Enduring Prestige, Eroded Authority: The Warsaw Rabbinate in the Interwar Period

Gershon Bacon

Introduction: The Nineteenth-Century Heritage and the Historical Narrative

The accepted narrative of the history of Warsaw Jewry portrays the abolition of the office of chief rabbi after Jacob Gesundheit’s removal from office in 1873 as the turning point for the worse for the stature of the rabbinate in the Polish capital. Placing authority in the hands of a rabbinical council instead of a chief rabbi was seen as practically guaranteeing the weakness of the city’s rabbinate from then on, which was not highly regarded by the leadership of the community.¹

In the mid-nineteenth century, it is asserted, the rabbi of Warsaw could speak authoritatively in the name of Warsaw Jewry, and, in many ways, in the name of Polish Jewry as a whole. Typical in this regard are the words of Jacob Shatzky, referring to the late 1850s:

...after the ‘Jewish War’ the executive of the kehilla [communal council] was comprised mostly of ‘enlightened’ Jews. They looked upon Meisels not just a rabbi, but as a representative of the great kehilla...The tales about the contacts with Polish officialdom and the respect shown him as a ‘genuine Polish rabbi’ quickly spread among the Jewish homes of Warsaw. In him was seen a leader, a guide, just as the archbishop was seen among Catholics...Meisels became the intercessor for the people. From all sides people turned to him for help. The kehilla, thanks to its chief rabbi, became the representative of the entire Jewish population in Poland.²

---

¹ Jacob Shatzky, Geshikhte fun yidn in varshe, III: 149.
² Ibid., II: 229, 231.
In Shatzky’s view, it was the authoritative personality of Dov Berish Meisels that conferred prestige on the Warsaw community leadership rather than vice versa.

Due to his position and to his personality, the chief rabbi of Warsaw was a national figure. With a long career in the business world, he made his way easily through the corridors of wealth and power in the capital. His participation in the momentous events leading up to and including the January Uprising of 1863 earned him a place in the pantheon of fighters for Polish independence and as an icon of Polish-Jewish cooperation.3 As we shall demonstrate, in the interwar period, the situation and status of the communal rabbinate in the capital were quite different from the supposed golden age half a century earlier.

The Warsaw Rabbinate in the Second Half of the 19th Century: A Golden Age, but with Shadows

While focusing on the interwar period, the present paper will attempt to revise the narrative on the Warsaw rabbinate from several perspectives. Despite Shatzky’s disparagement of the rabbinical council as little more than a mouthpiece of the kehilla lay leadership whose proclamations served the interests of that leadership or of the Russian authorities,4 at least until the early twentieth century, the Warsaw rabbinate could and did make its collective voice heard as a spiritual authority on communal issues, including those beyond the borders of the city. To cite one random example, during the 1892 cholera epidemic, the rabbinical council of Warsaw published an appeal to all rabbis and heads of Jewish communities of Poland to put an end to time-honored customs engaged in by Jews to ward off plagues, such as marriages of orphans or people with physical deformities in cemeteries (“Black Weddings”),5 or street processions. Though their intentions may be proper and honorable, the very public nature of these customs, the rabbis feared, could lead to misunderstanding on