



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

by Ira Robinson

ISBN 978-1-55238-681-1

**THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK.** It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at [ucpress@ucalgary.ca](mailto:ucpress@ucalgary.ca)

**Cover Art:** The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

**COPYRIGHT NOTICE:** This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence.

This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

### UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY**:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

### UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY NOT**:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.

# RABBIS & THEIR COMMUNITY

---

IRA ROBINSON

STUDIES IN THE EASTERN EUROPEAN  
ORTHODOX RABBINATE IN MONTREAL,  
1896–1930



*Rabbis and their Community*



# *Rabbis and their Community*

Studies in the Eastern European Orthodox  
Rabbinate in Montreal, 1896–1930

IRA ROBINSON



© 2007 Ira Robinson

University of Calgary Press  
2500 University Drive NW  
Calgary, Alberta  
Canada T2N 1N4  
www.uofcpress.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher or a license from The Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). For an Access Copyright license, visit [www.accesscopyright.ca](http://www.accesscopyright.ca) or call toll free 1-800-893-5777.

*Library and Archives Canada  
Cataloguing in Publication*

Robinson, Ira, 1951–

Rabbis and their community : studies in the Eastern European Orthodox rabbinate in Montreal, 1896–1930 / Ira Robinson.

Co-published by the Concordia University Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies. Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-55238-186-1

Also issued in electronic format:

ISBN 978-1-55238-681-1

1. Rabbis—Québec (Province)—Montréal—Biography. 2. Orthodox Judaism—Québec (Province)—Montréal—History—20th century. 3. Jews, East European—Québec (Province)—Montréal—Biography. 4. Jews—Québec (Province)—Montréal—History—20th century. I. Concordia University. Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies. II. Title.

BM750.R62 2007 296.8'32092271428  
C2007-904073-X

The University of Calgary Press acknowledges the support of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts for our publications. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities. We acknowledge the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing program.



The Alberta  
Foundation  
for the Arts



COMMITTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURE AND THE ARTS

Canada



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada



Printed and bound in Canada by Marquis Book Printing



This book is printed on Silva Enviro 100 paper

Cover design by Melina Cusano  
Page design and typesetting by zijn digital

*To my father, Jacob Robinson  
(1917–1998)*

*and to my mother, Hannah L. Robinson  
(1912–2007).*

*Their memory is a blessing.*





## *Contents*

Preface

ix

· 1 ·

Introduction:

The Yiddish-speaking Orthodox Rabbinate in  
North America and its Importance

1

· 2 ·

“Pa Is a Mussolini”:

A Portrait of Rabbi Hirsh Cohen

21

· 3 ·

Rabbi Simon Glazer:

A Rival for the Chief Rabbinate

35

· 4 ·

Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg:

Kabbalist and Communal Leader

57

## · 5 ·

Rabbis and *Shohtim*: The Cases of Getsel Laxer  
and Hyman Crestohl

69

## · 6 ·

The Founding of the Jewish Community Council  
of Montreal (*Va'ad ha-Ir*)

87

## · 7 ·

The Kosher Meat Wars of the 1920s  
and their Aftermath

103

## · 8 ·

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

119

## · 9 ·

## Afterword

127

## Glossary

129

## Notes

133

## Index

159

## *Preface*

This book originated in a series of lectures held at the Jewish Public Library of Montreal on successive Monday nights from October 30 to December 11, 2000. It was co-sponsored by the Library and the Concordia University Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies. My thanks go to people at both institutions: to Professor Norman Ravvin, Professor of Canadian Jewish Studies and Director of Concordia's Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies, for agreeing to the idea and providing the funding; to Eva Raby, executive director of the Jewish Public Library, and Claire Stern and Eirann Harris of its staff for making it all happen so smoothly and apparently effortlessly. Finally, and most importantly, to all those who attended these lectures, for providing a sounding-board for the ideas ultimately expressed in this book. Chapter 8 was not originally part of the lecture series but is included because of its close relationship to the other chapters of the book.

This book had its genesis in my research on Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, whom you will meet in Chapter 4. I have been working on a comprehensive biography of Rabbi Rosenberg for well over a decade. That I have not yet completed this biography is due in part to numerous complicating factors in my academic and personal life. More important, however, has been the fact that in order to do the best job possible in depicting the life and times of Rabbi Rosenberg, I needed to investigate not only him, but his colleagues, rivals, and communities. Thus, for example, I could not responsibly describe Rabbi Rosenberg's claim to be the chief rabbinate of Montreal without first looking carefully at his predecessor in this claim,

Rabbi Simon Glazer,<sup>1</sup> and his arch-rival, Rabbi Hirsh Cohen.<sup>2</sup> Since neither had received adequate scholarly study, I found that I had to do much of the preliminary work myself. This book, therefore, is a culmination of this work.

Taken as a whole, however, this book constitutes much more than a mere preliminary to Rabbi Rosenberg's biography. It also serves to sketch in a portrait of the Eastern European immigrant rabbinate of Montreal in the first three decades of the twentieth century. While it is true that Eastern European rabbis in North America have been getting considerably more scholarly attention in the past few years, one finds that most of the extant scholarly studies tend to concentrate on only one rabbi at a time. Thus the context in which that rabbi worked and the interaction of that rabbi with his colleagues is necessarily portrayed in a one-sided manner. In order to obtain the fullest possible understanding of the dynamics of the Eastern European Orthodox rabbinate in North America, we must attempt to examine carefully the multifaceted interrelationship between a number of rabbis sharing the same communal turf. While this book is not a substitute for an exhaustive, full-scale study of the Montreal rabbinate of this era, I believe that it does go farther toward that end than previous studies of one or another figure. I further believe that this study will have implications for research on the North American Orthodox rabbinate of this era in other major North American Jewish communities.

The book begins with a chapter on why the Yiddish-speaking Orthodox Rabbinate in North America is of importance in our study of North American Jewry as a whole, and why it has been neglected. The next chapter creates a portrait of Rabbi Hirsh Cohen, who was the dominant Eastern European immigrant rabbi of Montreal in the first half of the twentieth century. Chapter 3 speaks of Rabbi Simon Glazer, who from 1907 to 1918 was Rabbi Cohen's main rival for the chief rabbinate of Montreal. When Rabbi Glazer left Montreal, he was succeeded by Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, whose life in Montreal was marked by his rivalry with Rabbi Cohen, as well as his scholarly work on kabbala. His story is told in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 deals with two rabbis, Getsel Laxer and Hyman Crestohl, who became rabbis in small-town Quebec, and later moved to Montreal, but who did not achieve the power and position of Rabbis Cohen, Glazer, or Rosenberg. They rather functioned as ritual slaughterers [*shohetim*], a position of less communal prestige. Chapter 6 details the founding of

the Jewish Community Council of Montreal (*Va'ad ha-Ir*) in 1922, an attempt on the part of the immigrant Jewish community and its rabbinate to unite, while the next chapter discusses the Kosher Meat War, which nearly killed the Jewish Community Council in its early years and pitted rabbi against rabbi. Chapter 8 discusses Hirsh Wolofsky, Yiddish journalist and community leader, who was instrumental in the founding and fortunes of the Jewish Community Council through the perspective of a commentary on the Torah he wrote and published in this period. A short chapter on the implications of the findings of this book for the subsequent history of North American Orthodox Judaism concludes the book.

In my research for this book, I have to thank the archivists at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa, the Archives of the Jewish Public Library of Montreal, the Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives of Montreal, and the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio. I also have to especially thank Janice Rosen for many helpful suggestions, and the late Henriette Kallus for research assistance in the early stages of this research. Eve Lerner read the entire manuscript. Her sharp eye was most useful. Lastly, I am grateful to the University of Calgary Press for believing in this book and for sending it for evaluation to two discerning anonymous readers. Their numerous suggestions have made this a much better book.

Parts of this book were originally published in the journals *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, *Canadian Jewish Studies*, and *Jewish Political Studies Review*. My thanks to the editors of all these publications for their permission to use the material.

Montreal  
July 11, 2006

