The development of Orthodox Judaism in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century was marked by significant tension with respect to those Jews who had abandoned the Orthodox tradition, either wholly or in part. While scholars have begun to examine the ramifications of this phenomenon, much work remains before we can say that we have a good grasp of this important issue.

In this paper, I propose to contribute to the discussion of this issue through a translation and analysis of a sermon on this subject written by one of the most prominent Lithuanian rabbis of this era, Yeheil Michel ha-Levi Epstein (1829-1908). Though best known as the author of the Arukh Hashulhan, a halakhic code in nine volumes, Rabbi Epstein also wrote a book of sermons titled Kol Ben Levi, prepared probably between the 1890s and his death in 1908 but only recently published.

There is insufficient evidence to determine the exact date that these sermons were compiled or edited for publication. However, an examination of Rabbi Epstein’s works would indicate that they were likely redacted near the time of his death in 1908. In his discussion of the “Second Passover” in homily 7, he refers specifically to his work Arukh Hashulhan Leatid, which concerns the sacrificial service, published in 1907. He also concludes the introduction to his legal codes with his name and date, August 28, 1907 (11 Elul 5667). Moreover, in his first sermon, he refers to his brother-in-law, Rabbi Naphtali Zvi

1 See Simcha Fishbane, Aruch Hashulchan, Volume 9 (Hoboken, 1991), where volume 9 of the Arukh Hashulhan was published with the homilies. The introduction includes a biography of Rabbi Epstein.

2 These sermons reflect Rabbi Epstein’s world view, which exhibits an understanding of and concern for the plight of the ordinary Jews of his community. As Marc Saperstein, Jewish Preaching, 1200-1800—An Anthology (New Haven and London, 1988), correctly indicates, Rabbinical sermons reflect the society in which they are delivered. We add that sermons, possibly even more than other types of Rabbinic literature, reveal the world view of the authors. This is because sermons often address the specific plight, troubles, and behavior patterns of the preacher’s audience.
Yehudah Berlin, who died in the summer of 1893, with the notation “tz’l,” “his memory be blessed.”

The manuscript appears to be a document that Rabbi Epstein had prepared for publication. The collection contains twenty-six edited homilies. Each is numbered with proper references to rabbinical sources as well as cross-references to his own works. The literary style is well organized and consistent almost throughout the monograph. Although never published, the text of the handwritten manuscript was without corrections and would appear to have been prepared for publication. Furthermore, as will be discussed below, the first sermon parallels in style the introduction to Arukh Hashulhan, again suggesting a completed monograph, ready for publication. No suggestion is offered why this work was not published. One could only surmise that lack of funds, the priority of publishing his legal works, or the fact that he died shortly after the completion were the obstacles.

The fact that the sermons are presented as having been delivered to the community on Shabbat Hagadol (the Sabbath prior to Passover) and Shabbat Shuva (the Sabbath between the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur) does not necessarily mean they actually were delivered in this form. An examination of the genre of drashot testifies to the phenomenon that published sermons were not necessarily presented in their entirety. In this case, the homilies for the most part open and conclude with issues of concern to the community. These topics include such problems as livelihood, education, and the religious behavior of the individual and community. Commencing with a popular passage either from the Psalms or the Haftara, the rabbi propounded his thoughts. This aspect of Rabbi Epstein’s presentations does not necessarily differ from that of other sermons orally delivered by preachers. The middle portions of Rabbi Epstein’s sermons, however, do not conform to other known oral sermons. They feature a lengthy in-depth discussion of a Talmudic or halakhic issue, analyzing Rabbinic texts on topics related to the season, Passover or the High Holidays. It would require scholarly expertise to understand these discussions.

This theory is developed by Saperstein,3 who in his discussion of preachers and sermons from the fifteenth century Spain writes: “Since the audience ordinarily includes Jews of different educational backgrounds and intellectual levels and since listeners had various ways of expressing displeasure at what they were hearing, the sermon had to be pitched at a level that would not exclude most of the