

MONDAY OCTOBER 11, 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION A 14:00-15:30

AN ORTHODOX REVOLUTION: THE CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE BETH JACOB SEMINARY FOR GIRLS

by
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SOROH SHENIRER & BETH JACOB MOVEMENT - CHRONOLOGY

Soroh Shenirer. (1883-1935)

1915 – Fled to Vienna along with 200,000 other refugees from Galicia

1917 – Returned to Cracow determined to spread Torah to girls via her newly acquired Hirschian ideology.

1918-22 a. Attempt by Shenirer to teach up to 80 girls in her own small apartment.

. At the same time she sought support for her revolutionary idea from the Orthodox leaders. She succeeded in obtaining the endorsement the two outstanding orthodox leaders Rabbi Abraham Mordechai Alter (1866-1948), the Admor of Gur, the largest Hassidic group in Poland, and Rabbi Israel Meir Ha Kohen [Kagan] (1838-1933) (better known in the Jewish world by the name of one of his works, Hafetz Hayyim), the foremost non-Hassidic saintly leader. Shenirer's own rebbe, Rabbi Issachar Dov Rokeach (1854-1927), The Admor of Belz, supported her personally, but refused to encourage the girls of his Hassidim to go to Beth Jacob.

1919 - Agudath Israel adopts Beth Jacob as part of its activities. Its two foremost rabbinic leaders were the above-mentioned Admor of Gur and the Hafetz Chaim. This proved to be the turning point in the history of Beth Jacob. In addition to the ideological support, World Agudah's president Jacob Roseheim of Frankfurt a.m. (1870-1969) provided direct aid to Beth Jacob by:

- i. 1923 - Shenirer creates a Seminary in her home, at "Catachina No. 1."
- ii. 1923 - At the First Agudah International Convention (Knessiah Gedolah) in Vienna, Agudah officially adopted the development of the Beth Jacob Movement as one of its primary goals.
- iii. 1923 - Arranged for Beth Jacob schools to be included in the budget of Keren Hatorah, the Agudah's institution for collecting money to create and support yeshivot in Poland. It was Dr. Deutschlander, who headed Keren Hatorah. Based in Vienna, Grunfeld frequently went on fund-raising trips with Deutschlander to collect money for the Beth Jacob Movement.

- iv. Request for money for down payment to buy the lot offered by Cracow. Money for the new Seminary building was supplied by the American Beth Jacob Committee, headed by Rabbi Leo Jung, Cyrus Adler, Sue Golding, Rebekah Kohut and Frieda Warburg.

1925 -- 1931 - Dr. Judith Grunfeld (nee Rosenbaum) - Helps to develop Shenirer's new Teachers' Seminary in Cracow, Rosenheim sent Dr. Judith Grunfeld (nee Rosenbaum) of Frankfurt a.m., a graduate of Elizabeth Teachers' College and the Frankfurt University, to help Shenirer and Deutschlander further its professional goals. Although there were three other teachers at the Seminary during the first years, Grunfeld was the primary teacher of the Seminary, after Shenirer and Deutschlander. She remained at the Seminary. Grunfeld for six years (1925-1931) and became the third pillar of the pioneers of the Beth Jacob Seminary.

1925 – Founding meeting of Bnos (Agudah) youth groups in Lodz by Gershon Eliezer Friedenson.. Those under sixteen were called Basya.

1927 – Groundbreaking of the Seminary Building at "Stanislawa 1 0."

1928 – Over 20,000 students. 16,000 in Poland alone, 4,000 outside Poland.

1929 – First All Day school – combining religious and secular subjects. Prior to that there were only afternoon schools for religious education to supplement the secular public schools.

1929 – Major Beth Jacob Conference in Warsaw. 300 Delegates. Program for the future .

1929 – Second Agudah Knessiah Gedolah in Vienna. Reinforcing Agudah's ties with Beth Jacob. Pleas for all Jewish communities to support a local Beth Jacob school.

1935 – Demise of Soroh Shenirer. New head is Rabbi Yehuda leib Orleon.

1936-1939 – Creation of several Commercial Schools, Shenirer's inspiration for the concept of the Beth Jacob in Vienna (1914-1917)

While attending services one Sabbath morning a small synagogue in Vienna near her dwelling, Sara Shenirer was enthused by the sermon of Rabbi Dr. Flesch of the Stumpergasse, who was speaking about the heroine of the Hanukkah story, Judith, and called for all Jewish daughters to follow in her footsteps and become leaders among their people. The idea to establish a movement for the education of Jewish daughters was then conceived in her mind, for she realized how very little they knew about the grand and glorious history of their people. Until now she had been groping in the dark; but listening to Rabbi Flesch, she became so inspired that she saw the way clear before her. She began to make plans for the fulfillment of her ambitions. She did not know exactly how to go

about propagandizing her ideas, nor did she think it would be easy to convince the Polish daughters to follow her footsteps and to listen to her teachings. How could she, in this modern twentieth century implant in the hearts of “modern” daughters the desire to follow old traditions? Yet, she knew that she wished to teach them old traditions only so that they would not bring disgrace to themselves, to their families, and to their heritage. So, Sara Shenirer wrote down with painful loyalty every lesson she heard from Dr. Flesch during her years in Vienna. She became his constant and most conscientious pupil, and she grew impatient to return to Cracow, to share her learning with her sister Jews.

The First Teachers’ Seminary

What was the Seminary like in those days? Dr. Deutschlander gives the following description:

The girls met in an old boarding house in an old and dilapidated street. The steps were in bad shape. Two rooms were rented out to the future Beth Jacob teachers. We opened the door and walked in. The first room we had to go through served as a kitchen in which they cooked for fifty people. It was small and narrow and was separated from the other room by a curtain. This second room served as a study room and sleeping quarters, in addition to being used as a dining room, wardrobe and washroom for all fifty of its occupants. Twenty girls shared one room, sleeping two in each bed. There was no room for additional beds and so the others slept on folding cots that were set up in the room used for studies during the daytime. In spite of this, all the students were happy and anxious to learn; joyous and carefree at all times. Many of the students came from well-to-do homes and were used to luxury, but they never expressed dissatisfaction. These girls, who were the pioneers of the Seminary, served the Torah with self-deprivation, devotion and boundless love.”

Shenirer’s Ideology Regarding Beth Jacob

THE BETH JACOB SCHOOLS

In the Beginning

“The Main goal of the Beth Jacob school,” wrote Sara Shenirer, “is to train the Jewish daughters so that they will serve the L-rd with all their might and with all their hearts; so that they will fulfill the commandments of the Torah with sincere enthusiasm and will know that they are the children of a people whose existence does not depend upon a territory of its own, as do other nations of the world whose existence is predicated upon a territory and similar racial background. The Beth Jacob ideology stresses the following: religion; the fight against assimilation; the attachment to the Yiddish language.”

In the words of Sara Shenirer, “the Jewish people has one holy ideal through which, and because of which, it became a nation – its Torah. Only because the Jewish sons and daughters abandoned it and did not adhere to its precepts have they been exiled from their

holyland, Israel. The Beth Jacob School has as its goal the training of the Jewish woman to fulfill the commandments of the Torah and to educate its daughters in the Torah spirit. Not by the construction of beautiful edifices or large libraries will the fire of knowledge be implanted. No! Only when they will study the holy Torah, disseminate and spread it, fan its flames, open the Jewish eyes and warm the Jewish hearts with it, will the law of the Torah remain the law of life. And how can this happen if not for through intensive religious schools for Jewish daughters? Therefore, we must organize only truly Orthodox schools for your daughters which will imbue them with the Jewish faith and will implant in their hearts a Jewish consciousness.”

Beth Jacob Seminary Curriculum (1930's)

The course of study at the Seminary was for a two year period and consisted of the following areas of emphasis:

Five Books of Moses: This included the study of the Five Books of Moses in the original and in its entirety with the commentary of Rashi and Rabbi Samuel Raphael Hirsch.

Prophets and Hagiographa This included historical selections from the prophets; Thirty chapters in Isaiah; selections from Jeremiah and the twelve minor prophets with special emphasis on those used as Haftorahs; fifty selected chapters from the Psalms with accompanying ethical commentaries; readings from the Megillos according to the holidays and also on a regular day-to-day basis.

Prayers: Selections from prayers for the weekday, holiday and Sabbath services were studied. Ethics of the Fathers were also studied in conjunction with the commentaries,

Jewish History: This course began with the study of the creation of the world and continued until modern times.

Hebrew Grammar: The course of study in grammar included rules of vocalization, a declension of nouns and conjugation of regular and irregular verbs. Also included were drill and analysis in oral and written composition and recitation of simple stories of the Bible and dictation,

Jewish Law: The course of study included laws pertaining to daily living as well as those of the Jewish year both. duties and obligations of the Jewish man and in particular duties and obligations of the Jewish woman. The general program dealt with the teaching of the commandments in the spirit of Jewish law. Some of the textbooks used were: Mesilat Yishorim by Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzato; Selected Works from Chorev; The Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch; The Jewish Problem and Traces of the Messiah by Dr. Isaac Breuer; Amudai Hagolah by Stern.

Psychology: Psychological foundation of spirituality and the important discoveries and laws of spiritual life.

Pedagogy: The course in Pedagogy included the history of Pedagogy, biographies and selections of outstanding pedagogues, pedagogic quotations culled from the Talmud, educational psychology and methodology, special methodology to be employed in the general studies program, and special methodology for Beth Jacob schools, school health and hygiene.

Text used: Pedagogic Works by Frostier, Kerschensteine, Spranger.

Polish: The studies in Polish literature, History, and Geography were taught according to the prescribed course of study as set up by the government.

German: Instruction in the correct oral and written use of the language. The goal of this course was to provide the teachers with the ability to read by themselves the important religious literature of Hirsch and others which were written in the German language, as well as selected classical works such as the poetry of Schiller, Goethe, Nathan the Wise by Lessing, Zweig, and Beer-Hoffman.

Gymnastics: The course included exercises and instruction in various games for children, outings, free-play. The exercises were held indoors in the winter and outdoors in the summer.

Handicrafts: A program in sewing, repairing, embroidery, knitting was offered adjusted to the individual needs of the students.

Requirements for Graduation: A written lesson plan for a model lesson; a pedagogic essay or composition; a final paper about a specified text of the Bible.

Beth Jacob and the Holocaust

LAST DAYS OF THE MOVEMENT

If trouble and sufferings can measure the strength and spiritual stand of man and of an organized community, then the Beth Jacob movement, during the years of destruction and desolation of World War II, surely proved how strong were its spiritual forces. It stood with honor, in the very midst of the fire that terrorized the world. In the very beginning, when the Nazis overtook Poland, the Beth Jacob movement did not cease to exist. It was dangerous for the teachers to appear in the streets, but this did not deter them. They conducted schools in secret; many times in their own homes, or in other private homes. Even the Seminary in Cracow, which was turned into a refugee camp, did not cease to operate.

Orleon was at his best in the time of crises. In September 1939, all lectures in the Beth Jacob Seminary in Cracow ceased. After being persuaded by the Bianer Rebbe, who collected funds to support his work, Orleon continued his educational work. Later he was subsidized by the Joint Distribution Committee. He returned to his lectures and resumed

his contact with his students in the German-occupied zone of Poland. There he worked together with the former Senator Ascher Schapiro, Mose Deutscher, Meyer Heitner, Lacia Szaerainska, Chava Landsberg and others. At the very beginning, through his efforts, the Beth Jacob became at this time a movement of mutual help and assistance for all the surviving Jews. Beth Jacob teachers and leaders extended both help and rescue to their fellow Jews, regardless of their religious affiliations, and shared their meager bread with the less fortunate.

In 1940, after being severely beaten by the Nazis, Orleon left Cracow for Warsaw, where he resumed his lectures before a large group of girls. In Warsaw Orleon was like a father to the Seminary graduates, and those students of the higher grades, and organized classes. Beth Jacob schools continued to operate in various forms, under the leadership of Agudah leaders. The Beth Jacob teachers used to correspond with Orleon. Joseph Friedenson states that it is characteristic of the Beth Jacob teacher that the correspondence did not deal with the daily problems of the time, but with the academic problems they faced. He quotes from memory one of the letters Orleon received from a Beth Jacob teacher after the Nazis overran the community in which she lived:

“We are all well, thank G-d. My family is intact, except for my brother who was taken to Lublin and needs much mercy. I am meeting with the children again, but they are not permitted to carry books. Can you advise me how to teach Hebrew and Yiddish without a textbook? Until now I have taught the children the blessings, prayers, and laws, by heart. Please answer me, and if this is not possible, forget this letter. I will try to give the children a foundation and when G-d will help, they will continue to learn and will fill in what they have missed.

At times, the students who were looking for answers to the reason for the destruction that was going on about them, would turn to Orleon, who was always able, in the past, to supply them with the answers, and to strengthen their faith. They would put the age-old riddle before him: “Yesh tzadik v’ra lo, rasha, v’tov lo”, but try as he would, Orleon could find no answers. This time, he, too, was stymied.

From Warsaw, Judah Leib Orleon sent lessons in writing to Cracow where Beth Jacob groups were learning with interest and zeal. In Cracow, the educators and students of the Seminary taught their students in secret, in small groups. The girls used to agree beforehand to say that they came for a birthday party, in case of an attack by the police on the house, for it was not permissible for large groups of Jews to congregate in one place in the Cracow Ghetto.

The last news of the Beth Jacob schools is given by Dr. Hillel Seidman, who describes how the leaders carried on their work under the threat of deportation and death. In the

beginning of 1940, the Joint Distribution Committee commenced its activities of help and relief for Polish Jewry. At the Judenrat, Alexander Sische Friedman represented the religious faction and demanded its due share of financial help. He established a network of kosher food kitchens for religious Jewry with the help of David Guzik, and was instrumental in obtaining sums to support the kitchens, as well as the needy rabbis, laymen, and scholars of the Yeshivos. In the Warsaw Ghetto, Friedman was primarily occupied with educational work. He organized a wide network of religious schools in the Underground, which encompassed the Yisodey HaTorah schools for boys and the Beth Jacob schools for girls, elementary religious schools and even three religious schools of higher education. Thousands of children and hundreds of teachers were part and parcel of these institutions, which were conducted under the guise of “soup kitchens”, health stations, and recreation centers. Eventually these schools were permitted to operate in the open, but as the situation grew worse, it was virtually impossible to carry on education work in any organized manner.

II BETH JACOB MOVEMENT – QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSIONS

Can anyone explain the ideologies of any of the following Jewish movements in Poland during the interbellum period?

Is there anyone who personally joined, or who had one or more of their family join any of the these movements?

What was the impact on the family?

What were some of the positive aspects?

What were some of the negative ones?

Did individual(s) continue in this ideological direction upon coming to Israel? If any changes, what were they and why?