



RABBIS & THEIR COMMUNITY: STUDIES IN THE EASTERN EUROPEAN ORTHODOX RABBINATE IN MONTREAL, 1896–1930

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ISBN 978-1-55238-681-1

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*New Thoughts from an Ancient Source:
Hirsh Wolofsky's Commentary on the Torah*¹

The North American Yiddish press in the early twentieth century has long been recognized by scholars of American Jewish history as a force for Americanization and modernization within the Eastern European immigrant Jewish community. It is also understood that the medium of the Yiddish press could be used as a cultural bridging mechanism, enabling its readers to reappropriate their past experiences and education for the purpose of better understanding their new communities and acclimatizing themselves in their new home.² A particularly illuminating example of this process in action can be seen in Montreal in the early part of the twentieth century.

The *Keneder Odler* was Montreal's Yiddish-language newspaper, beginning in 1907, and its views, and those of its publisher, Hirsh Wolofsky (1878–1949), were of considerable importance for the city's Eastern European immigrant Jewish community.³ Among the many articles and columns Wolofsky wrote for *Keneder Odler* in the course of his career, three of which were printed in book form after appearing first in the newspaper,⁴ perhaps the most interesting are his series of columns entitled *Oyf Eybiken Kvall: Gedanken un batrachtungen fun dem hayntigen idishen leben un shtreben, in likht fun unzer alter un eybig-nayer tora, eingeteylt loyt di parshiyos fun der vokh*.⁵ ["From the Eternal Source: Thoughts and Observations from Contemporary Jewish Life and Aspirations in the Light of Our Old and Eternally New Torah, Organized according to the Weekly {Torah} Portions"; hereinafter "EK"]. In this series of weekly columns, written throughout the Hebrew calendar year 5689 [1928–29],⁶ Wolofsky

attempted to create nothing less than a contemporary commentary or homily [*drush*] on the Pentateuch. The form the book took, commentary, as well as its division according to the weekly synagogue Torah readings, reflected a respect for the Judaic tradition. It also appropriated that tradition so as to shed new light on the dynamics of the contemporary Jewish community, whose “life and aspirations” Wolofsky wished to reflect.

Wolofsky, as publisher of *Keneder Odler*, has for a long time been understood by scholars as a significant factor in the rise and development of the Eastern European Jewish community in Montreal in the first half of the twentieth century. He is well known to researchers of Montreal Jewish history for his book of memoirs, *Mayn Lebens Rayze*. His other books, however, including *EK*, have attracted hardly any scholarly attention.⁷ In the case of *EK*, at least, this is quite a pity, since an analysis of its contents will enable us to achieve an important insight into Wolofsky’s thought, and, perhaps more importantly, into some of the directions in which he felt Montreal Jewry was headed in a crucial period in its history.

In his introduction to *EK*, Wolofsky began by consciously placing his work in the tradition of the ancient midrashic and later homiletic [*drush*] literature of Judaism. These premodern works, he asserted, sought to explain contemporary problems in terms of the Torah, using the literary means of allegory, fantasy, and imagination. These elements were added to the true story of Torah⁸ in order to affect the hearts of the audience. This process was precisely what Wolofsky wished to follow, only in the twentieth century and “according to the American version [*nusakh*].”⁹ He further attempts to define what he means by the “American version” by stating that in “America,” everything is characterized by the slogan “hurry up,” and by a process of popularization that leads to the neglect of serious, classical music for jazz. Similarly, serious books do not have the audience appeal of “light” magazines. In such a cultural atmosphere, *drush* also needs to become different. There is no twentieth-century audience for a homily lasting hours on end. Jews who are willing to listen at all to words of Torah want the speaker to come to the point in fifteen to twenty minutes without either elaborate introductions or difficult questions.¹⁰ Having this situation in mind, Wolofsky was not about to create a “serious” commentary on the Torah in the old style. Rather, armed with his firm grasp of the text of the Torah, along with Rashi’s commentary derived from his childhood education, he desired to satisfy his own

curiosity about the Torah while writing a sort of Torah-based feuilleton on the problems of contemporary Jewish life.¹¹

EK was, of course, a bit more than that. Wolofsky, in writing this work, thought of his enterprise in the context of the age-old Jewish custom of reviewing the weekly Torah portion [*ma'avir sedra zayn*] with the original biblical text read twice and the translation/interpretation [*targum*] once. At present, however, Wolofsky asserted that the original "text" of Jewish life has largely been forgotten and that therefore contemporary Jews are living their lives at a remove from the original [*targum-lebn*] in a world where practically nothing is "original" and all is *targum*. For Jews living in such a world, Wolofsky proposed to present a series of homilies that might, indeed, be more *targum* than original, but which were conceived by him to be in the spirit of the original.¹²

For Jews, historically, the Torah has been understood as containing within itself literally the entire cosmos.¹³ It is no wonder, then, that Wolofsky, in considering the weekly portions of Torah, was able to find plenty of material to discuss everything that was on his mind, and that he thought would also be on the minds of his readers.

Prominent among these topics was what would later on be described as the "generation gap," that great lack of comprehension between the older, immigrant generation and the younger generation growing up in North America, who appeared to live in completely different worlds.¹⁴ The older generation was portrayed in general terms as religiously traditional; the younger generation as in rebellion from that tradition. Thus the observance of the Jewish Sabbath,¹⁵ and the observance of family purity laws¹⁶ were portrayed as points of contention between the old and the new generations. The secular education of the young was understood as an important factor in this process. As Wolofsky stated, "'Wise' children [*hokhomim kinder*] who go to high school and college [and] already speak English with a correct accent," look down on their father, the "kike," with his foreign accent and conservative ways.¹⁷ Young people with college educations grew ashamed of their Orthodox parents.¹⁸ The curse recorded in Deuteronomy that "Your children shall be given over to a foreign nation and your eyes see"¹⁹ refers, according to Wolofsky, to the non-Jewish cultures that the Jewish children will be drawn to without the parents being able to do anything about the situation.²⁰ Commenting on the fact that Joseph, in *Parshat va-Yehi*, visits his sick father without his Egyptian-born

wife, Asenath, Wolofsky states that, if he were a commentator like Rashi, he would say that Asenath was absent from the visit because she could not stand to go to the Jewish ghetto to see her father-in-law, the old Jew, the greenhorn. Wolofsky further comments to his readers on Asenath that, if such a thing has not happened in their family, it has certainly happened to their friends or acquaintances.²¹ This anachronistic identification of “Egypt” as the locus of Jewish assimilation forms a sustained theme in *EK*. It is continued by Wolofsky in commenting on Pharaoh’s offer to Moses in *parshas bo’* to let the adults out of Egypt but not the children. Wolofsky states in this instance that, as for the Jewish children, “Pharaoh must hold them under his influence and in his schools.”²²

Assimilation, not surprisingly, is one of Wolofsky’s major themes in *EK*. Assimilation is a sin against the Torah and the Jewish people, as Jews shed their Jewish names,²³ exchange their holy tongue for the language of their country, their ancient literature for contemporary world literature, their *shabbes* and *yom tov* for Sundays and non-Jewish holidays. All of this, says Wolofsky, is a sort of modern “sacrifice” brought by Jews in place of the animal sacrifices ordained by the Torah. Unfortunately, the sacrifices of assimilation do not effect expiation of sin, as the sacrifices of ancient times did; instead, they bring in their wake the persecutions of anti-semitism.²⁴

Wolofsky’s proffered remedy for the plague of assimilation was support for Jewish education, and, more specifically, for the religious education of the Talmud Torah.²⁵ Though many felt that, in America, the cause of Jewish education was hopeless,²⁶ and sending Jewish children for Hebrew education after a long day in public school was far from being an ideal situation,²⁷ not educating children Jewishly at all was going to do them and society as a whole a great deal of harm. Wolofsky thus stated:

Visit a Reformatory and you will not find there any children who attended Talmud Torah. Go to Juvenile Court and you will find there only Jewish children who did not attend Talmud Torah and have no Jewish education.... Children who did not get a Jewish education are like snakes who bite and poison their parents and their people.²⁸

But though a Talmud Torah education was the absolutely necessary foundation for the Jewish future,²⁹ support for the Talmud Torahs was

very weak, especially in contrast to the building of fine synagogues. Thus Wolofsky put in his commentary to the words of Balaam, blessing the Children of Israel:

“How goodly are your tents”³⁰ ... how beautiful are your synagogues and your private dwellings, but how puny is your childrens’ education. What a troubled Talmud Torah you have.³¹

Balaam’s “blessing” inspired Wolofsky to express a note of caution with regard to gentile praise of the Jews. Previously, he had mentioned that every gentile who says a good word about the Jews is feted by them.³² In the case of Balaam, Wolofsky pointed out that when Jews call upon a gentile to bless them, whether in a synagogue or at a Jewish national event, their blessing is an expression of Balaam’s psychology, whose ultimate purpose is assimilation with the daughters of Moab.³³

The state of the Talmud Torah was not dissimilar to the disarray Wolofsky found in other Jewish communal institutions. Their leaders were all too often not true Jews [*emese ‘iden*] and were prone to quarrel.³⁴ At times such “leaders” were suspected of mishandling communal funds.³⁵ The rabbis of the community were also likely to be the focus of controversies. Thus in *Parshas Toldos*, Rebecca, during her pregnancy when Jacob and Esau were contending in her womb, went “to seek God.” “Probably,” Wolofsky opined, “she [went to seek God] among the rabbis. But there she also found a conflict [*a vayisrotsetsu*].”³⁶

The conflict among rabbis was at times between older, European-born rabbis and younger men who could speak the language of the country and, deviating from age-old Jewish tradition dared to actually preach in churches.³⁷ More often, however, the conflict was to be found among the older rabbis themselves, and the problem started with economics: rabbis simply had a hard time making ends meet. Rabbis, Wolofsky stated, needed to make an honourable living. When complaints are made that rabbis are not doing enough to meet communal needs, the question should first be asked whether the community was providing for them sufficiently. They do not have the time to do the things expected of rabbis, such as studying, visiting the Talmud Torah, or the sick, because they needed to make a living by providing people with kosher certifications, divorces, or *etrogim*.³⁸ Wolofsky had “a message for the rabbis: Do no injustice in a judgment....

If you have a congregation, do not flatter the members ... and do not spill your colleague's blood."³⁹ The rabbis' freedom within their congregations to reproach sins like desecration of the Sabbath was limited by the fact that the congregants who pay their salaries were themselves largely Sabbath desecrators.⁴⁰ As preachers, they often did not know what to say or how to say it.⁴¹ Most of all, however, Wolofsky found that the rabbis went wrong because they abandoned their spiritual work to be sunk in the mire of the controversy over kosher meat.⁴²

The kosher meat wars of Montreal, and of other North American Jewish communities of the era, caused all sorts of trouble, such as the sin of "bearing false witness," which Wolofsky interpreted for contemporary times in this way: "Do not make kosher stamps to sell non-kosher [*treyfe*] meat."⁴³ So-called kosher butchers were capable of more than deceit. They also were capable of forming a "trust" and engaging in bribery in two ways. The consumers were bribed with meat at one cent cheaper (per pound), and the rabbis were bribed so that they could not and would not pay any more attention to matters of *kashrut*.⁴⁴

Wolofsky dealt in his commentary with other contemporary issues of likely interest to his readers. These included some of the great ideological issues of his time, including Zionism, Marxism, and the conflict between Torah and Science. He was writing in the context of the Zionist struggle to make the Jewish National Home promised in the Balfour Declaration a reality. Arab opposition, which, in the Fall of 1929, was to get violent, seemed to threaten the progress the Zionists had made in building a Jewish national homeland.⁴⁵ Zionism and its difficulties were thus very much on Wolofsky's mind as he reread the Torah. In commenting on Abraham's purchase of a burial place in Hebron, he thus stated, "Just as Abraham paid the full price for land in Hebron, we [Jews] pay the highest prices for the worst land [in Palestine]."⁴⁶ In imagining the spies sent out by Moses to travel to the Land of Canaan, in *Parshas Shelah*, Wolofsky had contemporary Zionist commissions, as well as ordinary tourists to Palestine, in mind. Thus among the questions the "commission" of spies is asked to report on, in Wolofsky's version, is: "Does the land have malarial swamps to be drained?"⁴⁷ Most of the Biblical spies spread a bad report about the land, like many contemporary "spies," who take one look at the land and run away. Commenting on contemporary Jewish

opposition to the Zionist project, he stated “then [in biblical times] there were also Jewish Arabs⁴⁸ ... who say we have no right [to Palestine].” Only Caleb, described as an “enthusiastic [*heisser*] Zionist” and Joshua saw the land with true Jewish eyes.⁴⁹

One of the great problems facing the Zionists in that era was the fact that the Arabs formed a great majority of the total population of Palestine. Then as now, Wolofsky remarked, “the [non-Jewish] peoples in the Land of Israel are in an overwhelming majority over us... [Nonetheless,] God is with you and not with those authorities [*hakhomim*] who say that all rights belong to the majority.” Wolofsky understood that the Zionists were attempting to effect a fundamental transformation in the Jewish character, and he expressed some reservations in this regard. He felt, for instance, that Zionism’s emphasis on physical strength and vindication of Jewish pride had somehow lessened respect for traditional Jews, who were predominantly non-bellicose.⁵⁰

While Wolofsky had his reservations concerning Zionists, he was thoroughly condemnatory of the ideology of Marxism, though it was founded, as he said, by a descendent of the biblical Jacob by the name of Karl Marx.⁵¹ Marx’s followers included many Jewish young people whose sacrifices were performed “outside” the Jewish polity [*shehutei huts*].⁵² Like the worshippers of the Golden Calf, they had dared to “put God on trial”;⁵³ in Russia, Jewish communists persecuted Judaism.⁵⁴

Wolofsky, however much he played with the ideas and connections he found in the Torah, was no skeptic. All the biblical characters, like Abraham, Rachel, Miriam, and Moses, seem to have been thought of by Wolofsky as essentially historical.⁵⁵ That does not mean, however, that he was immune from the perceived conflicts between science and religion that concerned so many in his generation. In two instances in his book, he wondered aloud about the contradiction between a Jewish calendar that marked only 5,689 years and fossils that scientists claimed to be millions of years old. Showing that he had learned something from either Rabbi Hirsh Cohen, his friend, or Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, his nemesis, or, perhaps both, he attempted to resolve the conundrum by quoting the Talmud and the *Zohar* on the worlds previous to our own, which God had created and then destroyed.⁵⁶ Similarly, the difficulty that the history of the Chinese seems to extend prior to Noah’s flood was countered by

Wolofsky with the statement that if, as the ancient rabbis stated, the Land of Israel was not affected by the Flood, perhaps other lands were spared as well, such as China.⁵⁷

In writing this book, Wolofsky, for all his individuality, was not unique in Jewish Montreal in the early twentieth century. In fact he found himself in the mainstream of a cohort of contemporaries in Montreal and elsewhere in North America,⁵⁸ who, through their teaching and publication, attempted to use the hallowed resources of the Jewish past, including Midrash, and Mishna, to recreate a thriving and culturally innovative Jewish community through the medium of Yiddish. As David Roskies described these people, they took for granted that the old Judaic culture had to be reinvented. If the original had become inaccessible to the average Jew in the street, then a compelling Jewish life in *targum* had to be established both intellectually and institutionally.⁵⁹ Like Wolofsky, these Jewish communal intellectuals were not unaware of the uphill struggle they faced.⁶⁰ Like him as well, they were essentially optimists. At the very end of *EK*, Wolofsky gave vent to this optimism. Having previously presented Egypt as the symbol of the perils of Jewish assimilation, he concluded his modern commentary on the Torah “in the American version” by stating that the Torah is the heritage of the Jewish people and a monument to Moses that will outlive the Egyptian pyramids and sphinx.⁶¹