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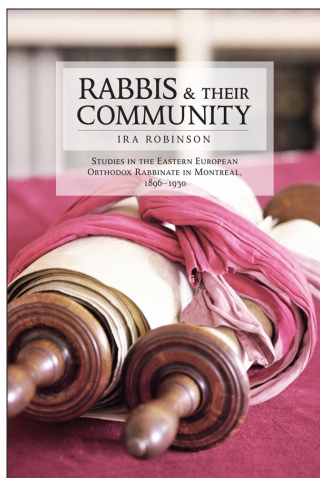
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RABBIS & THEIR COMMUNITY: STUDIES IN THE EASTERN EUROPEAN ORTHODOX RABBINATE IN MONTREAL, 1896–1930

by Ira Robinson

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*The Yiddish-Speaking Orthodox Rabbinate
in North America and its Importance*

We want to extend our brotherhood and respect to the old-fashioned rabbi for whom American life is an unbroken series of disappointment and sorrow. – Rabbi Leo Jung (1929)¹

This book will examine the Yiddish-speaking immigrant Orthodox rabbinate in Montreal, Canada, at the beginning of the twentieth century. In its pages, we will analyze and attempt to understand the deeds and motivations of rabbis who are, for the most part, forgotten men in the Jewish community they helped to shape. It is inevitable that personalities, factors, and trends from both the late nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century will be brought into our discussion for purposes of illustration. Nonetheless it is in the first three decades of the twentieth century in particular that the personalities who made up the Eastern European immigrant rabbinate in Montreal, the issues they faced, and the institutions they created, most particularly the Jewish Community Council of Montreal [*Va'ad ha-'Ir*],² were factors of fundamental importance for the development of the Jewish community of Montreal as a whole.

Taking into account all the changes stemming from Quebec's Quiet Revolution and the Sephardic immigration of the postwar years, the contemporary Montreal Jewish community is still recognizably descended from the community set up by Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe in the period 1880–1930.³ However, when historians came to chronicle the history of this community, or any other North American Jewish community for that matter, the men of the Eastern European rabbinate and

the synagogues in which they preached and prayed were often marginalized, if not entirely neglected.⁴ There are important structural reasons for that neglect. Before concentrating on the story of the Montreal rabbis and their community, therefore, it will be important for us to understand the institution of the Eastern European immigrant Orthodox rabbinate from a much wider perspective. Why did these rabbis become forgotten men? Perhaps the best way to begin considering this issue is by recounting an incident that took place slightly outside the temporal and geographical frame of this book, but which nonetheless graphically illustrates both the problems and the potential of research in this subject.

Early in 1943, it was apparent to anyone in North America who had eyes to see, and who was carefully reading the newspapers, particularly the Yiddish press,⁵ that something tremendously horrible was happening to the Jews of Nazi-occupied Europe. The exact nature and proportions of what would come to be known as the Holocaust were still unknown, but disturbing reports from a number of sources had begun reaching people at the World Jewish Congress and the United States State Department, among others, that the Germans were systematically killing all the Jews within the territory under their control.

There is presently a debate among historians of American Jewry regarding the appropriateness of the response of the American Jewish communal leadership to this news.⁶ These historians have asked the following questions:

1. Could that leadership have done more to protest?
2. Would open and public protest by that leadership have made any difference in the end result?

One American Jewish group that did engage in a vehement public protest was the Agudath ha-Rabbonim of the United States and Canada. The Agudath ha-Rabbonim was an organization of immigrant Orthodox rabbis in North America, founded in 1902.⁷ The rabbis of Agudath ha-Rabbonim decided to go to Washington on October 6, 1943, just prior to Yom Kippur, the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar, to attempt to meet with President Roosevelt and to plead with him to do something to save the Jews of Europe.⁸ Approximately four hundred rabbis gathered in Washington to demonstrate. Nearly all of them were European-born. They were most

comfortable expressing themselves in the Yiddish language, though most had lived in various North American cities for two decades and more, and many had become fluent in English as well. The group's demonstration in Washington was covered by the major newspapers and newsreels of the day. Despite this publicity, however, the rabbis did not get what they really desired – the chance to see President Roosevelt. When the president found out about the rabbis' request for an appointment, he turned to one of his most trusted advisors, Samuel Rosenman. Rosenman told FDR that he did not have to see the group, for, as he stated to the president in his memorandum, "they are a group of rabbis who have just recently left the darkest period of the medieval world. They really represent no one."⁹ Rosenman's political sense had told him that these rabbis, and the issues they represented, were marginal and could be ignored with impunity. Rosenman was not alone in his evaluation of these rabbis. In this, he most probably represented a large portion of American Jewish public opinion.

The reasons for this negative evaluation of the rabbis of the Agudath ha-Rabbonim by Samuel Rosenman are not dissimilar to the reasons they have not received an adequate evaluation in the histories of North American Jewry. The history of the Jewish community in this period has often been written by people who felt about these rabbis something similar to what Samuel Rosenman felt: that they represented the "darkest period of the medieval age"; that even though they were living *in* the twentieth century, they were not *of* that century; and that these were people who did not and should not have a say in either the Jewish present or future.

Seeking the reasons behind this negative evaluation brings us to some of the major issues of the great Eastern European Jewish migration to North America, which, in turn, are intimately tied to the revolution inherent in Jewish modernity. This revolution engendered, among its other major effects, a historiography whose predominant characteristic has been an emphasis on transformation and change¹⁰ in Jewish life in the past two centuries, and a corresponding de-emphasis on continuity and tradition during this period. In evaluating this historiography, it is of crucial importance to understand who is doing the writing. As Michael Kazin has written, in a different context:

Historians, like most people, are reluctant to sympathize with people whose political opinions they detest. Overwhelmingly cosmopolitan in their cultural

tastes and liberal or radical in their politics, scholars of modern America have largely eschewed research projects about past movements that seem to them either bastions of a crumbling status-quo or the domain of puritanical, pathological yahoos.¹¹

It is reasonably clear that a number of historians of American Judaism have, in the past, succumbed to a “whiggish” interpretation of American Jewish history in which Orthodoxy was kindly and conveniently consigned to the dustbin.¹² In this they follow most contemporary observers of the early twentieth century, for whom the future of Judaism in North America belonged, depending upon the observer’s ideological persuasion, to the Zionists, the socialists, the communists, the Yiddishists, the Hebraists, to Reform Judaism, to Conservative Judaism ... in other words, to anyone but the Orthodox. Until quite recently, therefore, few historians of North American Jewry seemed interested at all in the experiences of those who in the first half of the twentieth century struggled against great odds to transplant the age-old culture of rabbinic Judaism, as they perceived it, to the New World.¹³ Thus, for every word historians have written about Eastern European immigrant rabbis and their synagogues in the historiography of the North American Jewish community, there are arguably twenty or even thirty words about such subjects as the influence of the Jewish labour movement and secular yiddishist education within the immigrant Jewish community.

Indeed, in the face of this situation, more than one historian of Orthodox Judaism in North America has come to the conclusion that the world of the Orthodox rabbi in North America at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries is less well known and less intensely studied than the Jewish world of thousands of years ago. Louis Bernstein, working a mere two decades ago, in introducing his study of the Rabbinical Council of America, thus stated, “The historian working in the Jewish catacombs of Rome or in Philo’s Alexandria may have more material at his disposal than a researcher of American Orthodoxy.”¹⁴

This silence with respect to the Orthodox rabbinate is not confined to the historiography of North American Jewry. It is very much the case as well in descriptions of the Eastern European homeland of these rabbis. Thus Dan Miron, a prominent scholar of nineteenth-century Yiddish literature, in an article entitled “The Literary Image of the Shtetl,” presented

an analysis of the Jewish world of Eastern Europe as portrayed by the renowned nineteenth-century Yiddish writer, Shalom Abramovits, who wrote under the *nom de plume* Mendele Mokher Seforim. Miron asserts that, as far as Mendele's contemporaries and successors were concerned, his works "covered" the complete spectrum of life in the shtetl. This was so despite the fact that, as Miron stated, "[Mendele's] novels have almost nothing to say about Hasidism and the Hasidic way of life, in spite of the fact that the Ukrainian shtetl society upon which the writer focussed was largely dominated by Hasidism.... For that matter, the entire rabbinic tradition of learning receives very little attention."¹⁵ The religious establishment of the Jewish Ukraine is missing in Mendele's "complete" portrayal of Eastern European Jewish life. Rabbis and hasidic rebbes may have been denigrated by Mendele, but not portrayed. They had become invisible in the literary shtetl he had built.

Given this situation, it should not be entirely surprising to hear that, when I set out to research the Eastern European Orthodox rabbinate of Montreal in the period of the early twentieth century, I found relatively little written on it in the histories of Canadian or North American Jewry. The rabbis and their community are, relatively speaking, missing in Simon Belkin's pioneering history of the immigrant community of Montreal in its crucial formative years. His heroes are the members of the *Poalei Tsiyyon* [Labour Zionists] of Montreal.¹⁶ The same is true of Israel Medresh's sketches of this era in *Montreal fun Nekhtn* and *Tsvishn Tsvei Velt Millhomes*,¹⁷ and in Hirsh Wolofsky's memoirs.¹⁸ Pierre Anctil, in his introduction to his translation of Belkin, has observed that the *Poalei Tsiyyon* had a sense of themselves as pioneers who were making history. They also felt that this history needed to be preserved for future generations. With Belkin's work, they succeeded in having their self-conception perpetuated.¹⁹ Medresh also seems to have thought of the incidents and people he portrayed as worthy of perpetuation.²⁰

The rabbis, unlike the *Poalei Tsiyyon*, did not seem to have a sense that they were doing something new and extraordinary, even though their attempted implantation of Eastern European Orthodox Judaism in North America was as revolutionary an experiment as any made by the *Poalei Tsiyyon*. It is certainly true that these rabbis may have been tilting at windmills and attempting the impossible, but not any more so than the educators of the *Poalei Tsiyyon* who hoped that Yiddish language and culture

could be successfully implanted in the Jewish youth of North America.²¹ The rabbis were engaged in a noble experiment – win or lose – at least on a par with their Yiddishist brethren.

The rabbis of whom we are speaking have also suffered, at least in part, because, unlike the activists of *Po'alei Zion*, they were not, by and large, chronicled from within their ranks. The culture of Rabbinic Judaism, whose contemporary representatives these rabbis were, did not particularly care to emphasize history or historiography – whether its own or anyone else's. The Eastern European rabbis in North America, whatever else they stood for, perceived themselves to be heirs to a culture in which the recording of post-Biblical history was not considered a terribly significant activity. North American Orthodox rabbis wrote and published voluminously in areas that were of interest to them, such as sermons, Biblical and Talmudic commentaries, and responsa.²² We can and will learn much about their story from all of these writings. However, the one thing that they almost never did was to consider that their story was important to record as such.²³ For the most part, they had no sense that what they were doing was so special that they needed to write down what happened in narrative form. As the historian Yosef Haim Yerushalmi has written, insofar as rabbinic Judaism has retained a hold in the modern world, its curriculum does not give more than a minor place to history.²⁴

The Orthodox rabbis of North America, to repeat, did not especially benefit from historical examination because, on the one hand, they did not tell their own story, and, on the other hand, they did not “fit” into the story mainstream historians chose to tell. “Progressive” Jews, on the other hand, such as those identified with the Jewish labour movement, were chronicled, from within their own movement as well as by mainstream historiography, and were generally seen as a better “fit” in the master narrative of the unravelling of the Judaic tradition in North America.²⁵ Interestingly, even Orthodox scholars have contributed to the neglect of the contribution of pre-World War II Orthodoxy in their emphasis on the postwar Orthodox “resurgence.” Once again, I will cite Louis Bernstein:

Sixty years ago few observers gave Orthodox Judaism a meaningful chance to become an important factor on the American Jewish scene. But since World War II, Orthodoxy has become a significant component of American life.²⁶

Thus, in attempting an analysis of the history of rabbinic culture in Montreal itself, or elsewhere in Canada,²⁷ I found that I needed to begin with a lot of digging and sifting of primary sources. In contextualizing these primary sources, one must begin with the thesis propounded by Jeffrey Gurock, which states that the members of the Eastern European immigrant rabbinate can be understood through classification on a spectrum of “accommodationists” vs. “resisters” to “America” and all it stood for.²⁸ Gurock’s insight is most useful, for both accommodation and resistance were part of the common experience of these rabbis. However, Gurock’s classification scheme needs to be further refined to account for the fact that there are numerous cases of rabbis who were “resisters” in some aspects of their lives – such as dress and language – and yet “accommodators” in other areas, such as halakhic leniency.²⁹ Furthermore, in assimilating Gurock’s thesis to this research, it must be carefully noted that there was no Eastern European Orthodox rabbi who was so “accommodationist” that he ceased being countercultural with respect to mainstream North American mores, and there was no “resister” who was not changed in significant ways by his encounter with “America.”

As well, prior to commencing the story of the Montreal rabbinate, a word needs to be said concerning periodization. The mass immigration of Eastern European Jews to North America and elsewhere had its beginnings in the 1870s, and received a great impetus from the Russian pogroms of 1881 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5. Interrupted by World War I, this mass immigration lasted into the 1920s, at which time it was crippled by United States immigration restriction policies and given its deathblow by the onset of the Great Depression. This migration, spanning over half a century, is all too often looked upon as a unit, with the implication that there was uniformity in the migration, its motivations, and its consequences whether in the 1880s or the 1920s. However, even a cursory analysis will show that there were basic differences between those Jews migrating in the 1880s and those migrating in the 1920s, which greatly affected the fortunes of Orthodox Judaism. A brief personal anecdote will serve to illustrate. My great-grandfather, Moshe Nochum Segal, left Lithuania for New York in 1882. He stayed in New York for a few months and came to the conclusion that this was no place for Jewish people to live, and so he left for home. My great-grandfather died in Lithuania, but his

widow and her children wound up in New York a few years later. He had plenty of company within the circles of Orthodoxy, both in his conclusions and in his and his family's actions.³⁰ In the late nineteenth century, one of the greatest of the Eastern European rabbis of that era, Rabbi Jacob Willowsky, widely known as the Ridbaz, coined a phrase that echoes down the ages, "In America, even the stones are *treyf*." He also wound up coming to America and settling for a number of years in Chicago.³¹ The greatest of rabbinic leaders of Eastern Europe, Rabbi Israel Meir ha-Kohen, more widely known as the Hofets Hayyim, wrote a book for the benefit of the Eastern European Jewish emigrants entitled *Nidchei Yisrael* [*The Scattered Ones of Israel*].³² This book, which contained halakha for travellers as well as moral encouragement and exhortation, ended with a plea: Don't go to America. If you go, don't stay there. Don't bring your family there. Leave them safe at home where there is the possibility of a full Jewish life.³³ Despite these sentiments, there is a report that the Hofets Haim had stated, toward the end of his life, that if he were a young man, and not in ill health, he would go to America.³⁴ What had been unthinkable a few decades before had come within the realm of possibility. There is a trend that is discernible: North America may indeed have started out in the 1880s as an "impossible" place for Jews to observe the traditions and lifestyle characteristic of Orthodox Judaism. Yet, within a relatively short period of time, Jews in their hundreds of thousands and their millions came to North America and established themselves and their institutions. In other words, there are basic differences between the situation of Orthodox Jews in America in the 1880s and in the 1920s that historians have to consider.³⁵

By the end of World War I, a lot of important Orthodox institution building had been accomplished. Eastern European Orthodox rabbis had arrived and organized the Agudath ha-Rabbonim (though they could hardly be called united, as we will see). Jewish schools and yeshivas, on both elementary and advanced levels, had been founded. The Union of American Orthodox Congregations, an attempt to unite and strengthen American Orthodoxy, had been established. Without at all minimizing the difficulties of Orthodox Jewish life in the 1920s, it is fair to say that the makings of an institutional, educational, and organizational basis for Orthodox Jewish life, which had been lacking at the onset of the great migration, had been established.

The difficulties that remained as obstacles to Orthodox life in North America were nonetheless quite significant. The most important of these difficulties was the absence of the possibility for most Jews in America to live in “Jewish time,” which, for an Eastern European Orthodox Jew, was normative. In Eastern Europe, Jews had been more or less able to live their lives according to their own calendar with Sabbath and holiday periods differentiated from the workaday week.³⁶ It did not particularly matter whether individual Eastern European Jews were ideologically committed to this religious lifestyle. Even many of those who were relatively or totally nonobservant often acquiesced, at least in public, with Sabbath or holiday observance. On the contrary, one had to be ideologically motivated *not* to join in the general communal observance of “Jewish time.” Thus doctrinaire Marxists, like the members of the Jewish socialist Bund, were ideologically motivated in this way and did not choose to observe “Jewish time” in a way satisfactory to the Orthodox. However, the ordinary Eastern European Jew in the street did tend to go along with what has been called “*milieu frommigkeit*.” In other words, he or she would be observant of “Jewish time” because that observance was generalized in Jewish society. In North America, during the period of mass immigration, we witness the reverse phenomenon: one had to be ideologically motivated to observe “Jewish time.” In many cases even those desiring to do so found it to be practically impossible. The reasons for this stem largely from economic determinants.

In Eastern Europe, even non-Jews understood that Jewish businesses were going to be closed on Saturdays and Jewish holidays and accommodated to that practise.³⁷ Indeed there were some cases in Eastern Europe in which the parish priest, in making communal announcements after Sunday mass, informed his parishioners that a Jewish holiday was coming up and that therefore the Jews’ stores would be closed for business.³⁸ When the Eastern European Jews came to America, however, they found it to be nearly impossible to live in “Jewish time” in this way. Non-Jews would not accommodate them. Even in instances where both Jews and non-Jews, who had had commercial relations in the Ukraine, came to the same place in America and resumed the same economic relationship, “Jewish time” did not survive the crossing. Jewish stores in America tended overwhelmingly to remain open on Sabbath and holidays. It could be and often was the case that, in the first generation of immigration, the owners of these

stores were observant of the halakha in every other way but this. The economics of “making it” in America had overwhelmed them. The only important vestige of “Jewish time” in North America came on the High Holidays of Rosh ha-Shana and Yom Kippur. Jews, who otherwise kept their stores open on Jewish Sabbaths and holy days, felt obligated to close their stores at this time.

This was particularly the case in small towns. The following is a specific example of what was a much wider phenomenon. In the 1920s, Rabbi Joshua Halevi Herschorn of Montreal got a question from North Bay, Ontario, from the local teacher and *shohet*. The question concerned the possibility of reading from a Torah scroll in the local synagogue on Saturday morning in the absence of a minyan of males over thirteen years of age. Rabbi Herschorn’s response was a gently put “no.”³⁹ That the question needed to be asked raises the issue: where were the adult males of the North Bay Jewish community on Saturday mornings? They were obviously in their stores. What happened in North Bay occurred in other North American towns and cities – including Montreal – as well. The problem of getting jobs for Sabbath-observant Jews, even in the greatest North American Jewish centre of all, New York, was always quite difficult. Owners of garment factories knew very well that if they wanted to hire good labour cheap, they could promise the observant workers that they would not have to work on Saturdays. To take a cut in pay in order to observe “Jewish time” was accepted as normal. Jews thus had to be motivated to observe “Jewish time,” particularly when their economic situation as new immigrants was very “hand to mouth” and a governmental “social safety net” was almost completely absent.⁴⁰

Another important difference between the Jewish experience in Europe and North America was that, in Eastern Europe’s towns and cities, Judaism was manifestly a public presence in the synagogues and study halls. In America, on the contrary, Jews tended to keep their observances mostly at home, rather than in synagogues. Thus, for the most part, such Judaic observances as survived, survived mainly in the home. *Kashrut*, the system of Judaic dietary laws, was a home observance not affected by the restriction of “Jewish time,” and thus remained more or less observed by the immigrant generation.⁴¹ This created important new dynamics between men, whose traditional primary domain was in public, and women, whose primary domain was the home. This is one reason, among

others, that Jewish women became an especial target for satire: they had become so much more important in the transmission of Judaism.⁴²

There were, of course, sizeable Jewish communities, such as Montreal and New York, with an “internal” Jewish economy. Within this economy it was possible to observe “Jewish time” in the most complete manner possible. Within this economy it was also possible to get along with next to no English, though, even for the most isolated Jews within this internal Jewish economy, Yiddish rapidly became anglicized. Thus, when Rabbi Jacob Joseph came to New York in 1882, it was noticed by Yiddish journalist Abraham Cahan that, very soon after his arrival, his sermons began to feature English words:

It was only his second or third sermon since his arrival and already he was making a clumsy attempt to accommodate himself to his audience by using American Yiddish. Once he used the word “clean” for “*rein*” and it was easy to see this was purposely done to show he was not a greenhorn.⁴³

As we will see, however, jobs in the internal Jewish economy were relatively few and not at all simple to obtain. One of the most prestigious jobs within this internal economy was that of rabbi. Many of the people we will be dealing with in this book had achieved, or were fighting for, such privileged positions. Slightly down the scale of prestige was the job of *shohet*, who killed animals according to the Judaic laws of *kashrut*. We will be speaking of men in this position as well, and their relations with the rabbis. One of the great realities in the situation of Orthodox rabbis in North America in this era is that it was only from the supervision of the kosher meat industry that rabbis were able to make anything approaching a decent living. Certainly, as we will see, whatever salary they received from their congregations was not sufficient to make ends meet. The journalist Abraham Cahan, a keen observer of the immigrant Jewish scene in New York at this time, thus stated:

Here there are hundreds of congregations, one in almost every street, for the Jews come from many different cities and towns in the old country, and the New York representatives of every little place in Russia must have their congregations here. Consequently, the congregations are for the most part small, poor and unimportant. Few can pay the rabbi more than three or four dollars a week, and often

instead of having a regular salary he is reduced to occasional fees for his services at weddings, births, and holy festivals generally.⁴⁴

All the factors we have mentioned will be of significance when we consider the case of the development of the Jewish community of Montreal. In 1871, the first Dominion of Canada census counted only 409 Jews in Montreal. In 1901, with the mass Eastern European Jewish migration to Canada already established, there were practically 7,000 Jews in the city. In the next thirty years, the Jewish population went from 7,000 to 58,000. In the next thirty years, from 1931 to 1961, Jewish Montreal increased from 58,000 to 102,000. The major increase in Jewish population in Montreal, therefore, began in the latter part of the nineteenth century. From 400 to 7,000 is a quantum leap. From 7,000 to 58,000 is no less a quantum leap. What this means is that Montreal at the beginning of this immigration was a Jewish community that, although it was the largest by far in the Dominion of Canada, was by any standard quite miniscule. It means as well that practically all the population increase was accounted for by the Eastern European immigrants and their children. Thus, by 1931, the average Jew in Montreal was either foreign-born or the child of foreign-born parents and was either Yiddish-speaking or the child of parents whose mother-tongue was Yiddish.⁴⁵ The older, more acculturated Jewish community of Montreal was certainly not eliminated. It undoubtedly retained an important communal influence. However, its influence was much less proportionately than that of the established, acculturated Jewish communities of New York and Chicago, where, even prior to this mass migration, the Jewish community numbered in the tens of thousands.⁴⁶

Montreal at the beginning of the era of Eastern European Jewish migration was a city of three synagogues. One of them was founded in 1768: Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation. It was formally Orthodox in its service, which was in the Sephardic tradition, though, at this point, there were very few true Sephardim in the congregation. Most of the members were of Ashkenazi descent who, for reasons of social prestige and other factors, wished to be affiliated with the oldest congregation in Montreal and in Canada.⁴⁷ Until 1846, Shearith Israel was the only synagogue in Montreal. In that year, a congregation was formed calling itself the Congregation of English, German, and Polish Jews. It was ultimately named Shaar Hashomayim.⁴⁸ The name of this congregation

tells us some important things. The congregation, first of all, defined itself as “English.” This indicates something significant about the nature of Jewish immigration to Canada at that date. Prior to the 1880s, most of the Jewish immigrants to Canada did not arrive there directly from continental Europe; they were rather funnelled through England. They thus liked to consider themselves “English” Jews, however short their stay in the mother country. Whatever their ultimate origins, they also wished to assert their connection with England in a Canada that was still very closely tied with the mother country well into the twentieth century.

In 1882, Temple Emanu-El was founded. Interestingly enough, this Reform congregation was founded by Jews coming to Montreal from the United States where, by the 1870s, Reform Judaism had become the dominant Jewish religious expression. Though it represented a religious interpretation of Judaism that seemed quite foreign to them, the rabbis we will be discussing would develop an interesting, and by no means completely hostile, relationship with Temple Emanu-El.⁴⁹

When the Eastern European Jews began arriving in Montreal en masse, they thus saw two “orthodox” synagogues and one Reform temple. In the two congregations with an Orthodox ritual, both had retained the ritual but had combined it with a genteel, acculturated ambience that was entirely beyond the experience of the Eastern European Jews, who, as early as 1882,⁵⁰ had begun to set up their own religious institutions. Prominent among them was B’nai Jacob (1886), which inherited Shaar Hashomayim’s old building. There were tensions involved in this new founding of congregations by the Eastern European Jews. Some people in the established congregations wanted to know why it was that the immigrant Jews did not join the older synagogues and put obstacles in their way.⁵¹ However, it was clear to most that the cultural and economic gap between the members of the different communities was too great to be bridged. Moreover, the rabbis of these established congregations did not particularly wish to make room for other rabbis who may have had superior Talmudic learning, but whose general cultural attainment would have been deemed by them to be inferior.

How were these newly founded immigrant synagogues going to find their spiritual leadership? The short answer is from Eastern Europe, first and foremost from Lithuania. The “Godfather” of the Eastern European immigrant rabbinate in North America was Rabbi Isaac Elchanan

Spector, one of the most prominent Lithuanian rabbis of his generation.⁵² If one examines the biographies of the earliest Eastern European rabbis of North America, one will find that a very large proportion of these men were his direct students and received their *semikha* [rabbinic ordination] from him.⁵³ It is not happenstance that when Eastern European immigrant rabbis founded a yeshiva in New York, they named it the Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, which eventually became the cornerstone of Yeshiva University.⁵⁴

The rabbis who came to North America in the early decades of the Eastern European immigration were of two sorts. First of all, there were rabbis in financial trouble, unable to make ends meet at home. In the Eastern European milieu, being a rabbi was often not a particularly advantageous position. Rabbis in general were not well paid, even in some of the larger cities. In smaller places, especially, rabbis often got along in a decidedly hand-to-mouth way. Thus in many a community the rabbi's wife was customarily given a monopoly for the sale of such things as candles and yeast. There were also stipulated times of year, such as Purim, when the rabbi was given gifts by those members of his community who could afford to do so. That is why the rabbinate was most often not the first career path chosen by young men. Indeed, one could speak of a stereotypical rabbinical biography. A young man showed prowess in Torah study at an early age. After marriage, he continued studying Torah for a time. Then he started a business and *failed* at that business. That is the point at which he became a rabbi.⁵⁵

A famous example of the rabbi who could not make it financially at home is Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Vilna, whom we have already met. He came to New York in the 1880s, a time when traditional Judaism in that city was said by its critics to be in almost complete disarray.⁵⁶ The reason that Rabbi Joseph, who had an honoured position in Vilna, came to such a place at all was that he was heavily in debt and the position promised him in New York would allow him to get out of debt. He lived to regret his decision.⁵⁷

Those rabbis who did not come because they were heavily in debt tended to be young, inexperienced, and adventurous. It is particularly important for us to note the relative youth of many of the rabbis we will meet in this book because, if the rabbis of the generation I am speaking

of are remembered at all, it is as venerable, elderly men with white beards. They are not remembered in their vigorous twenties, thirties, and forties.

How can we understand the mostly young rabbis who came to North America in this era and the problems they faced? Perhaps the best way to begin to understand their situation is to pose the question: Who is a rabbi? The answer to this question is both simple and complicated. The simple definition of an Orthodox rabbi is a man who has received rabbinic ordination [*semikha*]. What does “ordination” mean, however? To begin answering that question one has to contend with the complicated history of rabbinical ordination.⁵⁸ In the classical rabbinic literature – the Mishna and Gemara – *semikha* is the according of an authority that was understood as having begun with Moses at Sinai and continued down the generations, transmitted by masters to disciples, as detailed in the opening chapter of the Mishnaic tractate *Avot*. This particular *semikha*, however, was interrupted during the Roman persecution of Judaism in the second century. In the absence of this true *semikha*, the spiritual and intellectual leaders of rabbinic Judaism, though they were still called rabbis, found it impossible to establish a solid hierarchy and understood that, in the present day, they did not possess the authority to do such things as levy fines [*kenasot*].⁵⁹ There was an interesting attempt in the sixteenth century in Safed to renew the ancient, authoritative form of *semikha*. Among the people who received *semikha* during this attempt was Rabbi Joseph Karo, author of the *Shulhan 'Arukh*. This experiment was not universally accepted, however. After a great debate, which made its mark on the responsa literature of the time, the attempt was abandoned.⁶⁰

As it was practised among Ashkenazic Jews in the modern era, rabbinical ordination was essentially anarchic, with no universally accepted procedures or standards of competence required of candidates. *Semikha*, essentially, consisted of a piece of paper, signed by someone calling himself a rabbi, attesting to the fact that someone else was worthy to be considered a rabbi. To be more precise, it is a statement by a rabbi stating that a certain person is worthy of adjudicating Jewish law. The usual formula in Hebrew in the ordination document was and is *yoreh yoreh*: “Can he give instruction [in the law]? He can give instruction [in the law].” On a more advanced level, there is the statement *yadin yadin*: “Can he serve as a judge [of rabbinic law]? He can serve as a judge.” But, once again, there

is no particular authority given to a person merely because of the fact of his having received such a document. The attestation of the ordination document does not even necessarily mean that a person possesses any more Torah learning than others in the community. In fact, particularly in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century, there were often men in the community who did not possess a *semikha* document and yet were able to vie with the official rabbis in terms of their Torah learning. Indeed, many such Jews, who possessed enormous learning, never bothered to obtain *semikha*. Thus the Hofets Hayym never obtained *semikha* until late in his life, in the 1920s, when he did so for the purpose of obtaining a passport.⁶¹ In North America, on the other hand, the rabbi was not merely likely to be pre-eminent in his congregation in terms of his Torah learning; he was often the only one in the congregation to possess such learning.

To sum up, *semikha* is nothing more or less than the statement of a rabbi that someone else is worthy to be considered a rabbi. That made it problematic. Nineteenth-century Lithuanian rabbi Eliezer Gordon, who made an unsuccessful attempt to institutionalize the Eastern European rabbinate, recognized that “there is great neglect in the granting of rabbinical ordination, and many who are unworthy of ordination are ordained, and this is a stumbling block and an obstacle for the Jews.”⁶² One of the greatest rabbis to emigrate from Eastern Europe to the United States in this period, Rabbi David Willowsky [Ridbaz], described the situation in this way:

No reliance should be placed on such [ordination] certificates granted in recent years. It was given to any young man who desired it, in order to encourage him to continue his studies ... every young man who studied some *Yoreh Deah* was granted ordination. I have done so myself.⁶³

Prominent rabbis were undoubtedly confronted with prospective candidates for *semikha* dozens of times a year. These young men were given tests in halakha in matters of practical, everyday concern, such as admixtures of meat and milk. If the young men gave cogent answers, then the rabbi would write a letter giving *semikha*. Once the man possessing this *semikha* crossed the ocean, however, he soon found that it was not unassailable. Partisans of a given rabbi could indeed boast of the quality of

the *semikha* of their rabbi. His opponents, on the other hand, could and would cast aspersions and doubt on such claims. Thus in any conflictual situation between rabbis – and there would be many – there were those who chose to assert that their opponents were in fact not rabbis at all, whatever their credentials said.⁶⁴

This was particularly true, as we will see, when the fight was over who constitutes a “chief rabbi.” Who or what is a “chief rabbi”? There is no classical Judaic source for such a position, but in the absence of a generally recognized authority structure, rabbis wishing to be thought of as having a position of leadership often sought to be distinguished by the title “chief rabbi.” There is a story that is told of New York in the 1920s, in which a passerby saw a sign proclaiming a certain rabbi Widrevitch as “Chief Rabbi of America.” Upon being asked who made him chief rabbi, the rabbi is supposed to have replied, “The sign painter.” Sometimes it was also the printer who printed the letterhead who could confer the title of chief rabbi. In the face of an authority vacuum, authority could be and was manufactured.

In such a chaotic situation, what was to be done? How could the Eastern European immigrant rabbinate react to the radically new conditions in which it found itself? Given that the rabbinate was theoretically a monopoly, how did it react to the rules of laissez-faire capitalism that prevailed in North America? As an anonymous rabbi commented in 1902, “The rabbinate has become a business. This one sells a *heter* [permissive ruling] while the other peddles an *issur* [prohibition].”⁶⁵ One major answer to this problem was an attempt to organize. The previously mentioned Agudath ha-Rabbonim was a union formed by many of the immigrant Orthodox rabbis in North America in order to attempt to create order out of this chaos. The group’s leadership asserted, to no avail, that only the members of their organization were authentic rabbis and that all other claimants, particularly those who claimed to have done their rabbinical studies in America, were somehow not up to their standard. They also attempted, unsuccessfully, to gain control of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, the main Orthodox institution in America preparing students for the Orthodox rabbinate.⁶⁶ They were nonetheless never able to make good their desire to restrict and control *semikha*, which remained a somewhat ambiguous term throughout our period.

Agudath ha-Rabbonim was also never able to arrive at a satisfactory answer to the major issue of territoriality in the North American rabbinate. Traditionally, in Europe, a rabbi was called “*mara de-atra*” – literally “the master of a place,” a piece of geographical territory, such as a city or town, as opposed to a congregational building. European rabbis coming to America tried very hard to retain this territorial component of the rabbinate. Thus the Agudath ha-Rabbonim in its constitution mandated that a member coming to a city where a member was already present had to prove that there was no encroachment on the colleague before he could take up his rabbinate in that city.⁶⁷ The attempt to restrict rabbinical territoriality was an abject failure and led to numerous rabbinical conflicts over who was the rabbi of what city, district, or slaughterhouse.

A second major issue these rabbis had to face was *kashrut*. When is meat kosher and when is it not? Why is meat kosher for some rabbis and not in the opinion of others? Though in its broad parameters the rules of what made foods kosher or not were understood and agreed upon, there remained nonetheless many legal “grey areas” that required interpretation and in which rabbis often differed. Because of the lack of agreed-upon lines of rabbinic authority, disputes all too often wound up publicized in the press and decided in secular courts.⁶⁸ Often it seemed that *kashrut* in North America was the prisoner of “lower standards ... and cheaper prices,” while supervision of major slaughterhouses seemed to be the prime prize to be captured in numerous kosher meat wars.⁶⁹

A final challenge to the rabbis of whom we will be speaking in this book was Jewish education, in which area there were also basic and important changes taking place in the period we are investigating. There was a growing realization among all North American Jews – Orthodox or not – that Eastern European methods of Jewish education could work only if one had seventy hours per week to try to teach children, which was the case in the nineteenth-century Eastern European *heder*.⁷⁰ If one only has ten or twelve hours a week, or even less, to teach a child the rudiments of Judaic knowledge, then one needs to strategize pedagogically. This means that all too often early attempts to transplant the Eastern European *heder* to North America proved to be a failure.⁷¹ Thus, there was a change in Jewish educational thinking in North America, which resulted in the concept of the Talmud Torah, a “modern” school designed to teach Torah to North American Jewish children in the hours after public school. Among

the major issues that had to be resolved was the language of instruction in the Talmud Torah. Were the texts to be studied to be read in Hebrew and then translated into Yiddish, as had been the case in Europe? Was English to have a role, or was Hebrew alone [*ivrit be-ivrit*] to predominate in the classes? At the beginning of the twentieth century, all of these questions and more faced the Eastern European immigrant rabbinate.

The rabbis we will be dealing with in this book all possessed knowledge of the Torah in a society that did not particularly value that knowledge in the way traditional Jewish societies had done. They needed to make their way in a society which, it seemed, had repudiated nearly all that they stood for. It was a society that seemed to need them only insofar as they could be called upon to declare food to be kosher. Even then, there always seemed to be another rabbi ready to proclaim the opposite conclusion. How, then, did these immigrant, Eastern European Orthodox rabbis attempt to build a community in these adverse circumstances? The chapters of this book, which examines the rabbinate of Montreal at the beginning of the twentieth century, will provide approaches to the answers to these questions.

