

European Rabbis Throughout the Generations * *Yehudah Klausner*

Introduction

In our genealogical searches, all of us, including those who consider themselves secular, soon discover that in most cases our ancestors are Rabbinic families. This study will focus on these families and in particular the Ashkenazic Rabbinic families in Europe.

While a portion of Ashkenazic Jewry traces its origins to those Jews who came from Spain and Portugal following the Expulsion in 1492, with some arriving both before and after the Expulsion, a number of Jews came in the 11th and 12th centuries from the Near East in the footsteps of the Radanites, merchants who brought goods from China to Europe, and some were Khazars who appeared after their defeat by the Russian army. These Jews settled in Western, Northern and Eastern Europe and established communities. Most families who trace their origin to Europe are descended from these Jews and from the rabbis who served them.

The Ashkenazic rabbinate that evolved over time in these communities had its origins in the rabbinic tradition dating from some 300 years BCE. The historic background of the rabbinic establishment and a description of the Jewish home and way of life will be portrayed before discussing the genealogical aspect of the topic.

Historic Background – The Title Rabbi

Over the years, from the time of the revelation at Sinai shortly after our departure from Egypt, our sages, teachers and religious leaders guided the spiritual and physical development of our people. The Mishnah states: “Moses received the Torah at Sinai, he transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly - *Knesset HaGdola*” (Ethics of the Fathers/Pirkei Avot 1:1). The title Rabbi, whose meaning is teacher, was first given to R. Gamliel the Elder (d. 46 BCE). Neither his father Simon, nor his grandfather Hillel the Elder, were known by this title. R. Judah the Prince (d. 209 CE) was known simply as ‘Rabbi.’ In Babylonia, the term ‘Mar’ was added to the title and in the time of the Geonim the title was “Mar Rabbi.” Among Sephardic Jews the title, ‘Haham’ came into use instead of ‘Rabbi,’ and in the areas ruled by the Ottoman Empire, the Rabbi of the community was called Haham Bashi.

In the time of the Talmud, the title Rabbi implied community leadership. “R. Yohanan states: ‘Who is wise? One who answers any question of Jewish law asked of him,’” (BT Shabbat 114a). The Talmud frequently mentions the word ‘Rabbanan’ as being equivalent to scholars.

Many of the Talmudic sages were farmers, some were craftsmen and artisans while some were merchants. One third of the day, they worked at their occupations and two thirds of the day they devoted to study. The farmers worked throughout the summer and spent the winter in study.

Throughout the ages, rabbinic ordination required years of study at Yeshivot and guidance from ordained rabbis. At the conclusion of the required studies, the candidate was examined and granted rabbinic ordination – *S’mikha*. This ordination permitted one to arbitrate disputes between people and resolve matters of Jewish law and religious practices. There were instances, as in many other areas of life, where economic, political or social pressures, and even family connections, paved the way to rabbinic ordination.

Although the rabbinic status is not formally passed down by inheritance, rabbis preferred that their sons receive proper education and be ordained as rabbis. The atmosphere in which rabbinic sons were raised made it easier for them and gave them certain advantages. In spite of the advantages enjoyed by rabbis’ sons, and the pressures applied to them at times, they did not always choose to follow in their father’s footsteps. Some preferred other trades while others even abandoned the way of life in which they were raised.

Scholars and rabbis enjoyed honor and esteem and their students would rise in their presence. For the most part, they were exempt from the taxes imposed by the government on their communities.

The rabbis headed yeshivot, served as judges and preached to their communities at least twice a year, Shabbat Hagadol – the Sabbath before Pesah, and Shabbat Shuvah – the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The rabbi was also expected to appear in clean and neat clothing. Maimonides (Rambam) in the 12th century, opposed rabbis receiving payment for performing rabbinic functions, and so many engaged in other work or commerce, or were supported by their wives who ran stores, or received an allowance granted to them by the community. This was not adequate to live on, so they had to find other sources of income. Money changing and loans at interest to gentiles were among the occupations of the rabbis and their families. Some rabbis even amassed wealth and possessions.

In a lecture delivered by the late Dr. Paul Jacobi in celebration of his 85th birthday, he noted that the Jews of Europe were witnesses to a “Holocaust”, in his words, that took place over time between the 13th and 17th centuries, when pogroms, massacres, murder and expulsions were the fate of most of the Jewish communities in Western and Central Europe. Entire communities were uprooted as expulsion followed expulsion whether in the Rhine valley, Spain, Portugal, Sicily, Lithuania, Provence and other places. Those who survived the evictions settled, if possible, in new localities close to their original homes, or moved in the direction of Eastern Europe or the Mediterranean Basin. As a result, laws and customs were forgotten or changed, and Jews of the time were not as scrupulous in the observance of the commandments. This trend also changed the function of the rabbis who were needed to support these newly founded communities, to strengthen their faith, and guide them in their careful adherence to commandments and customs. This period, between the 13th and 15th centuries, was when books on customs and laws were written to guide the people. (See list # 1 in the Hebrew Section.) The words of R. Isaac Tirna (b. 1380), in the introduction to his book *Sefer HaMinhagim*, are instructive: “Since, as a result of our great sins, the numbers of those engaged in study and the number of scholars has decreased; and because of the drastic reduction of knowledgeable God fearing men and men of good deeds in Austria, to the point that I have seen communities where one cannot even find two or three people who are familiar with the religious practices of their own communities, let alone with the practices of other locations, I take it upon myself . . .” These guides led directly to the great undertakings of the Rema (R. Moses Isserles), *Darkhei Moshe* and *HaMapah* on the Shulhan Arukh, that set the basis for the rules, laws and customs of Ashkenazic Jewry.

The Jewish Home

The information we have on the Jewish home at this time and the centuries following comes from rabbinic literature and in particular from the Responsa. There we find individuals named, including details about their lives. The religious requirements of the Jew determined in detail the order of his day, how he was to prepare his food, conduct his table, work, study, the order of the week from Sabbath to Sabbath, and the order of the days of the month and year as well as holidays. The difficulties of life as well as lurking dangers caused the Jews to withdraw into their homes. “The Jewish Home” along with the raising and educating of their children became the ultimate goal of the family. The number of children in the Jewish family was high, 10-12 children or more per family, but the death rate of infants was also high. Duties in the family were clearly defined and divided between husband and wife. The husband, besides being the principal breadwinner, was also responsible for the children’s, especially the boys’ education. Caring for the children rested on the wife’s shoulders, including the preparation of meals, maintaining Kashrut and assuring proper manners at the table. If the husband immersed himself totally in the study of the Torah, the task of earning an income also became the wife’s responsibility, as described above. It is important to point out the great value given to books, as they were considered the glory of the Jewish home. Basic volumes were not absent even from homes of little means.

Jews were engaged in every line of work permitted them, yet they found time for educating their children including the daily prayers, proper blessings for various occasions, studying the weekly Torah portion, memorizing Psalms or other prayers, and the weekly examination – *Farhehr* – on

their accomplishments. Most children did not receive a general basic education, but all knew their prayers, how to fulfill the commandments, and the weekly Torah portion along with the commentators. They also received basic instruction in the study of the Talmud so that they were able to continue in the Talmud Torah or Yeshiva. No one was uneducated or illiterate. The ambitious and the gifted, that had an inner drive or were pushed by their parents, continued their studies in the famous Yeshivot of the major cities. Many brilliant children or geniuses succeeded in their learning even though competition was fierce, and they received rabbinic ordination on the completion of their studies. It was also not uncommon for the head of the Yeshivah to pick out a student as a prospective husband for his daughter, also providing him and his family with financial assistance. The exalted position of scholar was one that many aspired to because of the prestige, the respect and the honor accorded them by the public.

As a consequence of poor living and sanitary conditions, infant mortality was very high. Many children never reached their first birthday and many women died in childbirth. Men with many children, who became widowers, married a second or even third time. An example is R. Akiva son of Isaac Katz (d. 1496) from Offen (Buda) and Prague who fathered twelve sons and thirteen daughters from four wives.

Rabbinic Families

The Torah and subsequently the Talmud (including the Mishnah, Gemara and Tosefta), and the Responsa were all transmitted by the rabbis: The the Rishonim, that is the early rabbis, those who flourished before the Expulsion from Spain in 1492, and the Aharonim, that is the latter rabbis, those who functioned from 1492 to the present. They all fostered genealogy in that they were careful to record their names and their lineage. The rabbis valued the importance of family pedigree, as it is written, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God Am holy," Leviticus 19:2, and they prepared family trees for themselves. Today, we have a vast rabbinic literature that contains a great deal of genealogical information.

As was mentioned, today most of the Jews of European origin, religious and secular alike, are descended from rabbinic families active between the 12th and 18th centuries. Because of the burdens of life and the demands made on living according to Jewish law the tendency in the past was to move from a religious to a secular lifestyle, and from there, with all of the pain it involved, even beyond the boundaries of the Jewish people. The opening of the New World to immigration, the development of the emancipation movements in the 18th and 19th centuries along with the various declarations on human rights also led to the crumbling of various Jewish structures. This process accelerated increasing assimilation. From this time forward the careful listing of rabbinic genealogies also declined. There is no scientific proof for the theory that most if not all of us are descended from rabbis or rabbinic families. The only proof would be through the rediscovery of the names of our ancestors dating back a few centuries.

Dr. Jacobi often spoke of between 60 and 80 old rabbinic families, who are the ancestors of all of the Ashkenazic Jewish families of today. In this article, an attempt has been made to create a list of these 80 families (see List # 2 in the Hebrew Section). This list will naturally reflect personal inclinations, but I believe that it is not far from being accurate or from the list that Dr. Jacobi would formulate.

Among these families, there are 'weak' and there are 'strong' families. Strong families I call those families who had numerous children, married into many other families, produced many scholars and rabbis, were rooted in the community, and preserved their names. In other words, they left their mark and thereby enhanced genealogical study. A short list of these 'strong' families would include Katzenellenbogen, Margolis/Margaliot, Horowitz-Segal, Rappaport and others. The genealogical ancestry of these families dates between the 10th and 15th centuries, and even before.

An example of a 'weak' family is Klausner, whose name dates from the 13th century. It produced noted scholars and rabbis, but they did not carry on their name and over the years some changed it

to Bushke, Zeinvirt, Oz and others. They were independently minded. Some of their rabbis corresponded with the false messiahs that developed in Judaism while others joined the Hasidic movement. Still others became scientists and authors. I cannot recall any genealogical literature dating from the 13th to 16th centuries that does not mention members of this family either with the name Klausner or the other family names. Additional 'weak' families include Buchner, Getz and others.

As already mentioned, Rabbis' sons were expected to follow in their father's footsteps, continue their studies in Yeshivot and opt for the rabbinate. With all the honor and respect that the rabbinate enjoyed, and on occasion, the economic security that it brought, the sons of rabbis did not always demonstrate the qualifications required or the desire to enter the rabbinate. In the best of circumstances, they chose to enter a profession or go into business, in the worst of circumstances, they distanced themselves to a greater or lesser extent from their father's lifestyle. Occasionally, we find conflicting accounts in rabbinic sources where in one of them some of the sons are not mentioned. The reason was not a lack of correct information in the writer's hands, but the desire not to reveal facts about the children that were not pleasant or desirable to the author.

Rabbinic Genealogical Literature

Rabbinic literature attests to the importance of this genre. It has many facets and expressions such as commentaries on the Torah and Talmud, discussions on Jewish Law and Responsa, Kabbalah, Legends, Musar (Ethical Movement) and more. Rabbinic literature includes genealogical information of all kinds:

1. Some rabbis included in the introduction of their works a detailed genealogical description of their families, including their children, those whom they married, and important dates in the life of the family. Some of this information was included in their commentaries and Responsa, as was mentioned previously.
2. Rabbis, their descendants, historians or researchers wrote detailed genealogical material on rabbis and their families.
3. Family trees of certain rabbinic families were prepared by family members or by others at the request of the family.

Many examples of this type of rabbinic literature can be found over the past 400 years up to our own day. Most of it is in Hebrew and only in the past decades has it appeared in other languages. For a selection of this genre of literature, see List # 3 (in the Hebrew version).

It was very common for rabbis to be known by the titles of their books: the Noda B'Yehudah is R. Ezekiel Landau (1713-1793); the M'galeh Amukot is R. Nathan Neta Shapira (1585-1633), etc. Some titles give us hints of the author's names, for example, P'nei Yehoshua was written by Joshua son of Joseph (1593-1648), Aderet Eliyahu was written by R. Eliyahu Hasid, the Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797), etc.

Closing remarks

A historical survey has been presented here of the development of the Jewish communities in Europe, the role of the rabbis in these communities and the connecting thread that leads from the sages of the Talmud to the generations of the rabbis of Europe, who were faithful to the study of the Torah and the preservation of its laws by their legal decisions whenever a question arose.

Covered were the changing circumstances, both for better and for worse, as well as the problems confronting Judaism whose origins were in threats that originated among the people with whom the Jews lived as well as internal challenges and divisions. The rabbinic establishment had to cope with all these dangers and the rabbis had to rise to the challenges.

As rabbinic families married among themselves, even though they did marry other Jews as well, and as rabbinic literature transmitted family pedigrees, most of us can find our ancestral origins among these rabbinic families.