

Rubinstein vs. Grodziński: The Dispute Over the Vilnius Rabbinate and the Religious Realignment of Vilnius Jewry. 1928–1932

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At first glance, a paper analyzing the struggle over the rabbinate in Vilnius in the late 1920s and early 1930s would seem far removed from the main topic of the present conference, namely Elijah Gaon of Vilna and his era. Yet as we shall see, the fight in this century had its roots in precedents set in the time of the Gaon.

The timing of its outbreak reflects the relatively late stabilization of the legal situation of the Lithuanian region annexed to the Second Polish Republic. Kehilla elections in the region would take place several years after elections in former Congress Poland. Jewish politicians attempted to widen the authority of the kehilla in Polish Lithuania, but in the end Jewish communities in that region too were governed by the same rules as in former Congress Poland.¹

The wojewoda (provincial governor) of the Vilna region ordered that kehilla elections in the region take place no later than the end of July 1928. In the key community of Vilna itself, elections were scheduled for July 29 of that year. The election results reflect the new political alignment of the Jewish community at the time. A coalition of four "economic" groups (artisans, merchants, retail traders, property owners), with 10 of the 25 council seats

joined by the Zionists (5 seats) elected Zionist Sejm Deputy Wygodzki chairman of the council and Mr. Kruk, the representative of the artisans, as chairman of the 12-member kehilla executive.² Even a cursory analysis of the election results shows that the orthodox forces (Ahdut, Agudat Yisrael, Mizrahi – 6 seats total) comprised only a small minority of the new council in the fabled “Jerusalem of Lithuania.” The political balance of power had shifted drastically in favor of the secular and left-wing parties.

With the new kehilla council and its elected leadership in place, the starosta (district prefect) directed the kehilla to choose a rabbi and deputy rabbis for Vilna. The order aroused the ire of the rabbis in Vilna, since the new Polish law specified that only one man would be considered the rabbi of the kehilla, and all others would be his deputies.

The very notion of electing a chief rabbi for the Vilna community opened up wounds 150 years old. At that time the community fought a 30-year battle with the incumbent communal rabbi, Samuel ben Avigdor, a struggle that at its height involved mutual denunciations to the authorities and imprisonment of the rabbi, and ended only with the rabbi's death in the 1790s. The community then resolved never again to elect a chief rabbi. As symbolic confirmation of this resolution, a large stone was affixed to the rabbi's seat on the left side of the Holy Ark in the Great Synagogue. This situation would persist until the period under discussion.³

The directive from the starosta of Vilna led to a break with this venerable tradition. At the session of the kehilla council called to consider the issue, the names of two rabbis were raised. The Zionists, supported by the economic organizations, nominated Rabbi Yitzhak Rubinstein, a Mizrahi leader and member of the Polish Senate who had served as Crown Rabbi during the era of Russian rule and had served the community with distinction during World War I and after.⁴ Agudat Yisrael and Ahdut proposed the name of Rabbi Hayyim Ozer Grodziński, a world-famed Talmudic scholar and orthodox leader, whose official position was that of a member of the Vilna rabbinical court, but whose authority in actuality was world-wide. In the vote, the Zionists and their allies prevailed, and Rubinstein was elected rabbi of Vilna. The orthodox factions protested the entire process of electing the new rabbi.⁵

This was the opening salvo in a three-year campaign to undo the decision of the kehilla board. The public debate spread beyond the boundaries of Vilna itself, and engaged the attention of the major Warsaw dailies, among other newspapers. The major struggle, however, was in Vilna, led by the two Rabbis Karelitz, Avraham Yeshayahu (known after the title of his books as

the "Hazon Ish") and his brother Meir, the former working behind the scenes and the latter working in the public spotlight. For months on end, the pages of the Vilna-based orthodox weekly *Dos Vort* would feature ringing denunciations of the precipitate action of the kehilla majority and its insulting attitude toward the acknowledged Torah authorities in the Vilna rabbinate. Opening the attack on the kehilla was the revered Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, known throughout East European Jewry as the "Hafetz Hayyim" after the title of his popular book on the religious prohibition against gossip. His letter, entitled "Humiliation of Torah",⁶ went right to the heart of the matter. After sketching out in short the history of the rabbinate question in the city, and the fact that no rabbi had served as chief rabbi since Samuel ben Ayigdor, Rabbi Kagan lamented the present predicament:

... and now the majority of the kehilla has decided to remove the Geonim, teachers of Israel from the religious kehilla, so they should have no influence in religious affairs, and to appoint a leader over them who is unworthy... The solution of the rabbinate question in Vilna at present, is the beginning of Reform...⁷

The rabbi called on all religious Jews to protest this action.

The rabbinical council of Vilna, the body directly affected by the new kehilla council's action, published a long memorandum stating its position in the dispute. First and foremost, the rabbis cited the long standing tradition not to choose a chief rabbi in Vilna. All the rabbis functioning in Vilna, no matter what their stature, held the title "moreh hora'ah", and a rabbinical council exercised religious authority in the city. No rabbi alive today possessed the requisite qualities to be over the rabbinic council of Vilna and its world-renowned scholars.⁸

After an initial flurry of news reports on the Vilna rabbinate fight, in the first months of 1929 the issue raised little public notice. The new kehilla leadership had asserted its authority through its election of Rubinstein, but did little to carry out its decision. By March of that year, however, the Zionists began efforts to get governmental confirmation of their choice as rabbi. Agudat Yisrael lobbied for its solution, to name a rabbinic council of several members. After several weeks of deliberation, the minister directed the wojewoda to confirm Rubinstein as Vilna rabbi.⁹ Orthodox representatives continued to claim that the nomination of Rubinstein was illegal, and appealed to the highest Polish administrative tribunal.¹⁰

At this point, the community had reached an impasse. When the kehilla council wished to proceed with the newly-formed rabbinate of Rubinstein plus his "assistants", the venerable rabbis of Vilna, including Rabbi

Grodziński, submitted a letter to the council stating that unless their demands were met, no rabbi would accept appointment to the rabbinate in the city. In the end, though, the council decided to ignore the rabbis' letter of resignation, and included in the budget an item providing the salary for the five "assistant" rabbis, in addition to the elected chief rabbi.¹¹

The kehilla leadership did search for a way out of the impasse. They invited the orthodox factions to a meeting to seek a compromise solution. The rabbis and orthodox councilmen had indicated in the past that the nomination of a second rabbi in addition to Rubinstein could resolve the issue, and the kehilla presidium took this idea as the opening basis for negotiation. The presumed candidate was Rabbi Hayyim Ozer Grodziński. Negotiations broke down, however, and the impasse remained.¹² Only after two more years of strife and maneuvering would the "two rabbi solution" become the eventual solution of the crisis in Vilna.

In the meantime, the orthodox community in Vilna, stunned by the new situation, began to consider a radical alternative. At several meetings of orthodox activists and in the pages of the orthodox press, the idea of founding a separate orthodox community first found expression. For the present, the orthodox would remain members of the existing kehilla, but planning would go ahead for the formation of a separate kultusgemeinde which would take over the religious functions of the kehilla. The very raising of the possibility of forming a separate kehilla caused consternation in kehilla circles, who saw this as the first step in the break-up of the Vilna kehilla. Mutual accusations were thrown about, mostly questioning the necessity of raising the rabbinate issue altogether.¹³ The issue became moot, however, when the authorities did not approve the by-laws for the separate orthodox "religious society."¹⁴ Nevertheless, this was one of the few incidents in the entire period in Poland when orthodox representatives made even a tentative effort to form their own community. For the most part they rejected such efforts as alien to Polish Jewry and self-defeating to their claims to represent the silent majority of Polish Jews. The attempt to take over the rabbinate in the "Jerusalem of Lithuania", and the perceived insult to the Lithuanian rabbi who was one of the pillars of the rabbinic leadership of Agudat Yisrael, led to desperate measures.

Additional factors contributed to the bitterness of this particular struggle. First of all, numerous correspondents in the ongoing press debate remarked that the "conquest" of the prestigious Vilna rabbinate constituted but an opening wedge in a larger effort by secular forces to capture the rabbinate, the bulwark of the Jewish religion, in other communities. They

expressed fears that Jewish secularists and government officials had plans to remake the image of the rabbi.

Besides the ideological overtones of the struggle, feelings of personal betrayal seem to have played a part as well. This element does not figure prominently in press accounts at the time, but does come in for detailed exposition in later, pious biographies of the rabbinic figures connected to the struggle, Rabbi Grodziński and Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz (the "Hazon Ish").

Recent accounts stress the personal debt which Rabbi Rubinstein owed Rabbi Grodziński, a debt which he repaid with an act of personal betrayal. The connection between the two men went back to 1910, during the elections for the office of Crown Rabbi of Vilna. The leading candidate for the post was Hayyim Tschernowitz (known by the pen name "Rav Tzair"), who had served as Crown Rabbi in Odessa. Rabbi Grodziński was determined to prevent the election of Tschernowitz, whom he considered too liberal, and sought a counter-candidate who possessed the requisite matriculation certificate. At that time Rabbi Rubinstein, who had served as a congregation rabbi in the Crimea and met the educational requirements, arrived in Vilna and presented his own candidacy. Grodziński, who saw no other way to defeat the candidate of the Jewish secularist groups, threw his support to Rubinstein, but evidently only after an understanding between him and Rubinstein, according to which the latter would refrain from interference in matters affecting the kehilla and the local rabbinate. After the outbreak of World War I, however, when Rabbi Grodziński went into exile, Rubinstein stepped into the breach, made his way onto the rabbinical council and functioned de facto as the spiritual leader of the community.¹⁵ He continued in this leadership role into the post-war period, representing the Jewish minority during the short period of Lithuanian rule, and then under Polish rule. Nevertheless, the orthodox circles in Vilna believed that there still existed an understanding not to over-step the bounds of the former office of Crown Rabbi. By running for the office of rabbi of Vilna and taking up the post, Rubinstein had repaid the earlier support of Hayyim Ozer Grodziński with a stinging slap in the face of the aged renowned scholar.¹⁶

The third and final aggravating factor in the fight over the rabbinate was the struggle over the major assets and income sources of the Jewish community between the newly-elected kehilla board and the veteran charitable organization in Vilna, the Tzedaka Gedola. The latter, which functioned practically as an autonomous mini-kehilla, had under its control many communal buildings and supervised ritual slaughter in Vilna, an

important source of income. The kehilla demanded that the assets of the Tzedaka Gedola be handed over to its control, since without them it could not effectively run the affairs of the Jewish community. Opponents of the election of Rabbi Rubinstein, who had controlling influence in the Tzedaka Gedola, attempted to punish the kehilla "in the purse" by preventing any handing over of assets. This impasse apparently proved crucial in the eventual resolution of the rabbinate question in Vilna, in the summer of 1932. Only after the kehilla received into its hands the assets of the Tzedaka Gedola and control over shehita (ritual slaughter), from the income of which the rabbis received their salary, and only after a special amendment to the law was passed which allowed the election of two rabbis in Vilna, did the struggle end. Rabbi Grodziński was named rabbi of the kehilla alongside Rabbi Rubinstein.¹⁷ One historian of Vilna Jewry notes that in practice Rabbi Rubinstein acted as the representative of the community in its relations with the authorities, and his office dealt with all matters concerning registration of births, deaths, and marriages. Rabbi Grodziński served as the leading religious authority whose decisions were sought by rabbis in other cities as well. He also continued to devote himself to the maintenance of yeshivot in Vilna and other parts of Poland.¹⁸ Thus the situation in the community remained until the tragic days of World War II. Rabbi Grodziński would die in Vilna during the Soviet occupation of the city (1940), while Rabbi Rubinstein (died 1945) escaped from Europe in 1941 and spent his last years teaching at Yeshiva University in New York.¹⁹

Observations and Conclusions

Along with several similar incidents in the interwar period, the dispute over the rabbinate of Vilnius points to some changes at work regarding the criteria for communal leadership. The Vilnius case has its special characteristics: the long standing taboo against naming a communal rabbi, plus the power struggle between the kehilla and the Tzedaka Gedola, the latter functioning for decades as a kind of autonomous kehilla in miniature. Yet beyond any local peculiarities, some common trends are evident as well:

1. Who is a rabbi?: new views – In this case and others, we are witness to a quiet revolution in the claims made as to who is worthy to take up a rabbinic post. This revolution was not thoroughgoing, and the traditional criteria of Torah scholarship were not denied. Nevertheless, the criterion

cited first and foremost was service to the community, especially in times of crisis. A major argument in favor of Rubinstein's appointment was his activity on behalf of individuals and communities in distress.

In this debate over "who is a rabbi?", Agudat Yisrael found itself in an uncomfortable position. Its own propaganda stressed the supreme duty of communal leaders to function as *shtadlanim* (intercessors) who intervene with government officials on behalf of other Jews. Now Aguda representatives attacked rabbinical candidates who had distinguished themselves in this very activity. In an attempt to create a distinction between their political representatives and Rabbi Rubinstein, Aguda spokesmen utilized nuances of language. They downplayed Rubinstein's efforts and abilities as that of a mere "*khodatay*" (Russian for intercessor), a man comfortable walking the corridors of the starosta's headquarters, purposely withholding from him the more honorable title of *shtadlan*.²⁰ This semantic quibbling could not hide the fact that as important as rabbinic erudition might be as a qualification for rabbinic office, many Jews looked for other qualities as well.

The experiences undergone by East European Jewry during World War I played a crucial role in modifying the concepts of the criteria for leadership. Local *kehillot* and the traditional leadership of the Jewish plutocrats in Warsaw, Moscow and other communities proved unable to cope with the unprecedented situation of mass deportations, refugees in the hundreds of thousands, and cruel military occupation regimes. This emergency opened the way for younger communal activists to exercise initiative and attempt to deal with a crisis of such wide dimensions. What is important is not just the fact that new figures made their way to leadership posts, but that the rhetoric of Jewish leadership was modified as a result. The attitude toward candidates for the rabbinate reflects this change in attitude. Actions during World War I served as a sign of worthiness for office even in the more "normal" period between the two World Wars.

One other interesting aspect of the dispute discussed here is the blurring of the old distinction between "*rabbi*" and "*rav mi'taam*" (Crown Rabbi) to the point where the new ideal rabbinical candidate had many of the characteristics of the government rabbi of Tsarist times.

The struggle over the rabbinate was part of the larger struggle over the leadership of Polish Jewry and over the definition of Jewish identity. For that reason the tone of public debate became so intense, since all sides to the debate saw so much at stake. With all that, we would add that neither the hopes of the Zionists nor the fears of the orthodox came to fruition. For all its symbolic importance, the rabbinate did not have the

political clout that other public positions in Polish Jewry possessed in that period. Other arenas of inner-Jewish conflict, such as the *kehillot* and educational systems, would prove more amenable to wide-ranging changes.

2. Democratization of Jewish life: implications and limitations –

Though incomplete (limited to male suffrage and with some remaining economic qualifications for the franchise), the democratization of Jewish communal life in Poland had become fact, with far-ranging implications. Old alliances and understandings fell apart, and new groups and new leaders asserted their claims to represent the Jewish minority. In certain respects, the entire interwar period was an extended twilight period of the old order in the *kehillot*, as the newer regulations, first of the German occupation authorities, later of the new Polish regime, slowly took effect.

Our survey shows that even when the final result proved highly negative from its point of view, no group wished to abandon the *kehillot* to its opponents. Strangely enough, only the socialist Bund would withdraw from *kehilla* politics for several years as a matter of principle, objecting to the overly "clerical" nature of the Jewish community. The orthodox groups, led by *Agudat Yisrael*, might raise the possibility of communal secession Frankfurt style, but these ideas were quickly set aside. All the public protests, all the ringing editorial comments in the press, all the interventions with Polish officials did not succeed in reversing the adverse decision of the *kehillot*. For their part, government officials could force the hand of the *kehilla* boards by demanding the holding of rabbinical elections in the wake of communal elections (as they did in Vilnius). *Agudat Yisrael* might claim time after time that it represented the silent majority of Polish Jewry, but the actual situation in any number of *kehillot* belied this claim. It could only partially undo the insult to the standing of the leading Lithuanian rabbi in the incident in Vilna. With all its efforts, *Agudat Yisrael* could not prevent the change, even if slight, in the public image of the communal rabbi and the requisite qualities for such a post. The growing emphasis in *Aguda's* ideological writings on the doctrine of "Daat Torah" (Torah view)²¹ which posited the infallible leadership of a select number of *gedolei Torah* (Torah sages), whose qualifications bordered on Divine inspiration, may reflect a reaction against the very earthly list of attributes for the rabbi envisioned in the approach of its Zionist and socialist opponents.

We would not want to leave the impression that the rabbinate in Poland underwent any major upheaval wherein the "rabbi-doctor" became the norm in place of the traditional *talmid hakham*. The conservative nature of the rabbinical office and of orthodoxy in Poland changed very little.

Nevertheless, incidents such as that in Vilnius reflect political shifts in Polish Jewry and the willingness of Jewish elected officials to exercise their prerogative to name new type rabbis to communal posts. The public debate in the pages of the Jewish press demonstrates that older views still had their proponents, but newer views also were heard.

That same process of politicization, however, coupled with more traditional fights between rival Hasidic dynasties, between Hasidim and Mitnagdim, or between local factions, further weakened the rabbinate in interwar Poland. Ongoing disputes, in which local factions could not agree on a candidate for rabbi, could leave the communal rabbi post vacant for long periods.²² This situation had wider implications, since according to existing law the rabbi sat as an *ex officio* member of the kehilla executive, and his absence from kehilla meetings added to the paralysis in kehilla life in many communities. As the interwar period progressed and as rabbinic posts became vacant through death or retirement of the incumbent, the number of kehillot without communal rabbis would increase. This process reached its climax in the mid-30s, after the death of the rabbi of Kraków in 1934. From that time until the outbreak of World War II, practically all the major kehillot in Poland were without chief rabbis.²³ In other words, the struggle here described was part of a much wider crisis afflicting the rabbinate in interwar Poland and affecting Jewish autonomy in general.

By looking at the rabbinate, we can gain an important perspective on the ways that Jews attempted to refashion the nature of this most politicized of Jewish communities. The modern rabbi and his political backers may not have "inherited" the rabbinate in interwar Poland, but the list of potential "heirs" had been changed in a significant way.

¹ Israel Klausner, *Vilna, Yerushalayim de'Lita: Dorot Aharonim, 1881–1939* (2 vols.; Israel: Bet Lohamei ha'Getaot and Ha'Kibbutz Ha'Meuhad, 1983), vol. 1, pp. 224–225.

² Israel Cohen, *Vilna* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1943), pp. 395–396; I. Klausner, *Vilna, Yerushalayim de'Lita*, vol. 1, p. 226. Note that in his account of the election results, Klausner left out the council members elected on the merchants' list.

³ Israel Cohen, *Vilna*, p. 501.

⁴ On Rubinstein's activities on behalf of the community, see Israel Cohen, *Vilna*, pp. 365, 378–379, 383–386; Josef Elihai, *Tenuat ha'Mizrahi be'Polin ha'Kongresait 1916–1927* (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 1993), p. 131; Yitzhak Raphael (ed.),

Entziklopedia shel ha'Tziyyonut ha'Datit (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1983), vol. 5, cols. 585–588.

⁵ Dos Vort (Vilna), #216, November 16, 1928, p. 1.

⁶ An allusion to Avot 6:2: "Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: every day a heavenly voice goes forth from Horeb, proclaiming 'woe to mankind for humiliation of the Torah'..."

⁷ Aryeh Leib Hacohen (ed.), Mikhtevei Harav Hafetz Hayyim zatza"l: korot hayyav, derakahav, nimukav ve'sihotav (3rd edit.; Israel, 1970), vol. 2, pp. 43–44. Letter dated Kislev 5689.

⁸ Dos Vort, #215, November 9, 1928, p. 1.

⁹ Vilner Tog, #63, March 14, 1929, p. 3.

¹⁰ Vilner Tog, #72, March 25, 1929, pp. 1, 3.

¹¹ Ibid., #154, July 4, 1929, p. 3.

¹² Ibid., #174, July 28, 1929, p. 3.

¹³ Vilner Tog, #255, November 4, 1929, p. 3.

¹⁴ Israel Klausner, Vilna, Yerushalayim de'Lita, vol. 1, p. 227.

¹⁵ Shlomo Cohen (ed.), Pe'er Ha'Dor: Perakim, mi'masekhet hayyav ve'yetzirato shel Ge'on Dorenu Maran Rabbi Avraham-Yeshayah Karelitz zatza"l Ball 'Hazon Ish' (Bnei Brak: Netzah, 1966), vol. 1, p. 304.

¹⁶ Aharon Sorasky, Rabban shel Yisrael (Bnei Brak: Netzah, 1971), p. 109. For his recounting of the rabbinic fight in Vilna, see the entire chapter devoted to the subject, pp. 104–116.

¹⁷ Israel Klausner, Vilna, Yerushalayim de'Lita, vol. 1, pp. 226–227.

¹⁸ Israel Cohen, Vilna, pp. 399–400.

¹⁹ Encyclopedia Judaica, vol. 14, col. 376.

²⁰ Dos Vort, #242, May 24, 1929, p. 3.

²¹ On this concept, see Gershon Bacon, "Daat Torah ve'Hevlei Mashiah: li'she'elat ha'idiologia shel Agudat Yisrael be'Polin," Tarbiz 52 (1983): 497–508.

²² See e.g. Der Yid, #35, December 10, 1926, p. 3, for the long vacancy in the rabbinic in Plock; #88, February 10, 1927, p. 3, for delays in electing a rabbi in Zamosc.

²³ Joseph Marcus, Social and Political History of the Jews in Poland 1919–1939 (Berlin-New York-Amsterdam: Mouton, 1983), p. 333.

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