ANAFIM ענפים

Proceedings of the
Australasian Jewish Studies Forum
Held at Mandelbaum House
University of Sydney
8–9 February 2004

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Mandelbaum Studies in Judaica No. 12
MANDELBAUM PUBLISHING
University of Sydney

Saul Berlin (1740–1794), Heretical Rabbi

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The Anglo-Jewish *minhag* used to be that, on festivals when the *Yizkor* memorial service was recited, a prayer was said for a list of departed chief rabbis. The list had its problems. Firstly, the earliest names were of rabbis whose writ was limited to the Great Synagogue in Duke's Place, London, but who were not yet acknowledged as chief rabbis of the whole *Ashkenazi* community of either London or England, much less of the whole British Empire. Though the Great Synagogue was the first *Ashkenazi* synagogue, other synagogues — notably the Hambro' (founded about 1702) and the New (1760) Synagogues — at times claimed primacy for their own rabbis. Hence, it is not entirely correct to read back into the record an implication that the early rabbis of the Great Synagogue were necessarily the historical progenitors of the chief rabbinate.

Further, the list, preserved by the Great Synagogue and subsequently printed in the Adler/Davis *Service of the Synagogue* (the '*Routledge Machzor*'), with 'some eliminations' made 'on historical grounds' by Dr Cecil Roth, has curious omissions and additions. The original list and Roth's amended version both omit the first rabbi of the congregation, Judah Loeb ben Ephraim Anschel HaCohen. Both enumerate some rabbis purely out of courtesy, such as Aryeh Leib (the father of Hirschel Levin), who never held office at the Great Synagogue. Of the courtesy list, the most colourful name was Saul Berlin, a scandalous character who was a famous heretic and literary forger. One cannot rationally defend the inclusion of his name in the august company of the rabbis of the Great Synagogue, though there is a view that at the end of his life he recanted and the office was within his grasp, but he died first. Yet, in his own way, even Berlin the heretic and forger may have influenced the nature and history of the chief rabbinate, and the story deserves to be told.

First, some background. There was an *Ashkenazi* presence in London from about 1659. In 1690, when the Great Synagogue was founded, there were no more than four hundred or so *Ashkenazim* in London. In contrast to the aristocratic and often worldly *Sephardim*, the *Ashkenazim* had few men of affairs, and more artisans and small traders. Many of the *Sephardi Hahamim* ('sages': the customary title for *Sephardi* chief rabbis) such as the philosopher David Nieto, *Haham* from 1701–1728, generally had a degree of general culture and urbanity, whilst the *Ashkenazim* tended to look for Talmudists, though as the eighteenth century progressed they had several rabbis with broader horizons.

Amongst the latter must be numbered Zvi Hirsch (or Hirschel) Levin (or Lewin), also known as Hart Lyon or Hirsch Loebel, who held office at the Great Synagogue for seven or eight years from 1756. Born in Galicia in 1721, he was the son of Rabbi Aryeh Leib Loewenstamm, rabbi of Glogau and previously of Lemberg. Rabbi Aryeh Leib figures in major eighteenth-century controversies as a stern opponent of the messianic claimant Shabbatai Zvi and a supporter of his own brother-in-law, the anti-Shabbatean Jacob Emden, against Jonathan Eybeschutz (an alleged follower of Shabbateanism). Aryeh Leib's son Hirschel gained an early mastery of Talmud but also, unusually, learned Hebrew grammar, and at 16 was already writing on the subject.

He was one of a handful of rabbis of the time to study history and even philosophy, physics and geometry. He had continued his studies after marrying Golda, daughter of the lay leader of the Glogau community. He was offered a post in Dubno but preferred London, where his ministry coincided with the Seven Years' War.

He had distinguished ancestry. A handwritten document in the Adler papers at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America says the family

> can boast of a long genealogy of learned Rebbis [sic] and trace the generations up to Rabbi Meyer of Padua, a renowned Rabbi who, in the preface of one of his

> celebrated printed works, speaks of Rabbi Haai Geon [sic] as his progenitor. This Rab. Haai [sic] was one of the last of the primates of the dispersed Israelites who died in 1038; & all the primates & princes of the captivity were deemed the genuine produce of King David's stock.

There may also be a connection with Rabbi Solomon Luria and Don Isaac Abravanel. These claims may be valid; rabbinic families are generally careful to preserve their genealogical traditions.

Levin was at first a friend of Mendelssohn. In 1778, he wrote an approbation for Moses Mendelssohn's German translation of the Bible, though others criticized him for apparently siding with 'modernizers'. He asked Mendelssohn for a German exposition of Jewish civil and matrimonial law. Later he regretted his association with Mendelssohn and attacked the educational values of the latter's friend Naphtali Herz Wessely. Wessely's work *Divrei Shalom V'Emet*, 1782, had a sensational impact as the touchstone of the practical *Haskalah*. It mocked the traditional *cheder* and advocated better-organized schools that emphasized *Torat HaAdam*, human knowledge. Levin sought to prevent Wessely's writings being published and even wanted to have him banned from Berlin.

His London sermons clearly position him as a scholar aware of the events of the time. Preserved in manuscript at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, they include addresses at intercession services commanded by the king; he urges his listeners to appreciate the piety of the king and the liberty that Jews enjoy in England. Speaking about the morality of war, he turns to the microcosm and says human beings must wage war on their own sins. He enumerates sins that he sees in his own community and warns that disregard of the Sabbath, dietary laws, modest dress and of personal morality will result in unpleasant consequences. He is shocked to find Jewish women wearing décolleté dresses, Jews eating in non-Jewish homes, and Jewish families even having Christmas puddings. Indeed, he thinks a group of Jews who perished by drowning at Portsmouth in 1758 may have brought their fate on themselves.

His sermons use Maimonidean philosophical arguments, but he insists that philosophy cannot replace religious faith or observance. This marks him out as a rabbi wise in the ways of the world. But London did not appreciate his talents; he says that in London he had only one pupil, his own son Saul. He returned to the Continent, first to Halberstadt, then Mannheim and, from 1772 to 1800, to Berlin. However, he later said, 'In London I had money but no Jews, in Mannheim Jews but no money, in Berlin no money and no Jews.'

Levin had three sons and three daughters from his first wife Golda, who died in Berlin in 1794. The three daughters all married rabbis; at least one daughter was herself learned in Talmud. Of Levin's sons, the oldest, Saul Berlin, was widely read like his father, whilst the youngest, Solomon Hirschel, who later became Chief Rabbi in London, does not appear to have had a general education at all. True, Solomon Hirschel was probably no intellectual, but was this what the London Jewish press meant when it wrote in an obituary that he was no Mendelssohn? Arthur Barnett depicted his 'complete unconsciousness of what was going on beyond the comfortable seclusion of his rabbinic library'. The middle son, David Tevele, called Berliner, may have had some secular education; he was a merchant who spent hours every day in rabbinic study and was offered, but refused, various rabbinic posts.

If Hirschel Levin introduced Saul, born in Glogau in 1740, to general education, which led to his becoming a sophisticate, why did he apparently limit Solomon Hirschel, born in London 21 years later, to a traditional education bounded by straight and narrow Talmudism? Did the father feel responsible for what happened to Saul Berlin and want to protect his younger son from spiritual harm? It is possible, but not entirely likely.

However, before we look at Saul Berlin and his career, a brief note about the family's different surnames. Until the imperial edicts at the end of the eighteenth century, European Jewish families often resorted to patronymics and lacked fixed surnames. Hirschel Levin, son of Aryeh Leib, was Levin because he was Leiv's son.

In England he was Hart Lyon; Lyon is a translation of Leib or Loewe. His son Solomon was known as Hirschel because he was the son of Hirschel Levin. Saul Berlin was also known as Saul Hirschel; the name Berlin reflects the father's eventual position as rabbi of Berlin.

Saul Berlin was ordained as a rabbi at 20. By 1768, aged 28, he had a rabbinic post in Frankfurt-on-the-Oder in the Prussian province of Brandenburg. He married Sarah, the daughter of Rabbi Joseph Jonas Fraenkel of Breslau. A considerable Talmudist, Berlin frequented rabbinic circles, but also associated with *maskilim*, proponents of the movement for enlightenment and modernism in Judaism. When he became more and more convinced by the *Haskalah*, he found himself in a dilemma. He could not repudiate his rabbinic background or cause an open breach with his father and family, but he needed to articulate the thinking of his new-found philosophy. This he now proceeded to do by embarking upon a series of anti-Talmudical writings, at times anonymously but generally under a pseudonym.

One was a pamphlet in defence of Wessely's *Divrei Shalom V'Emet* against the strictures of the orthodox rabbis, among them Berlin's own father. This pamphlet, issued anonymously in 1794, was called *K'tav Yosher*. It takes the form of a dialogue between an old-fashioned orthodox rabbi and a modern youth. He produced another polemic, a book of objections to the *Birkat Yosef* of Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (1772), leading Azulai to write a rejoinder.

In 1789, he wrote another small book, *Mitzpeh Yekuti'el*, accusing the respected Rabbi Raphael Cohen of Hamburg, Altona and Wandsbeck of inaccurate scholarship and erroneous decisions in his *halakhic* work, *Torat Yekuti'el*, published in Berlin in 1772. The name *Yekuti'el* was in honour of Cohen's father, Yekuti'el Susskind Cohen. Berlin's strictures were ascribed to one Rabbi Ovadiah ben Baruch, 'A Man of Poland'. Shocked by this attack, Hirschel Levin was about to sign a ban against the author when someone whispered to him that the real author was Saul, the rabbi's own son.

Levin did not proceed with the proposed ban. He probably thought Saul had become insane. But he subsequently stated that it was not personal reasons which prompted him to desist but the honour of the Torah and the wish to prevent strife in Israel. In what appears a somewhat half-hearted defence of his son, Levin did, however, acknowledge that the author of the *Mitzpeh Yekuti'el* studied Torah day and night and was sincere in his belief that Raphael Cohen had made some mistakes.

Having embarked upon a path of modernism, Saul kept going. He published in Berlin in 1793 a volume of 392 responsa entitled *Besamim Rosh*, attributing the material to great figures such as Rabbi Asher ben Yechi'el, the famous *Rosh*, who died in 1327. The name '*Besamim Rosh*' ('Chief Spices') derives from Exodus 30:23, though the word 'Rosh' alludes to Asher ben Yechi'el; '*Besamim*' has the numerical value of 392. The work appeared with notes and additions 'by Saul, son of Zvi Hirsch, Chief Rabbi of this City'. No longer hiding behind anonymity, Saul was now openly embarrassing his family because the book was widely denounced as a forgery and the author deemed to be an atheist.

Saul claimed that he was bringing to public attention a manuscript that he had acquired in Italy in 1784 and all he had added were his own notes. Hirschel Levin, trying to preserve his son's credibility, stated that he knew of the manuscript and a copy had been made by his son Solomon. The critics were not appeased and turned their wrath on Levin. They alleged that the responsa in the book could not be by the *Rosh* and other great rabbis, were a total forgery, and attributed views to the *Rosh* which he could not have held.

Examples are the following:

1. One must say a blessing over food even if it is non-kosher.
2. Commandments may be ignored if they upset one's mind.
3. The sages often distort the plain meaning of Biblical texts.
4. The Book of Esther need not be taken too seriously.
5. Jewish beliefs can change.

Eighteenth-century events are taken for granted in *Besamim Rosh* as if they had happened in the Middle Ages, and Mendelssohnian ideas are ascribed to the *Rosh*. Saul was using a well-known literary device to give his own modernism the appearance of credibility. One has to admire his scholarship and industry, but his honesty is clearly in question.

Now that his identity was openly revealed, it was not possible to remain in an orthodox pulpit. At some point in the 1780s, he lost his position in Frankfurt-on-the-Oder — or he resigned — and moved to Berlin. His orthodox friends abandoned him. He mixed with *maskilim* and wrote further essays. But by now his state of health was precarious and in Halle, *en route* to England, he made a will. He arrived in London in 1794. Whether he intended to remain there as a private scholar or had hopes of a rabbinical position is not certain; there is a view that the Great Synagogue thought of appointing him, in succession to David Tevele Schiff, as its rabbi. His scholarship and lineage might have fitted him for the post, but there remains the question of his views. It is possible that he was sufficiently penitent for the rabbinical world, including his own father, to endorse him without placing the London congregation under a stigma. We cannot be certain, though when his will was discovered it seemed to express an attitude of contrition.

But events overtook the question; within a few months of arriving in London he died and the London *Ashkenazim* gave him rabbinic honours at his burial. His tombstone calls him *harav hagadol hamefursam*, ('the great and renowned rabbi'), showing that the community was not vindictive despite all the scandals. It was not until later that it was found that in his will he had asked to be buried in his clothes, away from the graves of other people, in a forest somewhere — a mark of humility and contrition.

Regardless of his suitability or otherwise for the London rabbinic post, the congregation appears to have been short of money and apparently postponed any appointment for reasons of finance. It was not until eight years later that Saul's brother, Solomon, became rabbi of the Great Synagogue (outsiders often called him 'High Priest of the Jewish Nation') and held office for forty years.

It was during this last incumbency that the eminence of the Great Synagogue was firmly established and its rabbi recognized as chief rabbi of the *Ashkenazi* community.

But Solomon Hirschel was no modernist. It is not even certain how fluent he was in English; his English correspondence was the work of a secretary. By the time he was old, the community had changed. New thinking was about, but not as drastic as on the Continent. It was liturgical reform that was advocated. With his limited horizons, Solomon's answer was to insist on the old ways and to excommunicate the reformers.

It is tempting to argue that it was because Saul Berlin tasted the waters of modernism that Solomon Hirschel was denied a broad education. The argument would run like this: Hirschel Levin must have felt that he had given Saul too much leeway and would not let himself make a second mistake, so he limited Solomon to a traditional Talmudical education. Hence, though Solomon was a pleasant and pious religious leader, he was more old-fashioned than his brother and even more conservative than his father. There is some point to this argument, but it was not necessarily Levin who was responsible for what became of Saul Berlin, nor did any decision about Solomon Hirschel's education automatically dictate the nature of Hirschel's career and mould his London incumbency.

Had Levin remained in London, Solomon, born in 1761, might have become more English and come under broader cultural influences. At that time, though English Jews were still far away from political emancipation, some were socially integrated and a few of the more affluent had houses adorned with works of art. But when Solomon was still a very small child, though by now Saul, 21 years older, was fully adult, the family returned to the Continent. From now onwards, they probably lived within traditional bounds and Solomon was brought up in the world of the *bet midrash* and *yeshivah*. There the study of so-called secular subjects was deemed unnecessary. The Talmud provided a broad range of studies including mathematics, medicine and astronomy.

If anyone was interested, Maimonides and the great medieval thinkers provided philosophy. The emphasis was Talmudic and the rabbinic role model was the *talmid chacham*. Solomon Hirschel does not seem to have shown an interest in general culture and probably found himself sufficiently stimulated by rabbinic texts and *halakhic* reasoning. The new school of orthodox rabbis, recognizing the possibility of some bisociation, was still a thing of the future.

Solomon was 41 when he took up office in London. He did not purport to be anything other than he was: a good, solid, traditional, rabbinic figure. He played a role in some public and community issues, for example, in countering missionary campaigns that targeted Jewish children, but he could not be expected to understand and find a *modus vivendi* with movements which he felt were inimical to traditional Judaism.

But this does not mean that he dismissed out of hand the new knowledge of the time. In an obituary, the *Voice of Jacob* acknowledged that, 'in his after life', he had made 'efforts [...] to acquire other sciences, which his earlier training had not comprehended. Mathematics is said to have been the principal of these pursuits.' Whatever the effect of his upbringing and education, Hirschel thus eventually endeavoured to become a modern person. Whether, without the thought of his wayward brother Saul, he would ever have become more modern, remains a question. The likelihood is that he would still have been more or less what he was.

One final question. What do we know about Saul Berlin's immediate family? He and his wife, Sarah, had a son, Aryeh Yehudah Levin/Lewin or Loebusch, named after Saul's paternal grandfather, Hirschel Levin's father. Born in 1765, Aryeh Yehudah studied with both grandfathers and eventually succeeded his maternal grandfather as chief rabbi of Silesia. His community knew him as Levi Saul Shaulson or Fraenkel. He was a sound Talmudist but, like his father Saul, he had modernist tendencies. He was well-read in philosophy and other secular subjects but, like

Saul, he was influenced by the *Haskalah* and his views diverged from the norm. When Napoleon's *Sanhedrin* came into being, he began praising the emperor and urged the unification of all religions. His grandfather Hirschel Levin was ashamed and told him not to visit. Before long, Aryeh Yehudah left Judaism and by 1809 he was a Christian. Like Cain, he lived the life of a fugitive and a wanderer, before dying in poverty in 1815 in the Jewish hospital in Frankfurt-on-the-Main.

Note on Sources

1. Use has been made of material on the British Chief Rabbinate in the Elkan Adler Collection at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

2. On the Hirschel(l) family, see Hyman A. Simons, *Forty Years A Chief Rabbi: The Life and Times of Solomon Hirschell* (London: 1980); Raymond Apple, 'Solomon Hirschell, "High Priest of the Jews"', The Rabbi Falk Memorial Lecture (Sydney: The Great Synagogue, 2006).

3. No full account of Saul Berlin's life and career has yet been published. *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, III, pp. 83–4, has a lengthy but judgmental entry with a good bibliography. The entry in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, IV, columns 663–4, is less extensive. There is relevant material in Charles Duschinsky, *The Rabbinate of the Great Synagogue, London from 1756–1842* (Oxford: 1921), and Cecil Roth, *The Great Synagogue, London 1690–1940* (London: 1950).

4. Louis Jacobs, *Theology in the Responsa* (London: 1975), has an excursus, 'Saul Berlin and the *Besamim Rosh*'.