CHAPTER 6

An Unhappy Community and an Even Unhappier Rabbi

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The story of R. Jacob Gesundheit’s tenure as the rabbi of Warsaw was not a happy one. He was appointed to the position in 1870, was fired in 1873, and died in 1878. His was a short and painful rabbinical career, but well worth studying because it contributes much to our understanding of the history of the Jews in Warsaw and reflects the rapidly changing Jewish world of late nineteenth-century Eastern and East Central Europe. By the time of his appointment, the Warsaw Jewish community had already been the largest Jewish community in Eastern Europe for decades. This community was far from homogenous. It included an influential group of wealthy ‘enlightened’ Jews, though most of the Jews could still have been traditionalists. At the same time, many Warsaw Jews were Hasidim but they were far from being an overwhelming majority. Warsaw’s Jewish community had never been homogeneous in the past, and this had not prevented the selection of a communal rabbi. However, the growing heterogeneity, which was to become characteristic of almost every major Jewish community in Eastern Europe, made communal decisions far more complex than previously—as it also did elsewhere. R. Gesundheit was one of the first public casualties of the new reality.

Fortunately for those interested in the topic, the historian Jacob Shatzky devoted a chapter of his magisterial history of Warsaw Jewry to the Warsaw rabbinate and documented the sequence of events that took place during

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R. Gesundheit’s short career as rabbi of Warsaw. However, it was precisely Shatzky’s strengths—his mastery of the details and sources related to Warsaw Jewry—that left room for those who have tried to follow in his footsteps to analyze some of the dynamics and issues of the Warsaw rabbinate that were not central to Shatzky’s concerns. Here, the lessons learned from Antony Polonsky’s sensitivity to structure and to context are of critical importance. Moreover, with the aid of recently discovered sources from Russian archives that were not available to Shatzky, it is possible to fill out the story of Rabbi Gesundheit’s short and unhappy tenure and appreciate its significance.

To better understand the short lived career of R. Gesundheit, it is necessary to bear in mind some characteristics of the rabbinate in early modern Europe. In the Ashkenazi tradition, rabbis were elected by communities to serve as communal rabbis. There were often various eligibility requirements for

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1 Jacob Shatzky, *Geshikhte fun yidn in varshe*, 111: 137–144. He was preceded by Hilary Nussbaum, *Szkice historyczne z życia Żydów w Warszawie* (Warszawa: Druk K. Kowalewskiego, 1881), 133–136 and Azriel Natan Frenk, “Ha-rabanut be-varsha lifnim [The Rabbinate in Warsaw in the Past],” *Ha-tzefira* (3 May 1921): 2. Unless otherwise noted, the details on R. Gesundheit’s tenure are based on Shatzky and the sources he cites there. Jacob (Yankev) Shatzky was a fascinating personality in his own right. See Robert Shapiro, “Shatzky, Yankev,” *Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2: 1704–05. Yitshak Grünbaum wrote an article “Bor’ba za vlast’ v varshavskoi evreiskoi obshchine” in *Vestnik evreiskoi obshchiny* 1.4 (1913): 3–12 and 1.5: 10–26, but I was unable to find a copy of the journal with the first half of the article. Judging by the second half, it seems that he dealt mainly with internal divisions in Warsaw Jewry at the end of the nineteenth century and not with R. Gesundheit.