



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

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*Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg:
Kabbalist and Communal Leader*¹

The one and only excuse which answers almost all the [halakhic] problems of America is: “All right. It’s America, isn’t it?” – Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg (1916)²

In this chapter, we will discuss the life and works of Judah [Yudel] Rosenberg (1859–1935).³ Through an examination of his extant writings, and other archival sources, we will obtain a fuller idea of the challenges facing an immigrant Orthodox rabbi in Canada in the first third of the twentieth century. We will also begin to understand the difficulties he had in making a place for himself in the New World as well as the intellectual daring of the solution he proposed for the spiritual regeneration of Orthodoxy in that seemingly most unpromising setting.

Rabbi Rosenberg was born in Poland in the town of Skaryszew, near Radom. He received a traditional *hasidic* education in rabbinic literature and in kabbalistic and *hasidic* texts. He was also, like Rabbi Hirsh Cohen, who was to be his arch-rival for leadership of the Montreal rabbinate,⁴ exposed to secular learning both through the Hebrew works of the nineteenth-century Jewish modernist movement known as “Enlightenment” [*haskala*], as well as through his mastery of the Russian language, which he studied in order to obtain governmental permission to function as a rabbi.⁵ It is noteworthy that, though many Eastern European Jews with a similar background who were exposed to secular thought chose to abandon the Orthodox tradition, Rosenberg, like his rival Hirsh Cohen, remained loyal. Despite his lack of rebellion against the rabbinic

tradition, however, Rosenberg's exposure to secular thought was in many respects decisive in determining his ultimate stance within that tradition. Throughout his life, he retained an abiding interest in subjects such as science, politics, and economics and, more importantly, internalized many of these interests into his Judaic thought.⁶

Rosenberg received rabbinic ordination as a young man. However, it was not until after a couple of failed attempts at business that he went into the rabbinate, functioning as a rabbi in the town of Tarlow, and in the Polish cities of Lublin, Warsaw, and Lodz. He emigrated to Canada in 1913, at the invitation of a congregation of Polish Jews in Toronto because, as he wrote at the time, he was utterly unable to make ends meet as a rabbi in Poland. In 1919, he moved from Toronto to Montreal, where he believed he would have greater opportunities, and served as rabbi in Montreal until his death in 1935.

During the last thirty years of his life, Rosenberg wrote prolifically, in both Hebrew and Yiddish, on a wide variety of subjects.⁷ For a scholarly audience, he wrote a supercommentary on the talmudic tractate, *Nedarim*,⁸ a number of responsa [answers to legal questions],⁹ several volumes of homilies on the Pentateuch,¹⁰ and a short-lived rabbinic journal.¹¹ As well, he wrote or edited a number of liturgical and halakhic works meant to be read by a popular audience.¹² A book he wrote on Jewish folk medicine went through numerous editions.¹³ He wrote several hagiographical works, including biographies of King Solomon,¹⁴ the Prophet Elijah,¹⁵ two Hasidic leaders, the "Grandfather" of Shpole¹⁶ and Elijah Guttmacher of Graetz¹⁷ and, perhaps most notably, a series of stories concerning Rabbi Judah Loewe of Prague, most prominent of which was his account of Rabbi Loewe and the Golem.¹⁸ Joseph Dan wrote that this story:

... seems to be the best known contribution of twentieth century Hebrew literature to world literature. There is but one source for almost all the stories on this subject – the small book of Rabbi Judah Yudl Rosenberg.... The vast majority of this book is the fruit of the author's creative imagination.¹⁹

Rosenberg's major literary project, in which he engaged for some twenty-five years, was a translation and reworking of the classic work of Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar*. He re-edited the work to form a true commentary

on the Bible and translated it from an often obscure Aramaic to a clear and simple Hebrew. He also added his own commentary.²⁰ As I will argue later on, this project was of the utmost importance for Rosenberg's vision of the regeneration of Judaism.

Within the Canadian Jewish community, Rosenberg elicited both respect and controversy. He had considerable influence in Orthodox circles in the two major centres of Jewish population in Canada: Toronto and Montreal. As well, his reputation spread throughout the Jewish world.²¹ In particular, his influence was felt in the Canadian Jewish community in the field of *kashrut*, the regulation of the Jewish dietary laws.

In the pre-World War I era, the provision of kosher meat in North American Jewish communities was utterly anarchic. Unscrupulous butchers would sell non-kosher meat as kosher and defied most rabbinic attempts to regulate their industry. The situation inspired a major European rabbinic figure, Rabbi Jacob Willowsky, to declare that in America even the stones are impure. This anarchic situation spawned several attempts to create a powerful and respected Orthodox rabbinate in New York and elsewhere.²²

Rosenberg, who had been heavily involved in controversies surrounding *kashrut* during his tenure in Toronto,²³ was brought to Montreal by the same issue. Rosenberg's daughter records in her memoir:

Father had originally come to Montreal for a Din Torah [rabbinical trial] ... between a powerful rabbi and a group of shoychtim [ritual slaughterers]. The upshot was that the shoychtim were divided into two camps.... After the Din Torah, father became rabbi of those shoychtim he thought had been maligned.²⁴

What Leah Rosenberg did not specify is that Rabbi Rosenberg came to Montreal to succeed Rabbi Glazer in the leadership of his coalition of congregations.²⁵ This is clear from Rabbi Rosenberg's Montreal letterhead. In a letter of 1920 to Rabbi Glazer, he refers to himself as "Rabbi of the United Hebrew Community of Montreal, Canada."²⁶ He inherited as well from Rabbi Glazer the enmity of Rabbi Cohen and his supporters.²⁷ Thus, soon after he had arrived in Montreal, Rabbi Cohen published an attack on Rabbi Rosenberg in the *Keneder Odler*, in which he called him an ignoramus, whose rabbinic learning did not measure up to that of a student [*yeshiva bohur*].²⁸

Whereas in Toronto, Rosenberg's scanty income had come primarily from fees paid to him for performing rabbinic functions such as marriages, divorces, and circumcisions, in Montreal the bulk of his income was derived from the regulation of *kashrut* and most of his time was spent in the supervision of kosher slaughtering.²⁹ Efforts to regulate *kashrut* in Montreal led, in 1922, to the formation of the Jewish Community Council of Montreal [*Va'ad ha-Ir*]. The *Va'ad* was organized largely to regulate the kosher meat industry in the city. Whereas hitherto payment of those supervising the slaughter and preparation of kosher meat came from the butchers themselves – creating an obvious conflict of interest – now the salaries of those officials would come from a disinterested communal organization, the Council. The Council would receive its funds from a levy placed upon the slaughter of kosher animals and distribute this income not merely for the salaries of rabbinic supervisors and slaughterers but also to support local Jewish education.³⁰

The institution of this new system involved the cooperation of the rabbinic supervisors, the slaughterers and the butchers. Such cooperation was by no means easy to obtain in an industry that suffered from nearly constant strife. Rosenberg, in particular, was initially quite ambivalent concerning cooperation with the *Va'ad*, which was under the leadership of his rival, Rabbi Hirsh Cohen. After an initial period of affiliation, Rosenberg and a group of rabbis and slaughterers broke with the *Va'ad* and formed a rump organization that they named *Va'ad ha-Kashrut* of Montreal. This breach caused considerable ill-feeling within the Montreal Jewish community as each side declared the meat produced by the other group to be non-kosher. The fight between the two warring parties involved mass meetings, some violence and a suit brought before the Quebec Superior Court.³¹ Only in 1925 was the impasse between the two factions resolved when Rosenberg and his group were co-opted into the *Va'ad* organization with Rosenberg serving as vice-chairman of the rabbinical council, a post he retained until his death.

In examining Rosenberg's writings from his Canadian period, it is possible to discern many reflections of the problems and struggles faced by the Orthodox rabbi. The following is typical:

We see with our own eyes ... that pious scholars are despised by the people. Their life [is one of] penury and shame. Similarly the religious schools are in a lowly

state, for the rich men among the people do not wish to support and strengthen them. On the contrary, they ... give for the support of those schools where they make Jewish children into gentiles through the teachers ... who educate the holy flock in an alien education opposed to the Torah and [Jewish] faith as well as through their directors who are called by the name of “rabbi” – that is to say, “there is evil in him” [*ra’ bei*].... For these leaders and shepherds there is no financial want.³²

Rosenberg refers here not to the Protestant school system, which educated the vast majority of Jewish children in Montreal, but rather to non-Orthodox Jewish schools, which he felt were detrimental to the preservation of Judaism. Another reference to non-Orthodox Judaism has to do with the phenomenon, well-attested elsewhere in North America, of immigrants attending services in the Reform temples in order to hear the polished English sermons of their rabbis. Thus Rosenberg warned:

Hear not the poisoned speeches of the Reform “rabbis,” who possess the selfsame sinful souls of the prophets of Baal, who caused ... the destruction of the First Temple, or else the selfsame sinful souls of the Hellenistic leaders who brought upon the Jewish people the destruction of the Second Temple.³³

The observance of the Jewish Sabbath and holidays has classically been considered the hallmark of Orthodox Judaism.³⁴ Thus the non-observance of the Sabbath and festivals by vast numbers of Jews was roundly condemned by Rosenberg. He did not, however, merely condemn; he also attempted an analysis of the situation and offered some solutions. Many Jews excused their non-observance by blaming economic conditions that made it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain the sort of job that allowed for Sabbath observance. Rosenberg acknowledged this argument and stated that the solution to this problem was to be found in the five-day, forty-hour week, then advocated by labour.³⁵ He further stated, in an argument addressed to the increasing number of Jews who viewed their Judaism as being primarily ethnic rather than religious, that one could justify the observance of the Sabbath not merely on religious, but also on nationalistic grounds. Jewish national pride dictated that the Jews should observe their day of rest as the Muslims did theirs and the Christians theirs.³⁶ Owners of stores and factories that employed Jews on the Sabbath

and festivals were warned of divine punishment awaiting them in the next world.³⁷

Beyond the wilful desecration of the Sabbath by many Jews, over whom Rosenberg could exercise no control since they had consciously abandoned the halakha, there was also widespread ignorance of the details of Sabbath observance even by those who considered themselves observant. Such people thought nothing of performing such actions on the Sabbath as pushing baby carriages on the street,³⁸ turning electric lights on and off,³⁹ or purchasing bread (after the Sabbath) that had been baked on the Sabbath day.⁴⁰

Even worse than ignorance was the fact that public desecrators of the Sabbath, when they did choose to attend synagogue services, whether on the High Holy Days or else to commemorate the anniversary of a relative's death [*yohrzeit*] could and did receive all possible synagogal honours.⁴¹

Despite this, however, Rosenberg recognized that the support of the non-observant was essential for the continuation of Orthodox institutions. This somewhat ambivalent relationship was discussed by Rosenberg in terms of the birds sent out of the ark by Noah:

The raven which fled from Noah symbolizes those merchants who do not observe the Sabbath properly and flee from it in order to earn money... Yet they obtain some merit if they support the Torah and bring bread and livelihood to those who occupy themselves in the Torah. The dove which did not flee ... designates those who observe the Torah ... [who] say it is better [to obtain] a bitter livelihood from the hand of the Holy One – blessed be He – ... and to avoid desecration of the Sabbath than [to obtain] a sweet, bountiful [livelihood] from flesh and blood [in which] he is forced to desecrate the Sabbath.⁴²

Another area of Jewish law that was widely ignored, even by the ostensibly "observant," was the *mikveh*, the ritual immersion marking the end of the period of forbidden sexual intercourse connected with the woman's menstrual cycle. Even in those places where ritual baths were established, many women refused to immerse themselves out of modesty or because of fears of unsanitary conditions in those baths. Rosenberg attempted to rectify this situation through the publication of a pamphlet, entitled *Mikveh Yehuda*, giving detailed instructions on how to set up, at minimal cost and effort, a *mikveh* in one's own home.⁴³

Other areas of lax observance attacked by Rosenberg included *sha'atnez*, the mixing of linen and wool in cloth. Because of new manufacturing techniques, thousands of Jews were now guilty of this sin unbeknownst to them.⁴⁴ *Kashrut*, of course, was a primary concern of Rosenberg. He expressed this concern in one of his homilies in this fashion:

Our sages – their memory be a blessing – stated, “The most proper among butchers is a partner of Amalek.” ... For the war of Amalek in every generation is the impure power which seeks to defile the mouths of Israel with forbidden foods. This is a very grave sin. For a sin [committed] outside the body can be erased through repentance and disappear. However if the body has been fattened with forbidden foods ... even if he does repent, the body remains with the sickness of impurity... Thus ... the butcher who boasts that he is kosher and yet does not wish to place himself under the supervision of the local rabbi ... signifies that he feeds [the public] non-kosher food.⁴⁵

Moreover, according to Rosenberg, other Jews felt that *kashrut* in general was not worth the trouble, since, as they asked:

... what did it matter whatever was eaten. Does not everything become dung in the intestines? What holiness is attached to the intestines?⁴⁶

In general, the impression given by a perusal of Rosenberg's writings is that the life of the Orthodox rabbi in Canada was a ceaseless struggle. As Rosenberg put it, somewhat apocalyptically, it was a fight:

... between the pious remnants of Israel and the helpers of Satan ... in the end of days. At that time, Jacob, the spirit of Ancient Israel [*yisrael sabba*] will remain almost alone with no help or support. For the people will go in darkness and will not wish to go in the spirit of Ancient Israel. Only the tiny minority will be the remnant which God calls. Then Jacob will remain limping on his hip because of the coldness of those who support the Torah. “until the dawn breaks” – that is, until the light of messiah glimmers.⁴⁷

The religious outlook of Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, as gleaned from his writings, was quite pessimistic. In this, he was similar to many of his contemporary Orthodox rabbinical colleagues, though he was, perhaps, more

articulate than most. It would be wrong, however, to assume that Rosenberg felt that the cause was lost by any means. In fact, he believed that he possessed the key to the salvation of Orthodox Judaism and its reconciliation with the modern world. This key was – kabbala.

By the early twentieth century, kabbala – the Jewish mystical tradition – had been thoroughly discredited among westernized Jews and, while it was formally honoured by Eastern European Jewry, particularly by the *hasidim*, it was little studied per se by the masses.⁴⁸ Nonetheless kabbala, to kabbalists, held the promise of nothing less than the salvation of the Jewish people, should its study become sufficiently widespread.⁴⁹ Rosenberg, in particular, was convinced that “the raising of the fortune of the community of Israel in its holy faith” rested upon the popularization of kabbala.⁵⁰ It is to this popularization that he devoted the greatest portion of his literary effort for some twenty-five years.

What Rosenberg hoped to do in his *magnum opus*, the translation and re-edition of the *Zohar* was to make this classic of kabbalistic literature available to the masses – something impossible to do in its original Aramaic. As he stated:

I know that my book ... is not needed by the great men who are comparable to divine angels... However they too will rejoice ... when they see the awakening of ordinary men to study and understand the statements of the holy *Zohar*. For that is a sign that salvation will be soon revealed.... The good of the community of Israel will arise through the study of the *Zohar*. We cannot say that that [salvation] depends upon [the study of the *Zohar*] by the great ones of the generation alone.... For there will yet come a new revelation [of the *Zohar*] to the masses of Israel ... who will taste of the Tree of Life.⁵¹

In order to bring about this new revelation of the *Zohar* to ordinary Jews, Rosenberg laid aside his hesitations at translating the *Zohar*.⁵² He felt that the translation would serve to help stem the tide of secularism that was engulfing the Jewish people. Secular literature was popular among Jews, he felt, because the authors took pains to beautify their works and to write them in a pure and simple style, whereas holy books – and the *Zohar* in particular – were written obscurely and looked upon as basically incomprehensible. In such conditions, obviously, no new revelation could come about.⁵³

For these reasons, Rosenberg engaged in what he felt to be a war against secularism. His weapon was the pen. Addressing the Jewish masses, he declared:

Why must you bring into your houses impure books and stories full of poison, whether the poison of heresy or the poison of immodesty, and read them? They sully the mind and deaden the heart.... Would it not be better for you to bring into your homes books of ethics and wisdom which are not against the Torah for your sons and daughters to read especially in these times of the “footsteps of the messiah”? For heresy is strengthened every day as our sages – their memory be a blessing – foresaw in the period prior to the revelation of king messiah.

Therefore there is a holy obligation upon everyone who possesses the fear of God to fight with all his strength against heresy.... The strongest weapon to fight against it is the pen, to distribute to the people books like these from which the heart will be able to understand without going into the “counsel of the wicked.”⁵⁴

Once again, the sentiments expressed by Rosenberg, and particularly his belief that the Jewish people were experiencing the events of the generation immediately preceding the messianic advent, were common to many rabbis of his time. They constituted a response to the onslaught of modernity and the breakup of the universal halakhic consensus within the Jewish community.⁵⁵ What serves to differentiate him from his peers – beyond his belief in the efficacy of the popularization of kabbala – was his belief that kabbala was also the key to the reconciliation of Torah and science.

Rosenberg always prided himself on his knowledge of secular affairs and science⁵⁶ and always rejected the notion that Torah and science, properly understood, were antagonistic. Taking aim at those Jews who had abandoned the tradition in favour of what they considered to be a modern lifestyle, Rosenberg stated:

Possibly you believe that civilization is connected to the profanation of the Sabbath. However you must know that among the Jewish people there have always been found great sages, researchers, philosophers, doctors, astronomers who were quite Orthodox and strictly observed the Sabbath.... Now you understand very well [from the example of] Maimonides that the holy Jewish Torah does not compare with civilization as fire [does with] water.⁵⁷

In accordance with his program of presenting kabbala as the key to the salvation of Judaism, he took pains to describe kabbala as “the source of all spiritual sciences and also the source of the highest and noblest morality.”⁵⁸ His goal was to present his material in such a way that it be in accordance with both kabbala and science “so that all the nations of the world and their sages should see that everything is implicit in the holy Torah.”⁵⁹

Woven in among his commentaries and homilies are a number of instances in which he combined kabbala and science. In dealing with the creation account in Genesis, Rosenberg connected the sun and the six planets [Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn] to the seven lower *sefirot* [kabbalistic term for the emanation of God’s power]. He continued:

And if recently the astronomers have discovered other planets greater and farther away whose orbit is connected with the sun, it must be said that they are symbolized by the three first *sefirot* of the World of Formation. [the third, in descending order, of the four supernal “worlds” in Lurianic kabbala]. Thus kabbala and science do not contradict each other.⁶⁰

The fact that scientists believed the world was considerably older than the few thousand years provided for by the Jewish calendar was not a matter of concern for Rosenberg. He did not consider this a contradiction because the kabbalistic book, *Sefer ha-Temuna*, had stated that the world had passed through a number of aeons [*shemitot*] prior to the commencement of the present one.⁶¹

Indeed, Rosenberg was not content to claim that kabbala did not contradict the scientists. He also declared that the *Zohar* had anticipated the scientists in a number of discoveries:

The holy *Zohar* is not merely a book for the pious.... It also contains many matters of natural science.... It is known that the *Zohar* appeared in the world a hundred [*sic*] years before the discovery of the portion of the earth [which includes] America.... Yet there is found in it the science of geography just as was later discovered by the two scientists, Columbus and Copernicus. That is that the earth is round like a ball, that it is inhabited on all sides and that it possesses two types of motion, one motion spherical ... like a wheel on its axle and the other motion elliptical around the sun....

Everyone who understands will be able to see that almost the same things were hinted at [in the *Zohar*] as were discovered by the scientist Copernicus about three hundred years after the *Zohar* appeared in the world.⁶²

Similarly the “tower which floated in the air,” which Jewish legend ascribed to King Solomon, was considered by Rosenberg to be a machine, similar to the modern airplane, which worked in accordance with natural properties such as electricity and magnetism.⁶³

Even evolution, that most threatening of nineteenth-century scientific theories for traditional religious belief, had its connection with kabbala:

It must be seen that the science called ... “evolution” which was established by the mad scientist Darwin has something stolen from the words of the *Zohar* which speaks here of the creatures and types of men found in the other portions of the earth. Darwin, however, wrote that all men are descended from the apes. And it certainly seems that he is like an ape which is accustomed to imitate men in their movements. Thus he desired to imitate and say [things] similar to the words of the *Zohar* only in a spirit of madness.... On the contrary, in several places in the *Zohar* the opposite is stated that the apes are the descendents of sinful men. Something similar is agreed upon by the honest scientists of the nations of the world.⁶⁴

In general, Rosenberg wished to leave the impression that the *Zohar* was respected by the scholars of the gentiles, who had even translated it into their own languages. How much more so, then, should the Jews honour and study this book “which is ours and which [contains] our soul and the length of our lives.”⁶⁵

Rosenberg’s mission to save Judaism through the study of kabbala might well have seemed quixotic to his contemporaries. His ideas concerning the accommodation of science to kabbala – and vice versa – may seem naive. Yet they constituted the opening phase of a process which, perhaps in a more sophisticated way, marks the intellectual history of Judaism to the present.

Rosenberg published his edition and translation of the *Zohar* in the 1920s – the same period that Gershom Scholem began his masterful life-work of rescuing kabbala from neglect in the academic world. Both Rosenberg and Scholem, then, had much the same mission. Each was to take a subject that was neglected and misunderstood in the context

of contemporary Judaism and to make it the key element in the regeneration of Judaism in the modern era. The difference, of course, is in the audiences they addressed. Scholem and his works found popularity in academe. Similarly Rosenberg's translation found a considerable readership among Orthodox Jews, judging from the numerous reprints of the work.⁶⁶ Moreover both Scholem and Rosenberg seem – in their respective spheres – to have anticipated that kabbala was to become a prime factor in Judaic thought. Rosenberg must, then, be considered a predecessor of present-day popularizers of kabbala among Orthodox Jews such as Adin Steinsaltz and Aryeh Kaplan.⁶⁷

Rosenberg was no scientist, though he absorbed a good deal of scientific information available to him in either Hebrew or Yiddish. Nonetheless, here, too, he anticipated some of the major strategies of contemporary Orthodox Judaism in dealing with scientific theories and discoveries. These include the notion that all valid science is to be found in the Torah in some form, that there is no basic contradiction between Torah and true science, and that science is the handmaiden of Torah.⁶⁸

In short, we have been dealing with a man whose life and works, though they have been obscured by the passage of time, will amply reward further study. Through him, we may come to understand not merely the pressures of the modern world upon Orthodox Judaism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also the beginnings of the sort of creative response to these pressures that ultimately enabled Orthodoxy to emerge as a viable force within Judaism of the late twentieth century.