

CLOSING THE AMERICANIZATION GAP BETWEEN THE ELDRIDGE STREET SYNAGOGUE'S LEADERS AND DOWNTOWN'S RABBIS

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The builders and leaders of the Eldridge Street Synagogue have been often and aptly described as Jews who made considered accommodations in their religious lifestyles as they made their way in America and came to grips with this country's mores. Their goal was to maintain the essence of the East European Orthodoxy as they sought to live harmoniously within two cultures. Interestingly, they made their judgments and adjustments without consultation with or the authorization of downtown rabbinical authorities. So, for example, although Kahal Adath Jeshurun was one of the constituent congregations who hired and helped pay the salary of Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Vilna, who served as the Chief Rabbi of New York (1887-1902), they did not feel obliged to follow his lead or dictates. In a classic case, in 1891, when Rabbi Joseph sought to control Passover matzo-baking—to ensure that it was done with all due regard for Jewish law—and also to set the price for that essential holiday commodity, synagogues officials demurred. They voted to monitor that industry themselves and asserted that if their committee ascertained that prices were too high, they would bake that provision themselves at their own expense.

All too often, these accommodating congregational lay leaders—not to mention their rank and file of men and women in the pews—have been depicted as residing in a very different place from transplanted rabbis. The archetypical resistant organization was the Agudath ha-Rabbanim (Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada), a group of fifty-nine East European-trained rabbis who served immigrant communities throughout the United States and Canada. Beginning in July, 1902, this group mounted an organized response to the decline of religious commitment among Jews. As they saw the

community, the masses around them violated Sabbath strictures, neglected to provide their children with proper forms of Orthodox religious education. In their view, the most unscrupulous among them tricked unwary consumers, who still adhered to kosher regulations, by purveying *treyf*, or unkosher, cuts in their butcher shops. Essentially these rabbis hoped to achieve as a combine what Rabbi Jacob Joseph had failed to do as an individual authority.



The lay leaders of the Eldridge Street Synagogue sat in seats of honor along the Eastern Wall.

A traditional narrative of their activities has it that the rabbis projected their objectives with a heavy hand. For example, on the crucial question of Sabbath desecration, after pronouncing to the faithful, in their 1902 Constitution, that “all hope is [not] lost for Sabbath observance in this country,” the rabbis went after—among others—bakers whose stores stayed open on the holy day, warning “the people not

to buy bread from those transgressors." In their view, "not only is purchasing such products considered aiding a sinner" whose economic actions had to be punished, but they contended that "It is practically certain"—even without any formal inspection—that there is non-kosher oil and shortening in the baked goods."

However, upon closer examination, it appears that these rabbinic authorities also possessed a more flexible, accommodating side in their efforts to "discover...ways to strengthen" this cardinal mitzvah within the community. One remarkable stratagem was their interest in building an alliance with unlikely confederates, heads of secular labor unions, most of whom harbored little commitment to, or even respect for, Jewish religious traditions. In other words, while Agudath ha-Rabbanim members might be quick to condemn from their pulpits the most radical elements in the labor community around them as "the dregs of our people," they also recognized the advantages of pragmatic cooperation. Accordingly, the rabbis' union plan called for them to reach out to the workers' leaders, to initiate a dialogue towards "includ[ing] the right for Sabbath observance" among the laborites "just demands." In return, the rabbis pledged to "pressure the owners and employers to comply with the requests of the union." For the record, the calls for alliance went unanswered by union officials. Perhaps, staunch dogmatism of a secular type prevented the achievement of common cause among very disparate factions in the Jewish immigrant community.

The paradigmatic resisters also made concessions to the power of that most powerful of Americanizing agencies, the public schools. For the Agudath ha-Rabbanim, the ideal educational institution was always the old-world style yeshiva. There, its Constitution read that teachers [who] "must be Godfearing and their deeds in accordance with the Torah" would instruct their youthful charges in "Yiddish, the language of the children's parents." Of course, before entering his heder room, every teacher had to have "a certificate of approbation from one member of the Agudath ha-Rabbanim and two pedagogues...testify[ing] to his religious devotion and teaching abilities." Moreover, a "supervising committee" was empanelled to be on hand to assure that Torah "study is properly organized so that the yeshiva students will truly succeed in their dedicated endeavors."

Yet, at the same time, in a partial bow to how the public schools ran their operations, the Constitution also spoke of

the need "to draw up a proper curriculum for the various levels of study" making clear that "important topics must no longer be left in the hands of individuals on an ad hoc basis." The rabbis' organization also recognized the need for "a graded system or study so that teachers will no longer have various levels of students in one class." Arguably, through these moves the East European transplant was reformed with American pedagogic values and models in mind. Most importantly, they assented that when "necessary for the clarification of the topic, the teachers may also utilize English [and] in areas where only English is spoken, it may be the basic tongue." The *rebbe*s, presumably rabbis and teachers with East European pedigrees, had to know the language of the new land. This skill would be of particular importance to members who lived in communities like Omaha, Nebraska, Louisville, Kentucky, Denver, Colorado, Bangor, Maine, or Hazleton, Pennsylvania., locales far removed from the metropolis. (Only fourteen of the original 59 members of the UOR hailed from the New York City area.) Moreover, back in New York, home to but two fledgling yeshivas, Etz Chaim and the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School, provisions had to be made to teach "necessary...secular subjects" in their schools, albeit "by qualified instructors."

The sort of American training these general studies faculty had to have become clear a year after the Agudath ha-Rabbanim's founding. Then it ruled that "graduates from the normal schools in the employ of the City Boards of Education" should be engaged to moonlight in the all-day yeshivas, a concession to United States law, if not customs.

Finally, while never gainsaying the yeshiva as the ideal educational institution, as early as 1903, the organization was also on record in support of "evening schools for those youths who work or attend secular schools by day," a systematic curriculum and financial support "for all talmud torahs and hedarim," as well as the need to establish Hebrew schools for girls.

This degree of pragmatism and acceptance of the realities around them ironically grew out of their own East European background where over *there*, the Agudath ha-Rabbanim men of the future were among the most accommodating rabbis of their time and place. Most of the Agudath ha-Rabbanim's founders were Orthodox supporters of Hibbat Zion, disciples of Rabbis Isaac Elchanan Spektor and Isaac Jacob Reines. And they were soon to be members of the American branch of the Mizrahi movement, a faction



Avraham Aharon Yudelovitch served as the rabbi of the Eldridge Street Synagogue from 1918-1930.



Yisroel Idelson served as rabbi of the Eldridge Street Synagogue from 1930-1943.

and a vision within the Zionist camp that was organized the same crucial year of 1902. As such, they subscribed to that proposition that Orthodox Jews must understand and react effectively to the modern world around them—with the goal always of maintaining the essentials of the religious tradition. In this case they averred that they had to play a major role within the Jewish national revival to assure that Zionism progressed with regard to the teachings of the Torah. Needless to say, in occupying that position, these “moderns” effectively rejected the millenium-old notion that Jews should play no role in hastening their redemption. In Russia, Poland, and Hungary, this Religious Zionist position was a minority stance within the Orthodox rabbinate. However, in America, it long endured as the majority opinion.

No less compelling in comprehending the nuanced world-view of these transplanted rabbis is the recognition that as men on a mission in this country, they had parted company with the majority East European rabbinical view that opposed the very migration of Jews to this *treif* land. Unquestionably, the most famous naysayer was Rabbi Israel Meir ha Cohen Kagan, better known as the *Hafetz Hayim*—who rose to call for a halt to such perilous spiritual travel. Though progress had surely been made over more than two centuries in making America hospitable to those who wanted to maintain the religious traditions of the old world,

for the revered rabbi of Radun, Poland, settlement in this libertine country was still fraught with danger for devout Jews. In his plaintive work, *Niddehei Yisrael*, that appeared in 1894, addressed to the “dispersed and wandering Jews in distant lands,” Kagan went beyond calling upon the faithful on the move to make heroic efforts to keep the Sabbath, observe kashruth and follow the laws of family purity in that “curse[d]” place where “desecration of the Torah” was rampant. He instructed those who would listen to him that, in the end, “the only one proper solution” for those desiring “to live properly before God” was to not settle at all in America. For him, the only observant immigrant who was even conceivably worthy of praise was that rare “God-fearing man” whose presence in this barren land might “strengthen religious life.” However, on balance, he continued, if a “proper person” had made the tragic mistake of emigrating “he must return to his home where the Lord will sustain him. He must not be misled by thoughts of remaining away until he is financially wealthy.” For only back in Poland and Russia, he believed, could a Jew live the right type of religious life and “bring up his sons in Torah and piety.”

Effectively, future Agudath ha-Rabbanim members ignored this definitive ban when they boarded ships to America. If they had to answer charges that in so doing they were breaking with the authority of a great Torah sage,

perhaps these rabbis on the move would have responded that they were among those special case Jews; “God fearing men,” whom the senior rabbi prayed might against all odds “strengthen” American Jewish religious life. More likely, they would have proudly asserted that they were conforming to the authority of equally-renowned and respected rabbis Hayim Soloveitchik and Isaac Elchanan Spektor. Although these leaders’ views were the minority position among European sages—most colleagues were sure that since the Judaism of migrants would founder on foreign shores it was no place for the devout—Spektor made clear to many of those whom he personally had ordained that they were obliged to do their utmost to reclaim those on the move away from Judaism. Here, the Jewish religious legal tradition that a Jew must not only be pious, but be concerned with the religious behavior of others was surely in play. Rabbi Soloveitchik went even further in his charge. Not only “had the needs of the time... thrust an obligation” upon rabbis “to ameliorate Judaism” in America, he also projected this “impure” country as potentially “a secure refuge for our people.” This optimist looked at the freedom that Jews enjoyed in the United States, contrasted it with what Tsarist oppression was doing to his people in Russia, and prayed that his rabbis would not only “ameliorate Judaism.” They could be the vanguard who would “build a secure refuge for our people and our Torah.” They could construct the next great Diaspora Torah center until “the redemption to Zion would occur.”

It was sentiments like these that warmed and motivated Agudath ha-Rabbanim members to both resist many aspects of the American way, but to also accommodate pragmatically the world around them. It was this mindset that closely resembled that of downtown’s Orthodox lay leaders, like those who operated the Eldridge Street Synagogue, who sought their own ways for Orthodoxy to survive and advance in the United States.

WORKS ON WHICH THIS COMMENT DRAWS

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