

Robinson, Ira. *Rabbis and Their Community: Studies in the Eastern European Orthodox Rabbinate in Montreal, 1896-1930*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007. xi + 166 pp.

Ira Robinson accepts the challenge to remember what he terms “the forgotten rabbis.” In his specific case it is the Yiddish-speaking eastern-European, immigrant, Orthodox rabbis of Montreal at the turn of the twentieth century. In his first chapter, “The Yiddish-speaking Orthodox Rabbinate in North America and its Importance,” which in reality is the introduction to his book, he discusses the failure of the study of North American Jewish history to acknowledge the lives and contributions of the Orthodox immigrant rabbi to the development and shaping of Jewish life in the new world. Together with impressive historical research, the chapter offers an important theoretical discussion of the problems related to the study of Jewish American history. He correctly points out to his reader that, “when historians came to chronicle the history of this community [Montreal], or any other American Jewish community for that matter, the men of the Eastern European rabbinate and the synagogues in which they preached and prayed were often marginalized, if not entirely ignored.” Robinson then presents the historical evidence necessary to substantiate his theories concluding, “It is reasonably clear that a number of historians of American Judaism have, in the past, succumbed to a “whiggish” interpretation of American Jewish history in which Orthodoxy was kindly and conveniently consigned to the dustbin.”

The rabbis about whom Robinson writes came to the US and Canada along with the mass immigration of Russian and Polish Jews who fled their homeland because of the new and greater dangers confronting Jews, including poverty. America was perceived as the “land of gold” (*di goldene medina*), where the streets were paved with gold and economic opportunities were limitless. On the other hand, for the Orthodox Jew, it was considered a religiously polluted land (*di treyfe medina*), where the chances of remaining observant were

nil. Robinson describes this as the absence of the possibility in America to live in “Jewish time.” In eastern Europe, regardless of an individual’s personal level of observance, the Sabbath and the Jewish holidays were publicly observed. In America however, it was, for all intents and purposes, impossible to observe the Sabbath and the holidays and to survive economically. It was the Orthodox rabbis’ duty and challenge to create a viable and trustworthy Orthodox milieu.

The author details the struggles and internal controversies, the trials and tribulations that this entailed. Among the various institutional requirements and services essential to the existence of a viable Orthodox community is the preparation and sale of kosher meat. This required both professional slaughterers and honest butchers. At the turn of the twentieth century, both seemed difficult to find. The struggle between these groups to gain control of the market often led to what Robinson terms, “Kosher meat wars,” to which he devotes a considerable amount of space.

Other topics discussed in the volume are: the development of adequate Jewish educational institutions; Jewish service organizations; and the life, struggles, and contributions of the rabbis concerned with these services. In the last category, are such individuals as Rabbi Hirsh Cohen, a fixture in the Jewish community of Montreal from 1901 through the late 1940’s; Rabbi Simon Glazer, Cohen’s main rival for the post of chief rabbi of Montreal; and revolutionary thinker Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg. Robinson also discusses the cases of Getsel Laxer and Hayim Crestohl, who were rabbis and slaughterers, and chronicles the development of the Jewish Community Council.

Montreal was one of the larger centers of Jewish immigration, along with New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and other large American cities, and it serves as an excellent example of Orthodox Jewish life in the period discussed. Robinson’s thoroughly researched and well-written monograph allows the reader to visualize what life was like in the Jewish world of North America at the beginning of the last century. *Rabbis and Their*

Community makes a serious scholarly contribution to the history of American- and Canadian-Jewish life and leaves the reader eager for more information and research into the underservedly neglected world of North-American Orthodoxy.

Simcha Fishbane

Touro College

Schwartz, Shuly Rubin. *The Rabbi's Wife: The Rebbetzin in American Jewish Life*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2006. xiii, 312 pp.

In the opening pages of her book on the American Jewish rebbetzin, Shuly Rubin Schwartz notes that “the contributions of rabbis’ wives to the American rabbinate [have] largely been ignored.” (p.1) With these words, she defines the void in American Jewish history that she plans to fill. She presents “discernible patterns” and highlights individual rebbetzins whose activities “illustrate the impact of their evolving role.” (p.23) In highlighting the role of the rebbetzin, Schwartz provides an excellent view of the life of (North) American Jewish women, in general.

The introduction offers an overview of the “wife of” role in general terms within American society, a brief historical perspective of the rebbetzin in both history and fiction, and a glimpse into the role of Protestant ministers’ wives. Rubin Schwartz’s discussion of sources is especially fascinating. While she rightly notes that “rebbetzins have rarely left diaries or memoirs,” (p.2) she was able to access speeches, newspaper clippings, and letters; she could often verify oral evidence and recollections by speaking with more than one interviewee and by using extant records. (p.7) The book celebrates the ways these women forged creative and productive lives in response to their milieux. Describing the activities of rabbis’ wives through the stories of particular women is one of the strengths of Rubin Schwartz’s approach.

The American rebbetzins Rubin Schwartz has chosen as examples were active women who did not shy away from publicity.