate in the 16th–18th centuries were used, this was to address specific questions such as the practice of purchasing rabbinic posts but not to provide a broad and comprehensive picture of this topic, a task waiting for future researchers.

This book seeks to fill the lacuna described by Stanislavski and others, from three perspectives, corresponding to those mentioned above—geographical, chronological and thematic. Geographically, the discussion to follow will focus on the community rabbinate in the northern area of the Pale of Settlement—that is, those Jewish communities which belonged to the Jewish-Lithuanian cultural sphere and which were included in north-western administrative divisions (*guberniyas*) of the Russian Empire: Grodno, Vilna, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Minsk, Suvalkai, Kaunas, and Kurland. However, due to a number of factors it was sometimes necessary to expand the discussion to incorporate other regions. The itinerant nature of the community rabbi; the similarities between organizational and administrative structures of Jewish communities in central and Eastern Europe (all of which belonged to the Ashkenazi-Jewish cultural sphere); and the convoluted system of connections between community rabbis in the northern Pale of Settlement and their counterparts in Poland, Galicia and regions even further south (Volhynia, Kherson, Ekaterinoslav, Poltava, Chernigov and Kiev) sometimes led to these regions being encompassed in the discussion.

However, the comparison with rabbis serving in Poland or Galicia has been done only partially and with a limited scope, primarily because of their different formal statuses. These rabbis were recognized by law as official functionaries, a fact with consequences for their training and selection for office, as well as their social-communal and economic status. The “spiritual” rabbis in the Pale of Settlement, by contrast, had no official status because, beginning in the 1830’s, Russian law only recognized “Crown Rabbis.” Formally speaking, the spiritual, community rabbi did not exist in this region. This had dramatic repercussions for all elements related to the community rabbi’s activity, beginning with his selection for the post, extending to the conditions of his employment and including the possibility of his dismissal. This is also the reason why the figure of the community rabbi has left almost no trace in official records and archives. It is therefore difficult to compare the institution to its counterparts in other geographical regions, Galicia for example. In general, it can be said that the spiritual rabbi and the crown rabbi shared title alone.

In terms of chronology, our study focuses on community rabbis in the Pale of Settlement during the period beginning in the second quarter of the nineteenth century and culminating with the outbreak of World War I. This era—in which Europe as a whole experienced rapid changes which had a significant impact on Jewish society as well—is particularly interesting for an analysis of community rabbis and the institution of the rabbinate. This is reflected prominently, for example, in the tensions which prevailed between rabbis—the self-declared defenders and preservers of the old-order—and the rapid, sometimes even radical, winds of changes threatening to topple the status quo. A most notable change is the dissolution of the local, traditional format of Jewish societal organization—the Kehilla—which officially ceased to function as a recognized corporate body in the Tsarist empire beginning in the 1840’s. The disbandment of the “Kahal”—the institution once responsible for all communal activities—would, one would think, mean the cessation of its communal institutions and organizations, including the community rabbinate. However, as demonstrated by Shohet and Levitas, even after the Kahal had ceased to operate as an official corporate body, other systems, such as the welfare system (the *Tzedakah Gedolah*), continued uninterrupted due to their vital role in providing basic existential needs for the members of Jewish society. Nevertheless, the shrinking influence of the political-economic elites—those who generally had filled and controlled the institution of the Kahal—alongside the growing influence and power of the masses, had significant repercussions for the life of the community rabbi. This was especially true for the selection process of the rabbi, which now involved more people, and thus necessarily entailed the conflict of distinct and sometimes opposing interests. It also affected the rabbi’s authority and status in a society in which the boundaries of classic hierarchies were being indelibly blurred.

The third dimension of the rabbinate, its thematic aspects, are one of the major innovations of the present study. In this study, I wish to focus specifically on second-tier rabbis, that is, the rabbis of medium to small communities. One may think that the best way to study the community rabbinate of this era is to focus on the lives and behaviors of rabbis serving in large communities such as Vilna, Misnk, Vitebsk, and Grodno. This is, indeed, the accepted practice in most of the scholarly literature dedicated to the rabbinate. However, I would argue that while such prominent rabbis indeed began their careers as second-tier rabbis, their small numbers and unique qualities, invalidate them as representatives of the milieu of the entire institution in the time and place studied—especially insofar as economic and societal contexts are concerned. Likewise, the relationships and practices of a rabbi in a large, well-established community—whether the rabbi of the city or of one of its suburbs—cannot be used to characterize those rabbis who found themselves in small, remote towns. Therefore, the only way to familiarize ourselves with the community rabbinate up close, and to understand how it operated in a specific time and region, is by analyzing those people who filled the bulk of the institution’s ranks: the second-tier rabbis who served in hundreds of medium to small communities in Pale of Settlement, out of sight and often out of mind. By classifying, characterizing and analyzing data drawn from many sources, it is possible to paint a comprehensive picture of the community rabbi and the rabbinical institution.

In addition to the aforementioned considerations, there are a number of advantages to choosing to focus specifically on second-tier rabbis. First, it allows us to conceptualize the breadth and extent of the rabbinic institution. Its dimensions are best appreciated if we keep in mind that during the time period under discussion some 1,500 rabbis served in various communities, constituting the backbone of the rabbinate in the Jewish-Lithuanian sphere in the nineteenth century. In other words, this was a societal, religious and political institution with a wide scope. The special status of those who filled its ranks carried profound repercussions for the world of local Jews as well as the Kehilla as a political-societal organ.

Another advantage of focusing on second-tier rabbis is the opportunity to gain insights on a less famous form of rabbinical discourse from that era. The practice in hagiographical literature and in the many studies that discuss the rabbinate from a myriad of approaches, is to identify the rabbinical voice with halakhic rulings or occupation with broad public issues. The problem is that this was the voice of a very limited and, some would say chosen, group of rabbis. As mentioned above, they cannot be considered representatives of the general rabbinic milieu. Furthermore, halakhic rulings and the larger regional questions, as important as they were, constituted a very limited part of rabbinic discourse. A wide assortment of other topics occupied a more central place in the lives of community rabbis and constituted the primary subject of internal communal discourse. It was a mundane discourse, real and quotidian, which often dealt with seemingly trivial matters—not world altering questions. It primarily pertained to issues raised and discussed as part of the rabbi’s relationship with his community. The difficulty of finding a rabbinical post, the complex relationships of rabbis with their communities, the harsh financial straits of many rabbis, and the issue of the local rabbi’s authority and status occupied a prominent place in this discourse and rightfully so. Such questions could have a real impact on the lives and careers of rabbis, and, in many cases, could influence their jurisprudence.

The third advantage of discussing second-tier rabbis, is the insight it affords us into the communal aspects of Jewish society in Eastern Europe during the period discussed. As a public servant, even if not a formal one, the community rabbi commanded a convoluted network of relations with most elements of local society. An analysis of the relationship between the rabbi and local institutions, as well as between him and the individual members of his community, comprehensively highlights fascinating aspects of communal life at the time, shedding light on the complex dynamics taking place behind local political and societal processes.

Fourth, a discussion of the community rabbinate also affords scholar insights into the wider, meta-communal system of Eastern European Jewry, from a hitherto unexplored perspective. I am referring to viewing the rabbinate from an organizational-professional perspective. Community rabbis, as mentioned, moved about regularly, changing posts every 3–5 years on average. They were, therefore, considered by themselves and by society at large, a relatively unstable element. They did not, in other words, organically belong to any communal framework. Community rabbis regarded themselves, and were seen by many in their time, as members of an informal, meta-communal, professional guild. It was a rabbinical republic of sorts with its own unique codes of behavior. Exploring this group, from a broad perspective, therefore sheds new light, on an otherwise unexplored aspect of Jewry at the time, an aspect which was located at the center of local communities and the discourse of ideological and political organizational trends that characterized Jewry in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is true that other local Jewish professional sectors existed at the time, ritual slaughterers and cantors, for example. Nevertheless, the community rabbinate is the only Jewish sector at the time which embodied a complex network of relationships and connections, and even a system of hierarchies and organizational patterns, even if these always remained loose and unenforceable.

Certain aspects of the community rabbi have, however, been omitted from this book. The first, is the system of relationships and connections between spiritual rabbis and crown rabbis in the Pale of Settlement. With the establishment of the institution of the crown rabbi, communities were forced to fill both posts. That being said, and unlike rabbis in the Congress of Poland, a sharp and unambiguous line was drawn between the two institutions. The responsibilities of the crown rabbi included elements not traditionally considered part of a rabbi’s duties, such as managing communal population registers and granting formal approval for the officiation of religious ceremonies (marriage and divorce). The spiritual rabbi, by contrast, was entrusted with managing the religious needs of community members. He was the only halakhic authority who could rule on matters of kashrut and only he actively officiated religious ceremonies and delivered lessons and sermons. In practice, the two institutions only shared a name, and, in certain communities, the spiritual rabbi was appointed the “vice” crown rabbi in order to allow a community to pay his salary from its regular budget.

This distinction is seen prominently in communal discussions about the “question of the rabbinate,” a topic occupying a central place in the public discourse in the second half of the nineteenth century. This discourse sometimes included sweeping criticisms of the rabbinic institution and the way it operated. However, a careful reading of the arguments raised reveals a clear distinction between the spiritual rabbis and crown rabbis. While the criticism leveled against spiritual rabbis emerged from maskilic and post-maskilic circles, criticisms of the crown rabbi came from all levels of society. While spiritual rabbis were criticized for being irrelevant and incapable of dealing with the changing needs of the time and of society, the root of the criticism against crown rabbis was the feeling that the institution was anachronistic and redundant and only served the interests of the government.

Likewise, this book does not explore the world of the Hasidic community rabbi (with some exceptions). Unlike the type of community rabbi discussed in this book, the Hasidic rabbi was not nominated by community members (at least not in practice) but was rather appointed by the Hasidic master whose authority extended over the region in which a community was situated. This process had a serious impact on the behavior of the Hasidic community rabbi and his relationship with his community. Because he did not derive his power from his community, but only from the one who had appointed him, he was also completely uninhibited. This was true in terms of communal aspects of his post as well as practical aspects, such as the term and length of appointment, and the possibility of dismissing him. Like the crown rabbi, the Hasidic rabbi was fundamentally different from the spiritual rabbi serving non-Hasidic communities, despite the fact that their regular duties (halakhic adjudication, for example) were largely similar.

**Methodology**

One of the central issues of studying the rabbinate, especially the community rabbinate, is the writer’s approach to his or her objects of study. By its nature, hagiographic literature treats its objects of study as men of unique stature, value and gravity. Sometimes it even attributes to these figures a degree of holiness. Such an approach lacks a critical tone and is focused on depicting the virtues and contributions of its subjects. It is a style of writing characteristic of Orthodox historiography as well as collective folk memory which yearns for apogees, objects of admiration, leaders to be turned to in times of trouble. Historical research, by contrast, studies its subjects from a different perspective. Great rabbis, even important ones enjoying considerable status, are perceived as human beings. They have hopes and dreams, wishes and desires, and even impulses and weaknesses. This being the case, their rabbinical responsibilities and the way in which they carried them out are evaluated with the same criteria used to analyze any historical figure, regardless of that person’s station or role in society. A similar approach is prevalent among researchers of the clergy—as scholar of Christianity, \*\*\*, writes about the European clergy at the advent of the Modern Era: \*\*\*. It should, therefore, be noted that critical scholarship studies not just the community rabbi himself, but also the environment in which he was active, that is, in the context of communal institutions (which had their own considerations and methods when it came to the rabbi). This was my guiding principle in the present study and I believe that it is the only way to offer a practical and unbiased analysis.

Writing a collective biography poses complex methodological challenges. Most significant is the fear of being seduced into making generalizations or reaching conclusions with insufficient evidence—sometimes the consequence of studying a group with such wide scope and variety. To overcome this challenge, I have fully implemented the historical-quantitative method. I have created a broad database of rabbis born between the years 1800–1875, who served in the Jewish-Lithuanian cultural sphere. The database includes the following information about some 1,500 rabbis: name, place of birth, date of birth, date of death, place of study, books written, communities served and age of attaining each rabbinical post in each community. This large and detailed corpus is based on many, diverse sources (which I will discuss in further detail below). It affords us the most accurate picture possible of the historical reality of the typical community rabbi. Even in cases in which it was impossible to obtain extensive data on a given phenomenon, its prevalence and scope could be understood by the place it occupied in public discourse. This is primarily reflected in the writings of those who themselves belonged to the rabbinical milieu, who would describe behaviors and practices which stood in opposition to the ideal image naturally expected from members of the rabbinical institution.

An additional dilemma facing those who wish to study social groups is the proper way to present findings, and in our case, the proper way to present the story of the community rabbinate in the time and place under study. After much deliberation, I decided to tell this story by following the life of a “typical,” community rabbi. Thus, in the first part of this book, the reader is invited to join the young Torah scholar and accompany him as he passes various milestones of his life. His story begins with his studies and his training in Yeshiva or in a Beit Midrash. From there he begins a complex process, often beset by disappointments, to find a rabbinical post, a process characterized by internal communal bickering over the best candidate. He must contend with different intermediaries and methods which were intended to promote different candidates, deliver a trial sermon, and negotiate the conditions of his employment with communal authorities. Finally, if successful, he receives the yearned for writ of rabbinical appointment.

In the second part of the book, the reader follows the rabbi’s initiation into his new community: his various duties; his self-perception as a rabbinical scholar in a place bereft of scholarly-companions; his relations with the rabbis of other communities; the scope and contents of his scholarly Torah output; his sermons; his communal activity; the disagreements and conflicts which attended his presence and actions; the phenomenon of the “double” rabbinate; his relationship with local authorities and powers such as the political and economic elites, the slaughters, the butchers and dayyanim, as well as with the masses; his financial circumstances; the role and status of the rabbi’s wife; and finally the conclusion of his post (whether by his own initiative or because the communal institutions have decided to dismiss him) and his departure in search of a new post.

Despite our focus on the societal, political and economic aspects of the rabbinate, it should be recalled that the rabbi represented an important figure of religious authority, sometimes the only one in a given community. As the dilemma of this reality became clearer and better defined during my research, I entertained the possibility of viewing the rabbi as the Jewish equivalent of another religious figure, living and active in the same geographical milieu, sometimes under similar social and political circumstances. I am of course referring to the local priest, who in Russia was usually Greek-Orthodox and in Poland and Lithuania Catholic. It is true that the differences between rabbi and priest far outnumber their similarities. For this reason, most studies of the rabbinate have not even entertained the possibility of such a comparative analysis. Nevertheless, a review of the primary sources written by contemporary priests, such as the famous work of \*\*\*, relevant secondary literature, such as that published by \*\*\*, and sociological studies of the clergy, all point to a long list of affinities between the two institutions. Like the rabbi, the priest was also not a local resident. Before receiving his post, he also studied in a religious seminar, underwent a complex selection and acceptance process, relied on his congregation for his financial wellbeing, and, in many cases, felt disillusioned by the intellectual poverty of his surroundings or by the hostility sometimes showed to him by local authorities. Analyzing these (surprising?) similarities yielded significant insights into various aspects of a religious job-holder in a small segregated community, as also attested to by the wide variety of studies on the worlds of clergymen, especially the local village priest. Likewise, there are clear similarities between attempts to write collective biographies of the rabbinate in given regions and times and attempts to do the same for the clergy. Besides the immediate significance of crossing an intellectual-mental boundary/Rubicon, this innovative conceptual approach may truly contribute to future studies on the topic.

**Sources**

The scholar studying the world of the rabbinate in the nineteenth century has at his or her disposal a wide array of classic sources such as official archival materials, communal records, memoirs, halakhic and ideological literature written by the subjects of research. Alongside these sources, one can find a library of books dealing with the world of the rabbinate, full of hagiographical or semi-hagiographical accounts, (some published in recent years by rabbis of various communities), all focusing on the perception of the rabbinical institution and the dilemmas which plagued it. In addition to all these, belles-lettres and folklore must also be mentioned. In their own ways, these genres contribute an important perspective on relevant aspects of the historical reality which was. Autobiographies of the contemporary rabbis are, by contrast, a rarity.

In the first stages of my research, I primarily used these classical sources, allowing me to create a factual foundation. I was thus able to reconstruct the biographies of the hundreds of community rabbis discussed in this book. Due to the nature of such sources, relying on them demanded methodological caution. Nevertheless, they proved to be extremely valuable sources of information. They did, however, lack information on internal rabbinic discourse, and did not provide insights into the perception of the community rabbi in the public eye. I theorized that listening in on the voices emerging from these two types of discourse could contribute significantly to our understanding of additional, important aspects of the world of the community rabbi. Luckily, I was afforded the opportunity to eavesdrop on these voices through another medium—the contemporary, primarily Jewish, news presses.

It did not take long after its arrival in Eastern Europe in the late 1850’s, for newspapers to become the primary, most extensive and most important arena of public Jewish discourse. Jewish newspapers prioritized issues at the center of public day-to-day life including questions of religion, in-depth discussions of the nascent Zionist idea, the taxes on slaughtering which took its toll on the economic wellbeing of local Jews, recurring burnings, pogroms, the settlement of the Land of Israel, forced conscription into the Russian army, and the question of trans-Atlantic immigration and its repercussions for life in Eastern Europe.

To elevate the importance of this discourse, and in order to present a wide spectrum of opinions and approaches, news editors were very open to publishing correspondence pieces, that is, articles sent to the news editor by writers living in different communities, who regularly fed newspapers all manners of reports. Studying newspapers, thus allows us to observe events taking place in tiny remote communities, those lying far from the public sights (and sometimes mind). Before long the pages of newspapers were filled with subjects which had, until that point, been discussed only locally. This included the many aspects of the community rabbinate. The place occupied by discussions of the rabbinate in the Jewish press of the time is described in the twentieth century by Rabbi \*\*\*. As he explains: “At that time, the question [of the rabbi] awoke with great noise and much tumult, and often and in various times, it earned itself a regular column in our Hebrew press. It became the center of controversy between different authors and the subject of verbal polemics, some acerbic, others sensible.”

The context of this discourse gave public voice to the sundry processes taking place in the world of the community rabbinate at the time, especially those which failed to make their way into official documentation. It included articles about the search for rabbinical candidates and details about their appointments; tales of controversy and political struggle; critique from within the rabbinate and from without over ethical and organizational failures in the appointment process; discussions over the inheritance of a rabbinical post; musings over status of the rabbi and his powers; discussions of the status of the rabbi’s wife and the question of guaranteeing her financial wellbeing after his death; as well as a wide variety of intricate descriptions related directly or tangentially to other aspects of the community rabbi and his world. The Jewish press was also utilized by hundreds of rabbis from small communities as a platform to bemoan their complex and harsh circumstances. Once unable to express their views on these issues, the rabbis were now afforded the opportunity to actively participate in communal and meta-communal discourse. A review of the hundreds of reports and articles dedicated to the subject of the community rabbinate demonstrates that no other group in Jewish society at that time received such prominent attention in the public discourse.

Early on, the print press conceived itself as a communal watchdog. In an article published in the late 1880’s, \*\*\* writes:

For what purpose were periodicals/newspapers created in the world? I would say: so that all mankind would know that the ledger is open and the hand writing; and whoever wishes to lead the community despotically and to undertake actions of his own accord, should know that an eye is watching and an ear attentive, and all his actions are inscribed in a book.

??? another editor wrote “we station lovers of truth as observers in every nook and cranny, and all they see they tell us, and we will call out, and we will make heard and we will announce throughout the lands of Israel [=Jewry] this matter, so that they who are guilty may know that watchful eyes follow all their actions.” Truth-loving readers, quickly understood the significant potential of this new genre, as succinctly described by \*\*\*:

The writers of periodicals/newspapers for the Children of Israel, they are like watchmen at their posts to tell our brethren of righteousness or mischief. For today in Israel, the moment a writer sees wrongdoing in his community, even if it is small and insignificant among the thousands of Israel, he cannot ignore it, and it will be brought into judgement before the public opinion and its throne; and if it is found guilty, its sin will stain the leaves of the periodicals/newspapers [published] in our language for eternal infamy.

In terms of the rabbinate, the print press was not simply a watchdog; it was also a whistleblower, projecting across the Pale of Settlement. Jews from different communities, such as rabbis who felt they had been wronged, frequently reported their accounts of events, sometimes in multiple newspapers, and thus turned a local problem into a subject with wider societal significance.

Reliance on the press as a historical source is not devoid of problems; in fact, it may pose a considerable number of potential obstacles, especially when it comes to the reliability of a report. News editors were already aware of this problem, as is evident from the following passage printed in *Hamelitz*:

Where is the truth? Can we verify it from these news items/information? The newspaper—is it not obligated to accept and report on any matter which receives the overseer’s stamp of approval […] And thus the reader who wishes to verify a matter, is like a blindman groping about in the darkness. Nevertheless, we try. We know that here and there, in the cities and towns, there are men with ears listening, eyes seeing and hands writing. We call upon these men to awake, we send them strength and encouragement, to give us their helping hands, and to assist us.

And in many cases when a newspaper would publish tendentious or even false information, it would publish a retraction or correction if new information came to light. Sometimes the editor would even appeal to his readers, requesting comment on an article which described a certain community in an unflattering light: “We cannot guarantee that everything in this article from Uman is true. And we request the inhabitants of this city, if the writer has testified falsely, that they stand and vindicate themselves. Let them send their words to us with haste and we will publish their vindication.”

However, despite the chance of false reporting, the possibility of responding to a publisher in a relatively short amount of time, as well as the regular publication of multiple newspapers all criticizing each other, guaranteed a certain level of quality control over the information being published, including information about the status and activities of the rabbis. Thus, even when reports which could embarrass their subjects were published, such as the issue of the sale and purchase of rabbinic posts, those involved would refrain from denying the report, knowing that the public eye, in the form of the press, was always watching. As described by \*\*\*:

I shall do my part, and my words will be a warning to all who beg to obtain the crown of the rabbinate through crooked means. […] For an eye is watching and a hand writing, and I shall not spare the honor of my friends, teachers, relatives or those beloved to me. Against all my hand is armed, for the honor of heaven is greater than all. You have been warned; now be careful!

Nevertheless, I have done my best in this study to evaluate the reliability of print sources, primarily by comparing a wide range of newspapers published in different political and cultural environments (Warsaw, Odessa, St. Petersburg, Wilna/Vilna, Lyck and others). Newspapers and periodicals written in Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, Polish and Lithuanian were also consulted, representing a full spectrum of cultural and ideological world views—ranging from radical maskilic to conservative Orthodox. A meticulous analysis of these sources demonstrates a lack of essential variation on the basis of the ideological or cultural orientation of the newspaper editor inasmuch as the depiction of the community rabbi is concerned. In this study, we will also evaluate the information appearing in these newspapers by cross-checking them against other sources, adopting a strictly skeptical approach whenever anything seems to lack a proper basis.