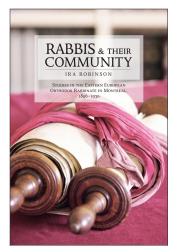


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RABBIS & THEIR COMMUNITY: STUDIES IN THE EASTERN EUROPEAN ORTHODOX RABBINATE IN MONTREAL, 1896–1930

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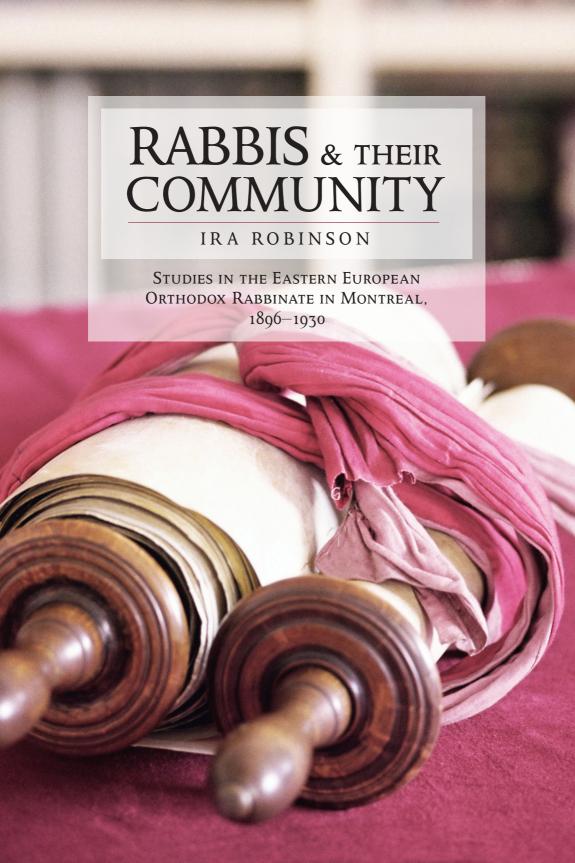
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Rabbis and their Community

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

IRA ROBINSON





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To my father, Jacob Robinson (1917–1998)

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

Their memory is a blessing.

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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,¹ and his arch-rival, Rabbi Hirsh Cohen.² 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 portraved 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 [shohtim], 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