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Table of Contents

Preface	i
Introduction	iii
Playtime with Radical Ideologies: A Brief History of the Socialist-Zionist Summer Camp Movement ELANA WENNER	1
Come Hell or High Water: Jewish Resistance in the Death Camps during the Holocaust ROBERT EISENBERG	21
“For Zion’s Sake I Will Not Keep Silent”: The Jewish Abolitionists RICHARD HENRY KREITNER	51
A Historiographical Analysis of Yakub Al Qirqisani’s Kitab Al Anwar ADAM EILATH	69
Interview with Dr. Eugene Orenstein PETER FUSCO	115
Author Profiles	127

Preface

On behalf of the Department of Jewish Studies, I am delighted to join the editors and contributors in celebrating the appearance of a new volume of *Dorot: The McGill Undergraduate Journal of Jewish Studies*. It takes hard work to produce a journal. The students have produced this volume, like previous volumes, independently, without the involvement of faculty. The yearly publication of *Dorot* is a testimony to the students' commitment to disseminate their research to the wider public and to begin to make their mark in the academic world of Jewish Studies.

The diversity of subjects addressed within this volume reflects the multifaceted nature of the study of Judaism at McGill. The high quality of these articles bears witness to the intelligence, imagination, and curiosity of their authors. My colleagues and I have the great privilege of interacting with gifted students such as these on a daily basis. It is one of the great pleasures of teaching Jewish Studies at McGill.

I have no doubt that the authors, whose work appears here, will continue to look back in pride at this volume. Congratulations and best wishes to all!

Eric Caplan

Chair, Department of Jewish Studies

Introduction

The great Jewish historian Simon Dubnow wrote, “The study of the Jewish past binds me to something eternal.”¹ While not all students of Jewish history derive such profound meaning from their coursework, they often feel some personal connection with the past that draws them to Jewish Studies. This is certainly true in my case, and it is for this reason that I am particularly proud to have been part of *Dorot’s* editing team this year. Although not our explicit aim upon reviewing the submissions, I believe we have put together a journal that really reflects the personal aspect of the discipline.

The first essay, Elana Wenner’s “Playtime with Radical Ideologies,” discusses the development of Jewish summer camps in North America. Drawing on interviews with alumni of Camp Miriam, a Socialist-Zionist camp in British Columbia, I believe the piece is of direct interest to McGill students, many of whom know people who attended or who are themselves alumni of such summer programs. In “Come Hell or High Water,” author Robert Eisenberg tackles the topic of resistance to Nazi forces in concentration camps – a subject notoriously difficult to approach objectively which some authors maintain cannot be approached in a non-

partisan fashion at all.² While Richard Kreitner's essay entitled "'For the Sake of Zion I Will Not Keep Silent': The Jewish Abolitionists" may seem to be the least personal of this year's journal selections, it is telling of the ways in which Judaism and Jewish history informed Jews' behaviour in the past and may continue to do so now. Finally, Adam Eilath, the author of "A Historiographical Analysis of Yakub Al Qirqisani's *Kitab Al Anwar*," examines how historians' personal preferences and tendencies have shaped the historiography of Karaism. He seeks not to reject a personal approach to history but rather to ensure that such a method does not distort the writing of history. All of the time and effort the authors spent refining and polishing their work is very much appreciated.

I am also happy to have been able to include an interview with Dr. Eugene Orenstein in *Dorot* this year. Dr. Orenstein, who is retiring this year after a very long career at McGill, has certainly affected the academic careers of many students of Jewish history. His presence in the Jewish Studies building will certainly be missed. Thanks to Dr. Orenstein for sharing his experiences with us, and to Peter Fusco for conducting the interview.

I would very much like to thank all the editors who worked so diligently to get this volume completed on a tight deadline: assistant editors Max Margulies and Alex Rosenblat and copy editor Mary Corbett. Their insights and attention to detail were indispensable. Thanks also to Rebeccah Mary Hartz for creating the cover art which is intended to reflect the diversity

of both Jewish history and, consequently, the subject matter of this year's volume. Finally I would like to express my appreciation for the support of Dr. Eric Caplan, Stefka Iorgova, and the entire Jewish Studies Department faculty for their support of *Dorot*. It is as a result of all of their efforts that I am able to present the twelfth volume of *Dorot: The McGill Undergraduate Journal of Jewish Studies*.

Enjoy,

End Notes

1 Dubnow as quoted in Michael A. Meyer, *Ideas of Jewish History*. (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1987) 248.

2 Henry L. Feingold, *Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995) 16.

Playtime with Radical Ideologies: A Brief History of the Socialist-Zionist Summer Camp Movement

Elana Wenner

Introduction

For over a century, many North American Jewish parents have sent their children to annual summer camps that instill ideals of spiritual growth through Jewish education while simultaneously creating a fun summer experience. The summer camp movement originally developed from the need for an enjoyable and creative aspect of education to mitigate the otherwise rigid nineteenth century school systems, but it eventually evolved into a much more expansive concept. Many European Jews who had immigrated to North America embraced the summer camp movement, which often proudly promoted various ideological standpoints, most frequently Zionism. However, times have changed, and for many camps the focus on ideology has diminished. Today, the primary focus appears to be simply the creation of an enjoyable Jewish experience. Despite modern adaptations, the original principles of community, informal education, and striving for the convictions of inner truth remain constant themes among today's Jewish summer camps. Camp Miriam,

a summer camp located on Gabriola Island off the west coast of British Columbia, Canada, is representative of the development of the Socialist-Zionist summer camp movement. Camp Miriam was established in 1948, at the zenith of modern Zionism. The camp was initially established with the aim of promoting Socialist-Zionism among Jewish youth; however, its ideology and practical functioning has changed with the times. A careful examination of the history of Camp Miriam offers an interesting look into how political and social evolution can impact the development of a summer camp.

Origins of the Summer Camp Movement

The summer camps of North America originated in upper-class Christian religious circles. High-class society called for summer activities that did not involve young children. Vacations at adult-centred resorts or tennis clubs left children with little amusement or entertainment. Children tended to spend their time indoors or getting themselves into trouble. William Gunn was the first to implement the idea of “tangible learning” in late 1880s.¹ He felt that the lessons learned in rigid classroom settings were lacking in certain significant learning experiences. He began to take his school children out to the wilderness for days at a time, to teach them skills that would not otherwise be learned from formal lessons. He taught them how to build fires, identify trees, and how to survive in the woods. Gunn referred to these excursions as the “laboratory of life.”²

Word spread about Gunn’s outdoor classrooms, and many

educators began to follow his example, despite initial criticisms of the theory. Eventually the demand to attend such outings became so great that entire camps were developed for parents to send their children while they spent their own time socializing during the long days of summer. The popularity of summer camps spread rapidly. Many different social groups latched on to the idea, resulting in a variety of summer options for children. The camps differed according to social class, gender, race, ideology, and even specific activities. Some were more educational, while others offered a chance to temporarily relieve parents of their children. Religious groups, in particular, took a keen interest in the philosophy of the summer camps. Realizing the opportunity for theological indoctrination, individual churches began to sponsor summer camps. Informal education in a rustic and enjoyable setting, far from the corruptions of secular society, proved very effective for religious training.

Emigration rates from Europe rose significantly in the time period following the Second World War. Many of those who had survived the atrocities of the Holocaust immigrated to North America, forming a North American Jewish community that would soon prosper. The European Jewish immigrants were keen to adopt the cultural norms of their new home. With each new shipload of immigrant Jews came a fresh batch of anger and motivation, inspired by continued anti-Semitism. Radicals from all sides of the European political spectrum poured into America, and Jewish involvement in political activism became popular.

For many immigrants, new life in North America resulted in a

theological paradox. On the one hand, they were eager to leave behind the constraints of their old society and assimilate into American culture. On the other hand, they held firmly to many religious convictions, and desperately wanted their children to be raised with similar ideals. The concept of the summer camp was therefore appealing, as it allowed the Jewish children to experience “normal” American life, while simultaneously being educated about the traditions of their culture. The outdoor settings of the summer camps made the learning exciting and enjoyable for the children. This type of informal education was hands-on and physically tangible in a way far beyond the limits of any nineteenth century classroom setting. As with many other cultural developments, the Jewish community saw the successes of the Christian summer camps and began to adopt the same educational models. Jewish summer camps, fueled by the ideologies of European immigrants, flourished with their own unique ideals of youth-indoctrination. By the mid to late twentieth century, Jewish summer camps had surpassed the original Christian prototypes in both quantity and effectiveness, for their purposes.

Zionism and the Class System

Social class structures from the Old Country influenced the incipient success of Zionism in North America. Though all different types of political, religious, and cultural Jewish ideologies were taught at the various summer camps, the successful majority were those preaching Zionist ideals.³ Much of the culture and society of the American Jews came

in remnants of faith from the older generations, mixed with the radicalism and passion for liberalist change that heated the new generation. Youth groups that had begun in Europe were brought over to the new country. The young radicals fought their way through the theological battle that was growing between those immigrants who chose to forget the past, and those who were determined to improve upon it. However, theological discrepancies were not the only differences among the new immigrants; the social class system that had existed in the Old Country was transported to America as well.

Those in the upper classes found themselves drawn more to assimilation into society than to the dream of an independent Jewish state. They had difficulty supporting a concept that would so clearly separate them more from the society to which they worked so hard to join. The lowest classes similarly rejected Zionism in favour of assimilation, but for different reasons. The proletariat experienced strong anti-Semitism, which, coupled with the difficulties of being the lowest class members, created a yearning for social acceptance above all else. A separationist and Zionist impulse would have alienated them further from the society with which they wished to integrate.

Zionism was therefore left to the middle class. Although they were reasonably accommodated to society, they knew it would never offer ultimate sovereignty to the Jewish people. From this background came the Zionist dreams of people like Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, and other significant players in the history of active Zionism. They saw beyond

immediate societal situations and dreamt of a functional, independent Jewish state. Many of those who were so active in the creation of Zionist summer camps came from similarly middle class backgrounds, which had a significant effect on the political outcome of each camp.

Zionism and the Youth Movement

The youth movements that assembled in twentieth century North America were based on the platforms and ideals of their European models, many of which had originated as responses to European anti-Semitism. Chaim Schatzker outlines six uniform principles that identify the youth movements⁴ of twentieth century Eastern Europe. These are:

- “Discontent with “Society” and the Striving for “Community”;
- Inner Truth as an Ontological Criterion;
- The Bund;⁵
- Totality of Commitment;
- Molding “Conviction” and “Bearing”; and
- “Indirect” Education⁶

Schatzker’s description helps to define the motivational principles that were based in European ideology, and eventually transferred into many areas of North American society. These same principles were manifested into North American summer camps and other forms of informal education. Schatzker promotes the movement of society towards the warmth of communal experience and development of the intellect, rather than what would assumedly be a preexisting, colder, and opposite form.

Rather than submit to such dismal realities, members of the youth groups were encouraged to live lives in search of an “Inner Truth,”⁷ found only within the emotional-experiential structures of the Bund community. The Bund represented socialist ideals and the “strong emotional attachments focused on the personality of an inspiring leader.”⁸ Value was attributed to the convictions of the heart, stimulated by emotional experience, rather than submission to the dry intellectual and financial pursuits of the general population.⁹ It was believed that these strong convictions would lead to understandings of Inner Truth, and that this Inner Truth was viable only when sought with complete dedication. Indirect education and separation from the apparent flaws of society were key. As Schatzker writes:

In its critique of society the youth movement deplored the fragmented, mechanistic relations between men, and its search for communion was expressed in a yearning for a pattern of organic, harmonious and all-embracing relations between the members of the community.¹⁰

The convictions necessary to reach this goal were taught to the young followers through a process of indirect education. The youth were taught,

not by preaching the word, but through the mysterious workings of symbols and allusions, and above all through the participation in experiences charged with emotion; not through the impact of outside influence, but through the inwards force of moved hearts and souls.¹¹

These principles are clearly reflected in the youth movements of modern North America. In fact, much of the idealism and successes of the North

American summer camps can be attributed to the original fundamental goals of the youth movements.

Jewish Youth in the New Country

Schatzker's principles of the Youth Movement traveled with the immigrant population as they settled in North America. Despite the horrors of the Holocaust, anti-Semitism still existed, even in the "new world" of North America. Jews still felt alienated and desperate for national identity. Members of the youth movements who had managed to escape the Holocaust and immigrate to North America did so with contagious fervour. Many of the older generation of Holocaust survivors were inclined to abandon religious and nationalist ideals altogether. Aware of this danger, the youth groups worked to re-instill a sense of hope and meaning into the broken lives of the Jewish community. New organizations started to replace the Bundist European youth movements, and many of those early Zionist youth movements have continued to exist in America and Canada until the present day. Among them are *Betar*, an off-shoot the Zionist-Revisionist movement, *Herut*; *B'Nei Akiva*, the Religious-Zionist movement focusing on a religious Jewish state, governed by traditional Orthodox Jewish Law; *Habonim-Dror*, the Socialist-Zionist movement that would recreate kibbutzim and the socialist way of life in North America with the ultimate goal of a socialist utopia in Israel; and Young Judea, which focuses on the strengthening of Jewish identity and community within an apolitical, pluralistic atmosphere.¹²

The youth groups integrated the original fundamental principles of their movements with new issues that were becoming increasingly relevant to the immigrant youth. The European Bund structure of large, emotional assemblies was transformed into low-key gatherings that generated strong emotional experiences. Youth gathered to discuss imminent political issues and the social dangers that threatened their communities. When the Zionist dream became a reality in 1948 with the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel, youth movements ceased preaching the importance of working towards Jewish independence and began to encourage *Aliya*.¹³ Continued anti-Semitism, the ideological decline of the older generation, and the deep-rooted desire of the youth for actualization of the Zionist dream created no shortage of discussion for every group meeting.

In addition to the social and educational meetings within the cities, the Jewish youth began to look towards the Christian molds of informal education for inspiration. The Christian summer camps in eastern North America were thriving, and Zionist Jewish youth movements, as well as non-Zionist groups, followed their example. Zionist Jewish summer camps were created as isolated¹⁴ havens of informal education that successfully provided enjoyment for the children as well as satisfactory indoctrination of Zionist ideology.

Early Jewish Summer Camps

One of the first Jewish summer camps was Camp Lehman,

established in 1916 by the 92nd Street Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA) in New York City. Originally a camp run by the Boy Scouts of America (BSA),¹⁵ it was transformed into a camp for Jewish boys, aged 11 to 16. Camp Lehman was based on "scouting principles"¹⁶ of practical outdoor education, borrowed from the BSA. The camp functioned mainly as an outlet of enjoyment and sense of community for upper-class Jewish youth. Although initially limited to the upper class, Camp Lehman eventually opened up to the immigrant population and even offered full scholarships for those who could not afford to pay. It may not have necessarily encompassed the ideals of Zionism that were professed by later summer camps that developed from youth movements, but Camp Lehman set a precedent for Jewish summer experiences that contributed greatly to the structures of later models.

The Zionist youth movements continued to flourish throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. Almost every group associated with a particular ideology of Zionism eventually developed its own summer program, often in the form of a series of summer camps, sprawled strategically across the continent and functioning at rapidly successful rates, even to the present day. Camper attendance numbers grew exponentially with each summer, and programming was increasingly more engaging for the children with each new year. Among the better-known camps were those affiliated with *Habonim Dror* and Socialist-Zionism; Young Judea and apolitical pluralism; or *Bnei Akiva* and Religious-Zionism. In addition, camps like Camp Lehman were formed from organizations

entirely separate from the youth movements. The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism adopted the concept of the summer camp and created a series of camps across North America, all called Camp Ramah. A Conservative youth group called the United Synagogue Youth (USY) was formed in later years as a result of the success of these camps. Other camps were established on much smaller scales, with the simple desire to create a summer utopia for children. These camps were often founded by a handful of ambitious individuals rather than by large organizations. One example is Camp Tawonga, which began as early as 1925¹⁷ in Northern California. Camp Tawonga's philosophy expresses loose Zionist tendencies, but emphasizes personal goals including the development of self-esteem and familiarization with nature.¹⁸ Many other Jewish summer camps exist in the present day as well, each with a varied level of involvement in the Jewish community. The summer camp model has been used to express a wide range of ideologies, some fitting into the category of fundamental Zionism and some focusing more on issues of community and self-balance.

Camp Miriam

Camp Miriam is located in British Columbia, Canada, and was founded in 1948, a symbolic year for the global Zionist community. It is an affiliate of *Habonim Dror*, an offshoot from the Socialist-Zionist youth movement that originally catered to the Jews of European lower bourgeoisie. With time, Socialist-Zionism evolved, and so did the camp.

Camp Miriam in its present state is a prime example of the moderating effects of modern liberalism on a once fiercely radical movement.

Camp Miriam is one of three main Jewish summer camps in the Pacific Northwest area.¹⁹ In 1937, the Jewish Tents Camp, which eventually became Camp Hatikvah,²⁰ was founded as the first Jewish summer camp in the Pacific Northwest. Camp Solomon Schechter followed soon after, holding its founding summer in 1954, on an island off the coast of southern Washington State. Of the three camps, Camp Miriam has historically expressed the strongest ideological radicalism, and has had the highest rate of alumni retention.²¹ The program's long-term success has been attributed to Camp Miriam having maintained a strong allegiance to the socialist and Zionist principles on which it was founded. Aside from the rustic appeal and charm of their program, Camp Miriam needed financial and social support in order to run on a continual basis. Members of the founding administration looked to friends who held high positions in society for help with fundraising. Community leaders of both local and world-renowned stature were called upon for help. Bernie Simpson, a senior board member and former camp director in the 1970s, played a large part in helping to support the camp in these various realms.

As Camp Miriam grew in popularity, financial issues arose that were separate from those of the camp institution. The camp catered to supporters of the Socialist-Zionist ideology, which often meant they were families on lower levels of the social class system, a theme that continued throughout the nineteenth century. Many of the families who supported

the Socialist-Zionist cause could not afford the luxury of sending their children to summer camp. Since the camp's ideology stressed social equality, such a situation was considered unacceptable. Funds were raised to establish "camperships" to children to attend Camp Miriam regardless of their family's financial situation. Although other camps have been known to do this in more modern times, Camp Miriam is unique in having been the first camp in the Pacific Northwest to do this. The camp has traditionally prided itself on its inclusivity; this trend continues today, as evidenced by the emphasis placed on Camp Miriam being one of the few Socialist-Zionist camps to cater to all types of children, including those who are mentally or developmentally challenged.

The camp was initially established with a goal of incorporating Socialist-Zionism as a fundamental component of Jewish childhood and development, while simultaneously providing a fun summer experience for Jewish children. The creation of the State of Israel was no doubt an inspiration and encouragement, as the camp's first model was intentionally very similar to those of the early kibbutzim. In the early days of Camp Miriam, and to a certain extent even today, the camp was run entirely by the youth. The children were given key responsibilities in the day-to-day functioning of the camp, and even the *Rosh* (head) of camp would only be in his early twenties. Before the existence of safety regulations that demanded running water and standard qualities food preparation, all water in the camp was taken from a series of wells. Children were expected to contribute by peeling vegetables for the kitchen. The children

themselves completed all other tasks, such as general maintenance of the campsite and even assistance with the construction of new buildings.

Camp Miriam worked hard to create as true a socialist community as possible, adhering to the maxim “give what you can; take what you need” – an identifying principle of socialist ideology. Parents were requested to send their children to camp with a small amount of money or food, to be pooled into a communal fund, or *kuppah*, upon arrival at camp. The *kuppah* belonged to the children as a group rather than as individuals. It would be used throughout the summer according to the democratically decided wishes of the camp community. All candy or extra luxuries were likewise confiscated at the beginning of the summer so they could be redistributed equally among the campers. In this way, the value of individual possessions was downplayed, and emphasis was put on the value of community well-being and equality.

In addition to communal labour and the deemphasizing of individual possessions, other aspects of socialist kibbutzim were also emulated. The ideology of Socialist-Zionism in the late nineteenth century revolved around the ultimate goal of a socialist Jewish community in an independent Jewish State. With the realization of the Jewish State of Israel, this goal had largely been accomplished. Camps run by organizations like *Habonim Dror* developed into microcosms of the ideal Socialist-Zionist community. As such, education in the Hebrew language was prioritized, as was education in the general affairs of the State of Israel, and youth were encouraged to move to the Holy Land at the earliest possible chance. Each

day in Camp Miriam, the children gather for a *sicha*, or “conversation,” about the State of Israel and what it means to them. The *sicha* session has stood out in the minds of many Camp Miriam alumni, some of whom recall understanding the importance of the *sicha* even before they were old enough to fully comprehend what was being said. The location of the camp also aids in the creation of a kibbutz-like atmosphere. Camp Miriam is currently located on Gabriola Island, off the west coast of British Columbia. A series of ferries and half a day of travel are required to get there. The isolation creates an atmosphere in which the children can fully disconnect from their regular lives. In the early days of the camp, this meant isolation not just from their families, but also from all aspects of capitalism, and from society as a whole.

Today the ideology of the camp has changed to a great extent, and children are much less isolated at camp than they were in the early days. The present Camp Miriam subscribes to a philosophy that relates more to the modern concepts of liberalism, which has evolved into a much less radical school of thought. Modern liberalism tends to focus more on balance and pluralism, rather than a more narrow pursuit of idealist goals. Socialism has been almost entirely abandoned by the Zionist movements, and even the term “Zionism” has played a diminished role. As both socialism and Zionism have transformed into much more complicated schools of thought, the *Habonim Dror* community has necessarily worked to avoid political clashes within their institutions. The *sicha* sessions still exist, but focus less on Jewish sovereignty in Israel, and more on discussion

about the development of the local Jewish community and the children's identity within their own tradition. Hebrew words still pepper the campsite and children are involved in camp maintenance and preparation to a certain degree, although communal involvement in things like food preparation has been reduced due to safety and health regulations. The advent of new technology and plenty of modern gadgets have made it quite impossible to truly create an atmosphere of non-individualization; however, the concept of the *kuppah* has been maintained for tradition's sake. As one alumnus put it, "it was one thing in the 70s to take away a child's candy bar, but to take away an iPod is a whole different story."²² Despite the differences between the original Camp Miriam and its current state, the camp still retains a unique and outdoorsy flavour that is mixed with Hebrew language and development of Jewish identity.

Conclusion

Camp Miriam is a prime example of what became of the Socialist-Zionist youth movements. Its structure fits perfectly in line with Schatzker's six principles of European youth movements, indicating the successful transmission of the ideological tradition through the generations. In its early days, the camp ideals conveyed a discontent with capitalist society and a need for social reform. Though this attitude has diminished over time, it represents the first of Schatzker's principles. The search for Inner Truth and ontological criterion is exhibited through the earnest daily lessons and constant reminders of ideology, faith and community that

teach the children about facets of life that reach beyond the mundane. The intrinsic value of the community is inherent in the camp setting. The concept of a “camp family” is embraced and valued, which is proven by the many Camp Miriam alumni who still interact with each other and even meet at yearly reunions.²³ The necessity of commitment to tasks is taught at camp through both the practical lessons learned in outdoors sports activities and in religious discussions. In line with the emphasis of the “camp family,” the campers learn to appreciate their own value in relation to the greater whole on a constant basis, as seen in the way the campers are asked to contribute to every aspect of daily living. In Camp Miriam today, the ideological education is experienced through the rustic setting, and methods of indirect education. In addition, appreciation for Hebrew language is taught and promotion of the Hebrew language in the form of practical use in reference to buildings and concepts in daily camp life, rather than through formal pedagogy.

Even amidst the new ideas, technologies, and social realities of the twenty-first century, Camp Miriam retains a strong ideological base and an atmosphere that is rare among modern North American summer camps. It represents the journey of Zionist ideals as transmitted through the generations of Jewish communities. Camp Miriam is a good example of a summer camp that has based itself on European ideologies but developed and evolved to appropriately meet the needs of each generation in its own unique way.

End Notes

1 Michael Lorge, *A Place of Our Own* (Michigan: University of Alabama Press, 2006)

2 Ibid., p. 4, fn12

3 This may have simply been due to the overriding majority of new immigrants who subscribed to Zionism above all other political philosophies that filtered out of 20th century Europe.

4 Schatzker argues that, based on these seven principles, the various youth movements can actually be seen as one main entity with a variety of individual sects (p.150). He therefore speaks of the singular “youth movement”; however for our purposes we will consider the individual sections within the movement and refer to them in the plural.

5 The Bund was a Jewish Socialist movement in Russia that could be identified by very large, emotionally-charged assemblies in which the members gathered to share inspirational words. (Schatzker, “Youth Movements,” 151)

6 Ibid., 151.

7 Schatzker defines Inner Truth as a search for “the key to the discovery and recognition of ... truth in the intuition, the subjective inner stirrings of the individual and the community, while rejectiong rational, objective criteria as inadequate and misleading.” (Schatzker, “Youth Movements,” 151)

8 Schatzker, “Youth Movements,” 152

9 Schatzker relates these ideas as having been derived from Chassidic theology.

10 Ibid., 152

11 Ibid., 153

12 Azrieli, *Rekindling*, 214-216.

13 “*Aliya*: the immigration of Jews to Israel” (Merriam-Webster dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alayah>)

14 The isolation factor of the camps soon became a key part of the implicated educational methods.

15 Boy Scouts America is an organization that “help[s] build the future leaders of this country by combining educational activities and lifelong values with fun”. (www.scouting.org)

16 Archives of the 92nd Street YMHA

- 17 The earliest camper cited on the website attended the camp in 1925, but it is likely to have been founded at an even earlier date.
- 18 www.tawonga.org
- 19 The Pacific Northwest refers to British Columbia, Alberta, Washington State, and Oregon
- 20 www.camphatikvah.com
- 21 According to various Camp Miriam alumni
- 22 B. Simpson (2009)
- 23 R. Wenner (2009)

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www.camphatikvah.com

Other

British Columbia Jewish Museum and Archives

Archives of the 92nd Street Young Men and Women's Association
(YMHA)

Interviews with Camp Miriam alumni:

Aaron Tischler

Alexis Hershfield

Bernie Simpson

Claire Schachter

Lucy Laufer

Richard Wenner

Come Hell or High Water: Jewish Resistance in the Death Camps during the Holocaust

Robert Eisenberg

Introduction

The history of the Jewish people is so replete with stories of hardship and oppression that it has become commonplace to assume that Jews are passive actors in history who merely move from one catastrophe to the next. However, since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, there has been a shift in the way Jewish 'passivity,' especially during the Holocaust, is discussed. Jewish resistance during the Holocaust has become a controversial subject because of modern Jews' (especially Israelis') desire not to see themselves and their ancestors as sheep led to the slaughter. This has led to a new historiographical trend which seeks to emphasise incidences of Jewish resistance to the Nazis, most notably the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and other various attempted revolts in the camps. However, historians such as Raul Hilberg claim that 'resistance' only encompasses instances of armed resistance, and argue that there was almost none during the War.¹

Although disagreeing with Hilberg's assertion that only armed resistance can be classified as resistance, this paper will seek to explore

Jewish armed resistance in the Nazi death camps, focusing on the uprisings in Treblinka, Sobibór, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The paper will begin with a brief overview of the Final Solution and the establishment of the death camps. This section will be followed by detailed investigations of the uprisings in the three camps in question. The third major section will detail some of the motivations which encouraged Jews to revolt in the camps, as well as obstacles to doing so. Finally, there will be a brief evaluation of the Jewish uprisings, with a focus on the Nazi reactions.

It is necessary here to make a brief note on the nature of the sources used. The majority of primary documents are private sources, including personal recollections by the individuals involved that were written years later. These sources are open to criticism, as the recollections may be less truthful, either because of the passage of time, or through willful revision in order to absolve some people of guilt, or to place it on others.

The Final Solution

While Hitler had always planned to "solve" the Jewish question² in Europe, it was not until 1941 and the realisation that he now had to deal with the millions of Jews living in occupied Poland and Russia that the Nazi leadership began planning the 'Final Solution.' On July 31, 1941, Hermann Göring sent a memorandum to Reinhard Heydrich which stated:

I hereby charge you with making all necessary preparations in regard to organizational and financial matters for bringing about a total solution of the Jewish question in the German sphere of influence in Europe.

Wherever other governmental agencies are involved, these are to cooperate with you. I request you further to send me, in the near future, an overall plan covering the organizational, technical and material measures necessary for the accomplishment of the final solution of the Jewish question which we desire.³

Immediately following this memorandum, the *Einsatzgruppen* on the Eastern Front began to increase the scale of their killings and sent reports back to Berlin of the murder of women and children, signifying a shift in their policy towards one of 'finality.' However, the Nazis still needed to create an organised system for mass murder. Thus, on January 20, 1942, Heydrich met with a group of departmental administrative leaders to coordinate logistics of the Final Solution.⁴ While some historians, such as David Irving, have argued that Hitler did not know the details of the Final Solution, Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz, clearly dispelled this myth during his testimony at the Nuremberg trials: "In the summer of 1941 I was summoned to Berlin to *Reichsführer*-SS Himmler to receive personal orders. He told me something to the effect – I do not remember the exact words – that the Führer had given the order for a final solution of the Jewish question."⁵

In October 1941, SS and Police leader Odilo Globocnik received orders from Himmler to begin construction on the first death camp, Belzec, while Sobibór, Majdanek and Treblinka followed in 1942. Together, these four camps formed *Aktion Reinhardt* or *Einsatz Reinhard* (Operation Reinhard) which had as its purpose the murder of the 2.3 million Jews living in the *Generalgouvernement* of Poland, using poison gas. In fact,

of the 400 people charged with managing Operation Reinhard, 92 were former staff members of the *Aktion T4* euthanasia programme who had experience using gas as a murder weapon.⁶

Treblinka

The Camp

Before the war, Treblinka was a small railway station near Sokolow, sixty miles northeast of Warsaw. The site was chosen as the primary centre for the extermination of Warsaw's Jewish population as it was isolated from major centres of human habitation, yet was still near Warsaw.⁷ Following the occupation of Poland in 1939, it became a prison camp, and then a death camp exclusively for Jews in May 1942.⁸ That summer, Himmler had ordered the final "resettlement" of Polish Jewry, and the mass deportations of Jews from Warsaw began on July 22 with 5,000 people deported daily. Since most Jews were killed on the day of their arrival, there was little need for camp infrastructure. The dominant features of the camp were the thirteen gas chambers which used carbon monoxide gas to kill 25,000 people per day, though efficiency could be increased to 30,000 per day under special circumstances. Indeed, in its first two months of operation, 300,000 Jews were murdered at Treblinka.⁹ Although it had the shortest lifespan of any of the six major death camps, it is considered to be the most efficient and largest killing centre in human history because it successfully removed all traces of the people who were killed there.¹⁰

The Treblinka Uprising: August 2, 1943

In spring 1943, Himmler ordered the mass burning of bodies and the elimination of all traces of the camp. On July 20, Jews working in the fire pits passed a message to those in the barracks stating that they would be done burning bodies in two weeks. The Jews realised that time was now short and no amount of cooperation or labour could prevent the wholesale extermination of the camp, so they created the Committee of Resistance to procure weapons and plan an escape.¹¹ The Committee, composed of twelve men, was led by Dr. Julian Chorazycki, a captain in the Polish Army, Rudolf Masarek, a captain in the Czech Army, and 'Engineer' Galewski. These three men orchestrated meetings at night under the guise of playing cards since the punishment for card-playing was only twenty lashes – an acceptable price to pay for organising a revolt.¹²

On August 2, 1943, after 800,000 Jews had already been gassed at Treblinka, 850-1,200 Jewish workers rebelled. The revolt was scheduled for August 2 at 17:00 so that the uprising could make use of the prisoners who would be returning from work on the trains. The Committee's plan was relatively straightforward: a group of young boys (including Jacek, 17, and Zaltsberg, 14) who polished the SS officers' boots were given access by the Germans to secure buildings and were therefore able to steal some grenades, though it was later discovered that these grenades had no pins, so they had to be replaced before anyone noticed they were missing. Moreover, Galewski had convinced the SS to allow a Jew, Alfred, to wander around the camp picking up garbage, since the Ukrainian guards were very messy and constantly left litter everywhere. Consequently,

Alfred had free reign as a conduit between the boys in the SS barracks and the rest of the Jews.¹³

The day of the escape, some Jews started beating a carpet outside the armoury to drive away the SS guards. Using a key that a Jewish locksmith had secretly copied, they were able to gain access to the armoury. They then managed to pass some small firearms through a window after cutting the pane with a small diamond they had smuggled in. These weapons complemented the pistols and explosives that survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising had brought with them to Treblinka before being gassed.¹⁴ Early on the morning of August 2, another Jewish worker who was responsible for spraying disinfectant around the camp filled his can with gasoline (or kerosene; the sources conflict) instead and spread it around the base of the camp's wooden buildings.¹⁵ The plan was to quickly kill the chief SS men, disarm the Ukrainian guards, cut the telephone lines, destroy the extermination facilities, free the Poles in the detention camp and flee into the forest to form a partisan band.¹⁶

However, at 15:00, *SS-Oberscharführer* Kurt Küttner discovered a large sum of money on one of the Committee members and was promptly shot, though not killed, before he could raise an alarm. This gunshot was taken by the rest of the resistors to be the signal to start the revolt, which was unfortunate since several hundred prisoners were still outside the camp and could not participate in the revolt. Moreover, the meagre supply of weapons had not yet been adequately distributed so the Ukrainians in the watchtowers were able to shoot the Jews "like ducks."¹⁷ Survivors of

the uprising remember the revolt as “madly exciting; grenades and bottles of petrol exploding, fires almost at once, shooting everywhere. Everything was just that much different from the way it had been planned, so that we were thrown into utter confusion.”¹⁸ The revolt devolved into ‘every man for himself’ with about 740 of the camp’s 840-850 inmates trying to climb over the fences with several hundred reaching the forest. All the way, the prisoners were chased by the Germans, as one survivor, Kalman Tiegman relates:

The Germans chased us on horses and also in cars. Some of those who escaped had arms. I also ran with a group that possessed a rifle and revolvers. The people returned the Germans’ fire, and the Germans withdrew. In this way we managed to reach the forest which was near this camp.¹⁹

Of the roughly 740 inmates who attempted to climb the fences, approximately 200-600 reached the forest and maybe sixty (some accounts say forty or even twenty) survived the war. The rest were killed by pursuing Germans and Ukrainians as well as hostile partisans and Polish peasants. Casualties on the German side were relatively light, with six or seven Ukrainians killed and one SS officer injured.²⁰

Sobibór

The Camp

The location of the Sobibór extermination camp was chosen by the Germans for practical reasons: it was on the outskirts of a small, obscure town where they could murder in isolation, yet it was large enough to

possess a railway station, a necessity for bringing in transports of Jews.²¹ In March 1942, the Germans brought a squad of Jewish labourers to the site to build a camp of about sixty hectares, including a gas chamber with a capacity for killing 20,000 people per day. Completed on March 8, 1942, the camp was divided into four sections and was staffed by 20-30 SS men and 90-120 Ukrainian guards. *Lager* (Camp) III was the section where the gas chambers were located, as well as some mass graves. Throughout the whole camp, there existed only twenty barracks for Jewish inmates, since the purpose of the camp was to gas the Jews almost immediately upon arrival, but after shaving their heads, so their hair could be used in German products, and seizing their belongings and clothing.²²

Once the prisoners had been gassed with carbon monoxide produced from a captured Russian tank, any gold teeth would be forcibly extracted before their bodies were placed in layers on grates made of train rails supported by stones and then burned, though towards the end of the camp's existence this was switched to burning pits to increase efficiency.²³ From May to July 1942, 90,000-100,000 Jews from Poland, Slovakia and the Greater Reich were murdered in Sobibór before gassings were temporarily halted in August and September because of problems with rail transport. However, the Nazis were not idle during this 'break,' but instead used the time to construct three new gas chambers – ironically, with Jewish labour.²⁴

One of the more notorious events in Sobibór's history occurred in July 1943 when Himmler visited the camp. In order to impress the

Reichsführer-SS, the gassings were accelerated to a high of 15,000 per day. Moreover, during Himmler's dinner party, 300 Jewish girls were gassed in his honour.²⁵

Escape from Sobibór: October 14, 1943

The first plan for an organised escape from Sobibór was created by Leon Feldhendler, the former head of the *Judenrat* in Zolkiew. His small organising committee planned an escape for the few hundred Jews that worked in the camp for the spring of 1943, during which they would poison the camp's guards, seize their weapons and escape. Feldhendler was spurred on by the arrival at Sobibór of 300 Jews who had worked at Belzec after their own camp was liquidated; they were gassed shortly after their arrival at Sobibór. The notes they passed along to the Sobibor prisoners served as the *mene tekel* (writing on the wall) to start planning an escape.²⁶ Unfortunately, the SS quickly discovered the poison and after shooting five Jews, mined the perimeter of the camp, precluding any further escape attempts.²⁷

Following the aborted escape attempt during the spring, Feldhendler and his committee realised that they were too disorganised and lacked the necessary military planning skills. However, on September 23, 1943, Alexander "Sasha" Pechersky, a Jewish political commissar and captain in the Red Army, arrived in Sobibór with a group of Soviet POWs from Minsk. Feldhendler saw the arrival of Soviet soldiers as providential and quickly brought Pechersky into his group, with Pechersky's stipulation that *he* would have full authority over any escape attempt.

Almost immediately, Pechersky began his preparations, ordering the reconnaissance of the entire camp and soon began to formulate an escape plan that would save the entire population of the camp.²⁸ Originally, he considered digging a tunnel out of the camp, though this idea was quickly rejected because the soil surrounding the camp was waterlogged. A tunnel would not allow all the prisoners to escape and it would exit too far away from the forest.²⁹

The date of October 14 was chosen by Pechersky, since many of the SS men would be out of the camp, including Gustav Wagner. It was important that Wagner not be present during the revolt since he was the “most intelligent” of the SS and would have noticed if something were amiss.³⁰ Pechersky’s plan of escape was extremely detailed. Firstly, all the SS officers in the camp must be eliminated within one hour. Pechersky assigned this task to his fellow Soviet POWs since he worried that the untrained Polish Jews would hesitate to kill at the last moment, although this did not turn out to be the case. At 15:30, Brzeki, a *kapo* who had agreed to cooperate in exchange for his life, would take the men to *Lager III*, where they would then kill the four SS men. Then, at 16:00, the prisoners would cut the telephone lines between the camp and the reserve guard, which would signal that the killing of the SS in the main camp should begin. The Nazis would be individually brought into workshops on the pretence that there was booty for them and they would be quickly killed by two prisoners. At the same time, two more cooperative *kapos* would line all the inmates up as if for work, and then, with the help of the Soviet prisoners

who would be dressed in the SS uniforms, lead the Jewish prisoners out through the main gate of the camp. On the way, some prisoners would attack the armoury while others would attack the watchtower.³¹

While Pechersky's plan was feasible, it did not develop as he had hoped. The SS men were killed and the telephone wires cut, though some of the Jews acted with more passion than Pechersky had hoped for. Chaim Engel killed *SS-Unterscharführer* Walter Ryba and "with each jab [he] cried, "This is for my father, for my mother, for all the Jews you killed.""³² Nevertheless, Pechersky gave the signal for revolt to his associates. Yet while the Soviet POWs followed the plan, most of the Polish Jews ran chaotically throughout the camp and after the attack on the armoury failed in the face of automatic machine gun fire, most inmates rushed the main gate, trampling some guards and making a run through the mine fields for the forest. Seeing that an organised mass escape was now impossible, Pechersky followed his intuition that the field behind the officers' houses would not be mined, and it was here that he cut the fence and made his escape with fifty-six others.³³

During the escape from Sobibór, 600 inmates attempted to flee; 400 made it out of the camp while 200 of these died in the minefields. Of the remainder, some were killed by the pursuing Germans who used both land and air forces, and others by the hostile Poles who surrounded the camp. Approximately 100 reached freedom or joined the Soviet partisans, while only thirty-five survived the war, including Pechersky. On the German side, eleven SS men were killed and thirty-eight Ukrainian

guardsmen were dead or wounded, while another forty Ukrainians ran away rather than face punishment by the Germans.³⁴

Auschwitz-Birkenau

The Camp

Construction on Auschwitz II (Birkenau) began in October 1941 though it was not operational until the following year. At his trial at Nuremberg, camp Commandant Rudolf Höss testified that:

The 'final solution' of the Jewish question meant the complete extermination of all Jews in Europe. I was ordered to establish extermination facilities at Auschwitz in June 1942. At that time, there were already in the *Generalgouvernement* three other extermination camps – Belzec, Treblinka and Wolzek. ... I visited Treblinka to find out how they carried out their extermination. The Camp Commandant at Treblinka told me that he had liquidated 80,000 in the course of six months. ... He used monoxide gas and I did not think that his methods were very efficient. So when I set up the extermination building at Auschwitz, I used Zyklon-B, which was crystallized prussic acid which we dropped into the death chamber from a small opening. It took from three to fifteen minutes to kill the people in the death chamber, depending upon climatic conditions. We knew when the people were dead because their screaming stopped. ... After the bodies were removed our special guards took off the rings and extracted the gold from the teeth of the corpses.³⁵

These "special guards" were the *Sonderkommandos*, whose job it was to force the victims into the gas chambers, remove any valuables from their corpses and deposit them for sorting in "Canada" and burn their bodies in the crematoria.³⁶ As Höss mentions, Auschwitz-Birkenau differed from

Treblinka and Sobibór in that it used Zyklon-B gas instead of carbon monoxide. By June 1943, more crematoria were built, which enhanced the capacity for gassing and burning to 20,000 people per day. The gas chambers and crematoria worked at this full capacity from April to July 1944, when 475,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The Sonderkommando Revolt: August 7, 1944

Auschwitz-Birkenau was different from other death camps in that while the majority of its victims were Jews (90%), there was also a large Polish and Russian minority. As a result of rampant anti-Semitism amongst the Gentile population of the camp, Jews were not allowed to participate in the 'official' resistance groups which were led by Poles, Communists and Socialists.³⁷ Thus, in 1943 the Jews were excluded when the multinational *Kampf-gruppe Auschwitz* ('Battle Group Auschwitz') was formed. Instead, a group of Czech Zionists formed a separate group in the Theresienstadt Family Camp, though it collapsed soon after one of its leaders, Freddy Hirsch, committed suicide.³⁸

The only moderately successful Jewish armed resistance in Auschwitz-Birkenau took its form in the *Sonderkommando* revolt which was led by Jozef Dorebus, Jankiel Handelsman and Zalmen Gradowski.³⁹ The *Sonderkommandos* made contact with four Jewish women who worked in the Krupp plant. These women, 23-year-old Roza Robota, Ella Gartner, Toszka and Regina, were able to smuggle tiny amounts of explosives each day, which was used to create grenades.⁴⁰ These explosives were passed

along to Wrobel, a Polish Jew, who in turn gave them to Borodin, a Russian technician who made grenades, which were “small lead containers, filled with powder, small stones, crumbled bricks, and a fuse.”⁴¹

The original plan to destroy the crematoria called for coordinating with the Poles to create a general uprising, though the plan changed on October 7 when the *Sonderkommandos* received a report from the *Kampf-gruppe Auschwitz* that another 300 people of the 663-member *Sonderkommando* were to be “removed” (killed). The 300 on the list decided to revolt prematurely, and once they were discovered by a *kapo*, they killed him and blew up Crematorium IV. The SS quickly arrived on the scene, and one witness, Zalman Lewenthl, notes that “[the *Sonderkommandos*] showed incredible courage, in that they would not move. They raised a loud cry, and threw themselves on the guards with hammers and axes, wounding a few of them and beating the rest with whatever they could, and threw stones at them.”⁴²

Seeing the attack on Crematorium IV, the *Sonderkommandos* of Crematorium II overpowered their own *kapo* and threw him into the ovens along with an SS officer, while beating another SS officer to death.⁴³ All these prisoners then cut the wire fence and attempted to escape, though they were all captured and killed by their pursuers.⁴⁴ The Nazis quickly rounded-up the four women who had smuggled the explosives into the camp, tortured them and executed them on January 6, 1945, making them the last executions at Auschwitz. Altogether, 451 Jews were killed in the failed attack and escape, along with two SS officers and two *kapos*.⁴⁵

Push and Pull: Motivations and Obstacles to Resistance

Now that the three major Jewish armed revolts have been addressed, this brief section will seek to uncover some of the motivations that pushed Jews in the death camps towards revolt, as well as the more numerous factors that prevented them from taking any action.

Motivation

There were several motivating factors that drove Jews to resist in the death camps, often knowing that it would cost them their lives. One of these was the desire to take a stand and refuse to be led to one's death like cattle. One survivor noted that the attack on Auschwitz showed the world:

That a small group of prisoners, determined to put up a fight, could tie down an SS garrison several thousand strong. Since the SS by this time were unable to bring the garrison up to proper strength, they had to drop their plans for the mass liquidation of the prisoners at Auschwitz in favour of evacuation.⁴⁶

Similarly, Esther Raab, a survivor from Sobibór notes that, "You felt like you [were] doing something, you [are] planning something. You['re] trying something. If you'll [sic] succeed it would be wonderful. If not, you'll get a bullet in the back – it's better than going to the gas chambers. I promised myself I'll never go to the gas chambers."⁴⁷ Furthermore, Pechersky convinced the inmates at Sobibór that the partisans would not attack the camp, since their first priority was to prosecute the war and that they would not risk their lives to "save some Jews." Instead, he argued

that “If we want anything to happen, it will be up to us.”⁴⁸

Other survivors wanted revenge on the Germans for murdering their friends and families. Y.M., a survivor of Treblinka writes that he saw a Jewish man, Meir Berliner, stab an SS officer, Max Bilo, to death after seeing him push his wife and child into a gas chamber:

The [SS] plaque calling for revenge, which hung over their barracks, and the general slaughter the SS then started in retaliation, didn’t intimidate us in the least – just the opposite: it aroused us and incited us to battle, to avenge ourselves and our people. The death of the young man from Warsaw became our rallying cry. The will to revenge, which lives in us, grew stronger all the time and took concrete shape.⁴⁹

Likewise, Samuel Willenberg, a survivor of Treblinka writes that “[t]he Jewish uprising [in Warsaw] warmed our hearts, infused us with new strength and led to new decisions. Our spines stiffened; we wanted to act; we would not let them claim our lives easily.”⁵⁰

Furthermore, some Jews realised that their own survival was not important, but stopping the mass murder was crucial. Thus, they resolved themselves to death in order to destroy the killing machinery. A witness from the Auschwitz-Birkenau revolt reports that one of the *Sonderkommandos*, upon seeing that escape was futile exclaimed, “Night is falling. Our ranks are thinning out. Ammunition’s in short supply. The Germans are reinforced with wave after wave of men and materiel. But our revolt has succeeded 100 percent. The entire camp is in flames and completely destroyed.”⁵¹

Finally, some Jews simply realised that their own deaths were fast approaching as the pace of the transports began to slow and that they had nothing left to live for. One survivor wrote that “[t]he workload in the camp was dwindling. ... For some time we had been receiving better and more satisfying portions of food. We got the impression that the Germans wanted to kill us all and were trying to dull our senses and deceive us with their behaviour.”⁵² In such a mindset, resistance presented a way of hastening the inevitable and dying with some dignity.

Obstacles

Like the multitude of motivations which led Jews to revolt, there were also four major obstacles that precluded decisive action. These included the difficulties of intra-Jewish cooperation, the constant threat of betrayal, fears of collective retribution, and finally, practical concerns.

As previously mentioned in the case of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Polish prisoners in the camps were almost as anti-Semitic as the Nazis. This hatred of the Jews prevented any form of productive cooperation which would have been necessary to instigate a successful revolt. In fact, instead of helping the Jews who were trying to revolt, Polish prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau often exposed the Jewish inmates to the Nazis, after taking Jewish money as payment for help.⁵³ Similarly, Zalman Lewenthl, a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, explains that the Russian and Polish prisoners tried from the beginning of the war to prevent Jews from rebelling by saying that the Red Army was nearby and liberation would be soon.⁵⁴ Thus, the escape from Sobibór can be seen as a unique case where the local

Polish Jews were able to cooperate with the Soviet POWs, though this cooperation can likely be attributed to Pechersky, who, although Jewish, commanded the respect of the Soviet soldiers.⁵⁵ However, even when the Jews were able to cooperate with Poles and Russians *within* the camp, they still faced a hostile Polish peasant population, whose anti-Semitism was fed propaganda by the Nazis who claimed that any escaped Jews were bandits that carried typhus and anyone caught helping them would be killed.⁵⁶

In order to create a successful revolt, it was usually necessary to enlist the aid of some of the camp's staff, usually Ukrainians guards, through bribery. While the greed of these men could often be exploited, bribing a guard was never safe. Pechersky notes that before his arrival in Sobibór 70 Dutch Jews had tried to bribe a guard, but he betrayed them and had them all decapitated.⁵⁷ Moreover, it was not only betrayal by Gentiles that the plotters had to fear, but also denunciation by their fellow Jewish prisoners. Some Jews decided that it was in their personal interest to expose their fellow inmates to secure favour with the Nazis, a fact that made cooperation extremely difficult. Indeed, because some Jews in Sobibór were suspected of collaborating with the SS, the plans for escape had to be kept secret until the last minute, which hindered the revolt's effectiveness.⁵⁸

Even if a revolt could be coordinated safely, there was still a major obstacle in the consciences of the plotters. The Nazis adhered to a policy of collective punishment, so that if any Jews were caught trying to revolt,

many more would pay the price. On October 23, 1943, a Jewish woman from Warsaw refused to enter the Treblinka gas chamber. She stole an officer's gun and shot two SS men, *SS-Unterscharführer* Joseph Schillinger and Wilhelm Emmerich. In retaliation, the SS guards opened fire in the camp with machine guns, killing 13 and wounding 46 Jews.⁵⁹ This retributive policy did not just extend to punishing violence, but escape as well. In Sobibór, a husband and wife had tried to escape together. In response, the Nazis shot 150 Jews who simply worked in the same part of the camp.⁶⁰ Even so, inmates in Treblinka and Sobibór could act knowing that those in the camp would not be kept alive for long. Unlike these two camps, Auschwitz did contain a large prisoner population, so the major focus of resistors here was not mass escape or rebellion, but rather saving lives, which precluded reckless action.⁶¹

In addition to the concerns of conscience, there were also several practical obstacles to overcome before any successful revolt could be made. Although Jews comprised the vast majority of inmates in the concentration and death camps, they were often the least physically able to mount any resistance simply because they were subject to the worst conditions in the camp. Consequently, they tended to focus more on day-to-day survival while the constant threat of death led many to avoid any resistance activity out of fear. Others were simply too weak or sick to participate.⁶² There was also the issue of what to do *after* a successful revolt. Most of the inmates in the camps were not from the surrounding areas and they could not hope to survive in unfamiliar forests while avoiding hostile partisans

and Poles.⁶³ Moreover, even if a mass escape was successful, the prisoners would have no way of housing, feeding, or protecting the escapees, which meant that any mass revolt could only take place once Soviet forces were nearby.⁶⁴ Clearly, there were many factors both pulling the Jewish inmates back from revolt and pushing them towards it.

Evaluation: The Nazi Responses

While the success of the revolts cannot usually be measured in the number of escapees, they have often been credited with scaring the Nazis into shutting down camps for fear of exposure. Indeed, following the uprising at Treblinka on August 2, 1943, Himmler transferred the camp commandant, Stangl, to Italy and replaced him with Kurt Franz. Since the Jews had only managed to destroy some of the camp buildings but none of the brick gas chambers, Globocnik was able to continue sending transports to the camp until November, when the remains of the camp were destroyed by the Nazis. The *Sonderkommandos* were forced to clear the area of all mass graves and plant pine trees before being shot. The site was then turned over to a Ukrainian guard, Strebel, who turned the land into a farm, using the bricks from the gas chambers to build his house. However, the eradication of the camp was hastily done, and when the Russians began exhuming the area in March 1944, they found the mass graves.⁶⁵

Following the escape from Sobibór, the second major Jewish camp uprising, Himmler ordered the immediate destruction of the camp and its existence kept secret. A special *Sonderkommando* unit arrived on his

orders and dynamited all the buildings and watchtowers, pulled down the barbed wire fences and burned the bodies in pits. Thirty Jews were sent in to plough the earth and plant trees before being shot. They did such a good job that no documents pertaining to the camp have been found.⁶⁶ Seeing as how approximately 100 Jews had escaped into the forest, Himmler was convinced that Jewish-Soviet cooperation was a threat and he decided to murder all the Jews, including workers, in the Lublin area immediately. This two-day campaign of murder was called Operation *Erntefest* (Harvest) and was responsible for the deaths of 42,000-45,000 Jews in 48 hours.⁶⁷

It is this closing of the Treblinka and Sobibór death camps that historians say was the real success of the revolts, since they could no longer be used for mass murder. However, the evidence illustrates that the revolts actually played a very minor part in this. Himmler had always intended that the *Aktion Reinhardt* camps be temporary and he had already decided to begin closing them down in March 1943 once the SS had finished murdering most of the Jews in the *Generalgouvernement*.⁶⁸

Likewise, the *Sonderkommando* uprising's importance in Auschwitz-Birkenau has been overstated. They only managed to destroy one crematorium, leaving several others operational, which only had a minimal effect on the disposal of bodies. The uprising did arguably scare Himmler: almost a month after the uprising on November 2, 1944, he ordered the cessation of all gassings in the camp, and on November 26 he ordered the gas chambers and crematoria to be destroyed and for all

evidence of murder to be eliminated. The last transport to Auschwitz-Birkenau arrived on January 5, 1945, and on January 18 58,000 prisoners were sent on death marches into Germany before the Soviet troops liberated the camp on January 22 to find the 5,000 prisoners left behind.⁶⁹ However, the shutdown of the camp cannot be attributed in any way to the *Sonderkommando* uprising, but rather to the threat of the advancing Soviets. Destroying all traces of murder was of paramount concern to Himmler since the Soviets had overtaken the Majdanek death camp so quickly in July 1944 that nothing could be destroyed and photographs started to circulate about the killing apparatuses.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Even if one were to accept Raul Hilberg's limited definition of "resistance" only comprising cases of armed resistance, there are still three major cases of Jewish 'resistance' in the death camps. The armed uprisings and escape attempts in Treblinka, Sobibór and Auschwitz-Birkenau, although unsuccessful in that they did not accomplish a mass escape or destroy the Nazi's killing capacity, must be seen as examples of resistance to Nazi dehumanisation attempts. While the motivations of each person who participated in these uprisings and escapes were different, they all shared a belief that they could not sit idly by while their fellow Jews were murdered on a scale unparalleled in human history. Although their revolts had little impact on the course of the Holocaust, they serve as examples not only to modern Jews, but to all people, that it is always possible to

preserve one's dignity and humanity, even in the face of cruel and certain death.

Endnotes

- 1 David M. Crowe, *The Holocaust: Roots, History, and Aftermath* (Boulder, CO, 2008), 244.
- 2 The term 'Jewish question' is quite nebulous, though in terms of the Nazis, it referred to the 'problem' of what to do with all of Germany's (and then Europe's) Jews since they were not welcome in the racially-pure Aryan Reich.
- 3 Memorandum from Hermann Göring to Reinhard Heydrich, July 31, 1941. Quoted in Roderick Stackelberg and Sally A. Winkle, eds., *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook: An Anthology of Texts* (London and New York, 2002), 340.
- 4 Crowe, *Holocaust*, 228.
- 5 Testimony of Rudolf Höss, April 15, 1946. Quoted in Stackelberg and Winkle 2002: 372.
- 6 Yitzhak Arad, "Jewish Prisoner Uprisings in the Treblinka and Sobibor Extermination Camps," in *The Nazi Holocaust: Vol. 7 Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust*, ed. Michael R. Marrus (Westport, CT, 1989), 240; Crowe, *Holocaust*, 239-41.
- 7 Konnilyn G. Feig, *Hitler's Death Camps: The Sanity of Madness* (New York & London, 1981), 295.
- 8 Samuel Rajzman, "Uprising in Treblinka," in *They Fought Back: The Story of the Jewish Resistance in Nazi Europe*, ed. and trans. Yuri Suhl (New York, 1967), 128.
- 9 Feig, *Death Camps*, 296; Crowe, *Holocaust*, 247.
- 10 Feig, *Death Camps*, 296.
- 11 Ibid., 309-10.
- 12 Witold Chrostowski, *Extermination Camp Treblinka* (London and Portland, OR, 2004), 87.
- 13 Samuel Willenberg, *Surviving Treblinka*, ed. Wladyslaw T. Bartoszewski, trans. Naftali Greenwood (Oxford, 1989), 139; Chrostowski, *Treblinka*, 89.
- 14 Isaiah Trunk, *Jewish Responses to Nazi Persecution: Collective and Individual Behavior in Extremis* (New York, 1979), 265-67; Feig, *Death Camps*, 310.

- 15 Crowe, *Holocaust*, 249.
- 16 Feig, *Death Camps*, 310; Chrostowski, *Treblinka*, 90.
- 17 Crowe, *Holocaust*, 250.
- 18 Feig, *Death Camps*, 310; Crowe, *Holocaust*, 250.
- 19 Quoted in Crowe, *Holocaust*, 250.
- 20 Feig, *Death Camps*, 309; Crowe, *Holocaust*, 250.
- 21 Alexander Pechersky, "Revolt in Sobibor," in *They Fought Back: The Story of the Jewish Resistance in Nazi Europe*, ed. and trans. Yuri Suhl (New York, 1967), 7.
- 22 Feig, *Death Camps*, 285-86; Crowe, *Holocaust*, 244.
- 23 Feig, *Death Camps*, 287.
- 24 Crowe, *Holocaust*, 244.
- 25 Feig, *Death Camps*, 286.
- 26 Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor: A History of a Nazi Death Camp*, ed. Bob Moore, trans. Karin Dixon (Oxford and New York, 2007), 148.
- 27 Crowe, *Holocaust*, 245.
- 28 Pechersky, "Revolt," 16.
- 29 Schelvis, *Sobibor*, 152.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 154.
- 31 Feig, *Death Camps* 290; Schelvis, *Sobibor*, 156; Crowe, *Holocaust*, 246.
- 32 Quoted in Crowe, *Holocaust*, 246.
- 33 Feig, *Death Camps*, 290.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 290-92. There is some debate over the numbers. Crowe, *Holocaust*, 246 says that 320 people escaped the camp; 80 were killed immediately after while 170 were captured; 90 were killed as partisans or by the Poles and only 62 survived the war (9 being from earlier escapes).
- 35 Testimony of Rudolf Höss, Nuremberg Trial, April 15, 1946, in Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham (eds.) *Documents on Nazism, 1919-1945* (London, 1974), 490.
- 36 The sorting area was called "Canada" because Canada was seen as a very rich country. What better name for an area full of confiscated wealth?
- 37 Feig, *Death Camps*, 363.
- 38 Crowe, *Holocaust*, 262.
- 39 Krzysztof Dunin-Wasowicz, *Resistance in the Nazi Concentration Camps 1933-1945* (Warszawa, 1982), 236. Feig, *Death Camps*, 363 mentions that a French Jew named 'David' was also involved in the leadership.

- 40 Feig, *Death Camps*, 364; Dunin-Wasowicz, *Resistance*, 236; Hermann Langbein, "The Auschwitz Underground," in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994), 500.
- 41 Langbein, "Auschwitz Underground," 500.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid., 501.
- 44 Langbein, "Auschwitz Underground," 501. Feig, *Death Camps*, 364 notes that the case of Filip Müller, a possible survivor, has recently come to light.
- 45 Langbein, "Auschwitz Underground," 502; Crowe, *Holocaust*, 263.
- 46 Quoted in Feig, *Death Camps*, 364.
- 47 Quoted in Crowe, *Holocaust*, 245.
- 48 Quoted in Schelvis, *Sobibor*, 150.
- 49 Quoted in Trunk, *Jewish Responses*, 263.
- 50 Willenberg, *Surviving*, 128.
- 51 Quoted in Trunk, *Jewish Responses*, 268.
- 52 Quoted in Arad, "Uprisings," 276.
- 53 Tzipora Hager Halivni, "The Birkenau Revolt: Poles Prevent a Timely Insurrection," in *The Nazi Holocaust: Vol. 7 Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust*, ed. Michael R. Marrus (Westport, CT, 1989), 301.
- 54 Nathan Cohen, "Diaries of the *Sonderkommando*," in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994), 528.
- 55 Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (New York, 2007), 559.
- 56 Chrostowski, *Treblinka*, 92.
- 57 Pechersky, "Revolt," 7.
- 58 Chrostowski, *Treblinka*, 85; Schelvis, *Sobibor*, 157.
- 59 Langbein, "Auschwitz Underground," 497-98; Crowe, *Holocaust*, 262.
- 60 Pechersky, "Revolt," 7.
- 61 Langbein, "Auschwitz Underground," 485.
- 62 Ibid., 485-88.
- 63 Chrostowski, *Treblinka*, 92.
- 64 Langbein, "Auschwitz Underground," 500.
- 65 Feig, *Death Camps*, 311; Crowe, *Holocaust*, 2008: 250-51.
- 66 Feig, *Death Camps*, 285, 292.
- 67 Friedländer, *Years*, 559; Crowe, *Holocaust*, 247..

- 68 Crowe, *Holocaust*, 241.
69 Feig, *Death Camps*, 364.
70 Friedländer, *Years*, 628.

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“For Zion’s Sake I Will Not Keep Silent”:¹

The Jewish Abolitionists

Richard Henry Kreitner

“No religion and no legislation of ancient times could in its inmost spirit be so decidedly opposed to slavery as was the Mosaic; and no people, looking at its own origin, would feel itself more strongly called to the removal of slavery than the people of Israel. A religion which so sharply emphasized the high dignity of man, as being made in the image of God; a legislation, based on that very idea of man’s worth, and which, in all its enactments, insisted not only upon the highest justice, but also upon the tenderest pity and forbearance, especially towards the necessitous and the unfortunate; a people, in fine, which had itself smarted under the yoke of slavery, and had become a nation only by emancipation, - would necessarily be solicitous to do away, wherever it was practicable, with the unnatural state of slavery, by which human nature is degraded.”²

James Buchanan, the fifteenth President of the United States, had one foot out the door of the White House as he was yielding to the younger and mostly unproven Abraham Lincoln. With the disintegration of the young republic nearly a reality, and with both options and hope quickly diminishing, he asked his fellow Americans to recognize January

4, 1861, as “a day ... set apart for Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer throughout the Union.” He “recommend[ed] that the People assemble on that day according to their several forms of worship, to keep it as a solemn Fast.”³ By keeping his undeniably religious appeal explicitly nondenominational, Buchanan appealed to what is sometimes called the “American civil religion,” one of the basic tenets of which is that America is a country favoured with God’s good graces, its dramatic history the work of His merciful hands. Buchanan pleaded,

Let our fervent prayers ascend to His Throne that He would not desert us in this hour of extreme peril, but remember us as he did our fathers in the darkest days of the revolution; and preserve our Constitution and our Union, the work of their hands, for ages yet to come. ... Let me invoke every individual ... to feel a personal responsibility to God and his country for keeping this day holy, and for contributing all in his power to remove our actual and impending difficulties.⁴

Morris Jacob Raphall, a Swedish-born scholar and rabbi at New York’s B’nei Jeshurun Synagogue, answered Buchanan’s plea in a rather curious way. He delivered a controversial sermon — Max Kohler, a typically calm and detached Jewish historian of the early twentieth century, called it “Dr. Raphall’s outburst”⁵ — defending slavery as biblically-sanctioned and entirely compatible with Jewish ethics. Of a Brooklyn rabbi with contrary opinions, Raphall asked,

How dare you, in the face of the sanction and protection afforded to slave property in the Ten Commandments – how dare you denounce slaveholding as a sin? When

you remember that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job – the men with whom the Almighty conversed, with whose names he emphatically connects his own most holy name, and to whom He vouchsafed to give the character of “perfect, upright, fearing God and eschewing evil” (Job i.8) – that all these men were slaveholders, does it not strike you that you are guilty of something very little short of blasphemy?⁶

Raphall by no means represented the American Jewish public as a whole, but neither did he represent its absolute antithesis. In the North, there were both Jewish abolitionists and passionate defenders of the South, which itself was also home to Jews of varying opinion on slavery. There was no monolithic Jewish position on the issue because there was no monolithic Jewish position on anything at the time. The 1853 report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society attempted to explain why this was the case:

As citizens [the Jews] deem it their policy to have every one choose whichever side he may deem best to promote his own interest and the welfare of his country. They have no organization of an ecclesiastical body to represent their general views, no General Assembly or its equivalent. The American Jews have two newspapers, but they do not interfere in any discussion which is not material to their religion. It cannot be said that the Jews have formed any denominational opinion on the subject of American slavery.⁷

Furthermore, there were then still no national organizations specifically designated as representatives and advocates of the American Jewish community. Just as Protestant-style congregationalism splintered the

Jewish community into religious disunity, atomizing each synagogue into an essentially sovereign entity, the lack of a common national voice led to splintered Jewish opinions on the most prominent political issue of the day: the institution of slavery in the southern United States.

This paper will examine the various American Jewish opinions on the subject, with a focus on Jewish abolitionists in particular. The main question at stake here is to what extent their Judaism informed their abolitionism. Was their abolitionism a direct result of their identity as Jews, or were the two identities merely tangential, unconnected and accidental? This investigation will conclude that although Jewish opinion was rather diverse on the controversial matter, many Jews answered the criticism issued by the aforementioned 1853 report, which challenged them, almost tauntingly, to be true to their history and to end their hypocrisy: "The objects of so much mean prejudice and unrighteous oppression as the Jews have been for ages, surely they, it would seem, more than any other denomination, ought to be the enemies of caste and the friends of universal freedom."⁸ Many Jews argued and acted explicitly as Jews, and in the name of their religion against the institution of American slavery.

First, it is necessary to clarify some ambiguities in the preceding discussion of Morris Jacob Raphall and his inflammatory sermon. By today's standards, it would be inappropriate to judge people such as Raphall who appear to have voluntarily placed themselves on the wrong side of history, as views such as his are often derisively labeled. For one, Raphall's sermon, "Bible View of Slavery," espoused something

other than what might be considered the traditional religious defense of southern slavery offered in his day. While Raphall did think of the institution as divinely endorsed and beyond moral disapprobation, he did not think slavery was being practiced in the southern states in the way God intended it, or in the way the Hebrews practiced it in ancient times. For slavery to be biblically legitimate, Raphall said, "The slave [must be considered] a *person* in whom the dignity of human nature is to be respected; *he has rights*. Whereas, the heathen view of slavery which prevailed at Rome, and which I am sorry to say is adopted in the South, reduces the slave to a *thing*, and a thing can have no rights" (emphases in original).⁹ Though making this distinction did not prevent Raphall from attacking abolitionists in the most vitriolic terms, mentioning it carves a certain niche for Raphall in what was then a crowded field of orators espousing their respective positions on slavery.

In an 1897 article on the Jewish abolitionist movement, the historian Max Kohler wrote that Diaspora Jews had a long history of both holding and trading slaves going back to at least the early Middle Ages. When Jews began establishing themselves as a sizable community in the New World, they participated in the American version of the institution to as great an extent as any other people did. Kohler reported that Jews owned slaves in New Amsterdam less than a decade after their arrival, and that "at least one New York Jew was engaged in bringing slaves over from Guinea" in the early eighteenth century.¹⁰ Newport's Jews were also deeply involved in the slave trade right up to the Revolution, in which

several slaves owned by Newport Jews were forced to fight.¹¹ During this early settlement in America, Jews had to do whatever they could to survive, and it was no time for them to deliver grandiose harangues on the evils of slavery. "Given the institution," Kohler wrote, "it is not hard to account for the fact that so receptive and assimilative a people as the Jews should have adopted it from the peoples in whose midst they were living."¹² Indeed, the story of the first Jews in America is one of using economic means to achieve political and social acceptance, if not complete integration. The idea of Jews not speaking out against slavery when they otherwise might have but for primarily commercial reasons is a recurring theme throughout the two centuries during which they were in contact with the institution. Of northern Jews, who did not publicly announce their anti-slavery views, even in later times when such views were not wholly unheard of, Kohler wrote:

Business and trade policy ... rendered such avowals inexpedient. Nor, many argued, need they feel called upon to take sides as to dangerous political issues. Still others deemed it wise policy to keep on good terms with Southern voters; still others were frightened by the revolutionary and impractical or anarchistic ravings of certain abolitionist leaders. In the South, too, it frequently became dangerous for residents who could afford to keep slaves, not to do so. Such conduct was regarded as suspicious, and carried with it social and business disadvantages.¹³

Nevertheless, not all Jewish anti-abolitionism was economically motivated. Mordecai Manuel Noah, the most prominent Jewish voice of

America's early national period, began his public career as an opponent of the expansion of slavery. However, as Noah aged, his views on the subject began to grow drastically more conservative and he embraced a full defence of states' rights. His biographer Jonathan Sarna reports that as Noah saw it, "the Union was paramount and not subject to compromise. Patriotism and national security demanded that anti-slavery forces yield in the face of southern hostility."¹⁴ Like many other anti-abolitionist opinion leaders, both Jewish and Gentile, who would follow him, Noah argued that abolitionists, rather than supporters of slavery, were the main threat to the preservation of the Union.

Morris Jacob Raphall, who incidentally delivered the eulogy at Noah's funeral in 1851, was not the only prominent American Jew who ever publicly maintained and defended the acceptability of slavery. Isaac Leeser, who was then at the helm of Philadelphia's Congregation Beth-El-Emeth, agreed with Raphall regarding the religious legality of the institution, but denied him the point that slavery is founded on racial superiority and divine condemnation of the black race. Rather, he endorsed slavery largely for economic reasons, and because he believed abolitionists to be the primary threat to the Union. Furthermore, Leeser complained of Raphall, "Though the sermon is well put together, we must again express our regret that it was preached in one of our synagogues; they are not places for political discussions."¹⁵ At a time when anti-Semitism was flourishing with a ubiquity never before experienced in America, many Jews believed it could only jeopardize the security of the Jews as a people

to publicly announce themselves as taking what was then a controversial position on an issue with only indirect religious implications. They saw no reason to conjure enemies where there previously had been none. Samuel Isaacs of New York, editor of *The Jewish Messenger*, was one such moderate, who

did not preach anti-slavery sermons, yielding to the outcry against 'politics in the pulpit,' but was recognized as a warm advocate of liberty, and wrote unreservedly in favor of the union and the Lincoln policy at the beginning of the Civil war, a time when there was considerable public indecision.¹⁶

Some, as will be seen in a moment, did not care for such diffidence.

The views of another other major American Jewish figure of the time, Isaac Mayer Wise, are somewhat debated. Historians' uncertainty is a reflection of the ideological vacillations of Wise, who was constantly mediating between the relative conservatism of Leeser on his right, and David Einhorn, whose views will be discussed shortly. While the early twentieth century historian Max Kohler believed Wise to be one of the Jews who defended slavery, if only for pragmatic reasons, Wise's biographer, Max B. May, saw no basis for this assertion whatsoever: "[The writings of Wise that Kohler references] do not contain even a scintilla of evidence to that effect, and not a syllable from which such an inference could be drawn."¹⁷ May, however, in the ensuing passage, does not provide Wise's position on slavery itself but rather on the approaching civil war. In an article he wrote for *The Israelite*, "Silence our Policy," the title itself

advertised Wise's prescription for the recommended attitude of American Jews. I could find no evidence to substantiate May's passionate disavowal of Kohler's statement that Wise opposed slavery as an institution, but opposed more strongly rabble-rousing abolitionists who were seemingly willing to destroy the Union before acquiescing to the perpetuation of slavery. This prioritization of abolition over preservation of the Union was another major divide in Jewish opinion on the subject.

As was mentioned earlier, Wise's interlocutor from the left was the noted Rabbi David Einhorn, who was also one of the founding members of the anti-slavery Republican Party in his hometown of Baltimore, Maryland. Einhorn was the most prominent representative of that rare specimen, a Jewish abolitionist who explicitly appealed to his religious beliefs as the basis for his anti-slavery activism. As opposed to such vacillators as Wise and Leeser, Kohler reported:

Einhorn, however, threw restraints and policy to the winds in his righteous indignation at this perversion of the position of Judaism, and at such endeavours to stem the great moral awakening by appeals to religion against it. In uncompromising, rigorous, earnest and convincing terms, he exposed the fallacy of this stand, and assailed [Raphall] both from the pulpit and in the press.¹⁸

Einhorn's position was so unpopular in Baltimore — Maryland was a border state, with markedly Southern sympathies — that his physical security was threatened, leading to his voluntary exile in Philadelphia. Einhorn represented the most prominent of those Jews willing to subordinate the preservation of the Union, which had up to that point

been a very good thing for the Jewish people, to the priority of wiping out the abominable institution of slavery, which was a blight upon the consciences of ethically-enlightened men such as himself.

It may at first appear strange that the radical reformer David Einhorn was the only one among the big three American Jewish leaders of the time to denounce slavery from an explicitly Jewish perspective. Einhorn, after all, espoused the most rarefied, philosophical, non-orthodox Judaism of the time, whereas both Leeser and Wise were more willing to preserve some of the conservative components of prior Jewish traditions. Einhorn was the rabbi who went to the greatest extremes in denouncing ancient Jewish rituals and customs as wholly inapplicable to life in nineteenth century America. Why, then, was he alone among the three in outlining his position against slavery in explicitly Jewish terms?

Although we have now entered the realm of historical speculation, it is possible to offer an educated guess on the subject. Einhorn, influenced greatly by German philosophy and culture, rejected the classification of Jews as an ethno-national “people.” He believed in a rarefied form of ethical monotheism, that the Jews were a people only insofar as they were united by common ethical beliefs. If Einhorn perceived the likes of Leeser and Wise to be prioritizing the preservation of the Union above all else mostly because America had been such a beneficial haven for the Jews as a *people*, perhaps his prioritization of abolition over all else was a way for him to attack the more conservative depiction of the Jews as a distinct ethno-national group. While this theory does not assume that Einhorn

was not repulsed by slavery, it argues that other, perhaps non-ethical, motivations entered into his political calculations.

However, as Kohler noted, "Einhorn was not alone at the beginning of the war in his espousal on behalf of Judaism of the anti-slavery cause."¹⁹ For instance, Bernhard Felsenthal, a Chicago rabbi and Einhorn protégé, made the connection between Judaism and abolitionism quite explicit by arguing, "If anyone, it is the Jew, above all others who should have the most burning and irreconcilable hatred for the 'peculiar institution' of the South."²⁰ Kohler cited one Frenchman, Adolph Cremieux, founder of the *Alliance Israelite Universelle*, arguing that Jews, given their history, had a special responsibility to fight for emancipation of the American slaves: "He himself so strongly emphasized the connection between Jewish emancipation and the emancipation of the negro slave."²¹ Essenian Jews, Cremieux noted, were the world's first abolitionists. He also explains Jews were also "the first to abolish human sacrifices, and to turn away with horror from the shedding of human blood in the religious ceremonies."²² Gustav Gottheil, who later became one of the first American rabbis to embrace the Zionist project, published a series of lectures entitled "Moses versus Slavery."²³ The young and passionate Abram J. Dittenhoefer, later a New York judge, was motivated to join the abolitionist cause by Ohio Senator Benjamin Wade's striking denunciation on the floor of the United States of southern Senator Judah P. Benjamin as "an Israelite with Egyptian principles."^{24, 25}

The Polish-born biblical scholar Michael Heilprin, a veteran of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution, refuted Raphall's pro-slavery conclusion vociferously and directly in a January 11, 1861, editorial in the *New York Tribune*, arguing that the rabbi's interpretations of various parts of the Hebrew scriptures had been superficial, erroneous, and far too literal. Referencing the denunciation of Judah P. Benjamin, Heilprin asked, "Must the stigma of Egyptian principles be fastened on the people of Israel by Israelitish lips themselves? Shall the enlightened and humane of this country ask each other, 'Are these the people of God, who have come from his land?'"²⁶

Like Heilprin, Moses Mielziner, another Polish-born biblical scholar and a Reform rabbi in America, examined the issue of American slavery in "Slavery Among the Ancient Hebrews," a two-part paper he wrote in the 1850s, an extended quote from which serves as the epigram to the present work. One of Mielziner's main concerns is to establish the historical fact that ancient Hebrews treated their slaves with the utmost decency and dignity, distinguishing their institution as entirely unlike that being practised in the American south. Although the author refrains from explicitly discussing the volatile American situation, it is quite clear that his personal position on the issue is quite different from that of Morris Jacob Raphall. It is difficult to read the following passage without reflecting on its implications for the Jewish position on American slavery:

The provision of the [Hebrews'] law, that men-servants and maid-servants should have a day of rest in every

week, in which they were to be free from all labor, would of itself insure them against excessive exertions ... The ever living memory of the hard toil of the Hebrews in their Egyptian bondage, from which the divine compassion delivered them, taking vengeance on their oppressors, and the injunctions to spare and pity all strangers and helpless ones, contained in God's law, and frequently recalled in connection with these tribulations, must have had a most important influence upon their own treatment of those they held in bondage.²⁷

In addition to the ranks of David Einhorn, Bernhard Felsenthal, and Michael Heilprin, who, amongst others already mentioned, enunciated their abolitionist political beliefs as if they were merely the logical extension of their Judaic beliefs, there were also a host of Jewish abolitionists who did not explicitly mix those two facets of their identities. Among these activists included Ernestine Rose,²⁸ Isidore Bush,²⁹ and August Bondi.³⁰ Although they each embraced their Judaism publicly as no small part of their core identities, they framed their abolitionist arguments and actions only in secular, or at least, religiously nondenominational, terms, appealing to nothing more Judeo-specific than the same American civil religion referenced by President Buchanan.

The conclusion of this investigation, that a certain portion of those Jews involved in the American anti-slavery movement did, in fact, draw upon their identities as Jews to inform their political attitudes, signals that something remarkable was occurring in American Jewish life during the slavery debate. Whereas some claimed to be fighting above all for the preservation of the Union, it was really those unapologetic abolitionists,

fighting for the full realization of the principles laid down in the United States' founding documents, whom history has recorded as having taken the truly principled and patriotic stance. Those aforementioned abolitionist Jews, rather than the reactionary Noah or the cautious Leeser, grasped the spirit of their newly adopted nation, and its importance for the Jews in particular. For Einhorn and others to have jeopardized everything in defense of abolitionist principles, and to do so explicitly in the name of Judaism, meant bracketing traditional Jewish instincts of self-preservation. That prioritization implies a novel sense of security for a people who had wandered the globe in search of it. It implies further that at least some Jews were beginning to recognize the United States as their new and rightful home.

Endnotes

1 Isaiah 62:1

2 Moses Mielziner, "Slavery Among the Ancient Hebrews II," *The American Theological Review* 10 (1861), 3.

3 *The American Annual Cyclopedia* (D. Appleton and Company, 1868), 294.

4 Ibid.

5 Max Kohler, "The Jews and the American Anti-Slavery Movement," *Publications* 5 (American Jewish History Society, 1897), 157.

6 Morris Jacob Raphall, *Bible View of Slavery*, (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1861), 28-9.

7 Max Kohler, "Anti-Slavery," 143-4.

8 Kohler, "Anti-Slavery," 144.

9 Raphall, *Bible*, 37-8.

10 Kohler, "Anti-Slavery," 141.

11 Ibid., 142.

12 Ibid., 140.

13 Kohler, "Anti-Slavery," 147.

- 14 Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew* (New York: Holmes and Meir, 1981), 109.
- 15 Lance Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 222.
- 16 Max Kohler, "Jews and the American Anti-Slavery Movement II," *Publications* 9 (American Jewish Historical Society, 1901), 51.
- 17 Max B. May, *Isaac Mayer Wise* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1916), 245.
- 18 Kohler, "Anti-Slavery I," 150.
- 19 Kohler, "Anti-Slavery I," 151.
- 20 Saul S. Friedman, *Jews and the American Slave Trade* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 213.
- 21 Kohler, "Anti-Slavery II," 48.
- 22 Ibid., 54.
- 23 Kohler, "Anti-Slavery I," 152.
- 24 Kohler, "Anti-Slavery II," 52.
- 25 Senator Benjamin's position on slavery is not discussed in this paper because his political position in the South was too fragile for him to articulate his position in favour of slavery from an explicitly Jewish perspective. Furthermore, he rarely spoke publicly of his Judaism and is widely assumed to have been largely unobservant. See, Eli N. Evans, *Judah P. Benjamin*, (New York: The Free Press, 1988).
- 26 Michael Heilprin, "Michael Heilprin's Anti-Slavery Editorial" from *New York Tribune* (January 11, 1861), Jewish-American History Foundation, <http://www.jewishhistory.com/>
- 27 Moses Mielziner, "Slavery Among the Ancient Hebrews," *The American Theological Review* 11 (1861), 11.
- 28 *Mistress of Herself*, ed. Paula Doress-Worters (New York: The Feminist Press, 2007).
- 29 J.A. Wax, "Isidore Bush, American Patriot and Abolitionist," *Historica Judaica* V (October 1943), 183-203.
- 30 Leon Hühner, "Some Jewish Associates of John Brown," *Publications* 23 (American Jewish Historical Society, 1915), 55-78.

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- . "The Jews and the American Anti-Slavery Movement." *Publication* 5 (American Jewish Historical Society 1897):143-4.
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"FOR ZION'S SAKE I WILL NOT KEEP SILENT"

A Historiographical Analysis of Yakub Al Qirqisani's *Kitab Al Anwar*

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Despite extensive scholarly research on Qirqisani's magnum opus, the *Kitab Al Anwar*, there has never been a comprehensive analysis of scholarship on the book, which is the most extensive work by a Karaite author on the subjects of philosophy, history and *halakha* (Jewish Law). This study seeks firstly to summarize the religious thought of Abu Yusuf Yakub Al Qirqisani and attempt to place his writings in an appropriate historical context that will enhance the meaning of the text. Then, it will analyze the historiographical progression of scholarship on the *Kitab Al Anwar* and identify some of the main problems that limit the understanding of the text. This study will then provide an independent reading of the chapter entitled "An Account of Jewish Sects" from the *Kitab Al Anwar*. This chapter has received the most scholarly attention and has most significantly contributed to the understanding of Karaite historiography.

The *Kitab Al Anwar waál maraqib* (translated as "The Book of Lights and Watchtowers") was written in 927 C.E. by Abu Yusuf Yakub Al Qirqisani.¹ It is the most comprehensive and accessible work written

by a Karaite scholar from this period and provides us with detailed insight into the religious thought of the greatest Karaite scholar to emerge during the sect's golden age. The book is divided into thirteen sections that discuss a range of religious ideas and issues, most of which concern the philosophical and biblical foundations of Jewish law. The work is considered a milestone in Karaite *halakha*, philosophy and historiography.

Yakub Al Qirqisani was likely born in either Qirqisiya, a town located in the ancient Circesium in Upper Mesopotamia, or in Karkasan, a small town near Baghdad.² Yakub Al Qirqisani was well-read in contemporary scientific, theological and philosophical Arabic literature. He wrote of having personal relationships with religious figures of various other faiths, including Jacob Ben Ephraim al Sami, a Rabbanite Jew, and Jesus Sexa, a Christian bishop.³ Despite being a scholar of immense intellectual stature, Qirqisani seems to have been fairly unpopular amongst his contemporary Jewish theologians. There is no evidence of a Hebrew translation of any of his writings, which likely kept his works out of the hands of later Karaites in Crimea, Egypt and Europe. Furthermore, Arabic texts contemporary to Qirqisani do not reflect a widespread familiarity with his work.⁴

The historical context of Qirqisani's writings is critically important. Scholars unanimously recognize the period of the tenth to the eleventh centuries as being the "Golden Age of Karaism," as Karaite writers during this period produced an unparalleled volume of writings on theology, philosophy and religious law.⁵ Saadiah Gaon⁶ (882-942 C.E.),

a contemporary of Qirqisani, was undoubtedly influenced by Qirqisani's writings. The importance Saadiah placed on the Karaite's work is clear from the numerous polemics he wrote against the Karaites, including Qirqisani, before being appointed Gaon in 928 C.E.. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider all the facets and repercussions of the historical position and significance of Qirqisani and his writings,⁷ there are a number of general themes that demand attention:⁸

- (1) Unprecedented tensions between Rabbanites and Karaites (largely fuelled by the anti-Karaite polemics of Saadiah Gaon^{9,10}) dominated the Jewish climate of the tenth century.
- (2) The fluid interchange of ideas between rationalistic and speculative Islamic groups and Jewish dissident groups.¹¹
- (3) There was a lack of cohesion amongst tenth century Karaites; for example, the tensions between the Karaites of Jerusalem (namely Daniel Al Qumisi and Saul Ben Masilah) and the "Eastern Karaites" (namely proponents of Qirqisani's rationalistic school and Salmon Ben Yeruham) that significantly diminished the strength of Karaism as a dynamic opponent to normative Rabbinic Judaism.¹²
- (4) The heightened belief in messianism and consequent tensions that characterized the century and half preceding Qirqisani's writings. These social and religious pressures were characterized by heightened messianic tensions. These tensions were manifested in a number of events and movements, namely the Abu Isa uprising, the Yughdanites, and the Avelei Tzion, or Mourners of Zion.¹³

Although the historical circumstance in which Karaism developed is too broad a topic to tackle in this paper alone, these events and movements may be helpful in understanding Qirqisani.

Reworded Slogan, or Innovative Mission Statement?

Since Karaism's formative years in the early ninth century,¹⁴ the phrase "search scripture well" has been used to represent the strict scripturalist tendencies of the movement. On its own, the phrase resembles the Rabbinic axiom, "turn it [the Torah] and turn it over again because everything is contained within it."¹⁵ However, the Karaite axiom reads "*happisu be-orayta shappir veal tishanu al daati*,"¹⁶ which taken in its proper context means "search scripture well and do not rely on my opinion." The phrase now reads as a rejection of the received knowledge characteristic of the Rabbinic tradition. This has two implications. Firstly, it can be understood as a promotion of a kind of scripturalism that rejects the Mishnah, Talmud or any sort of extra-biblical law while reinforcing the unique authority of the Torah. Secondly, it rejects the Rabbinic *shalshet* (chain of tradition) that is based on the rulings of Rabbinic masters that is later transmitted to disciples.¹⁷

In order to clarify the implications of this axiom, it is helpful to briefly examine Meira Polliack's analysis of the motivations of early Karaite sectarians. In *Rethinking Karaism: Between Judaism and Islam*, she claims that the main intellectual impetus for the formation of the Karaite movement lay in the dual effect of the codification of the Babylonian Talmud and the subsequent Muslim conquests of North Africa, Spain

and the East (632-732 C.E.) that allowed the Rabbinical authorities to exercise the binding authority of the newly codified Talmud.¹⁸ Polliack claims that, prior to the Muslim conquests, there were various Jewish communities that were untouched by Babylonian Rabbinic authorities in places like Northern Persia and North Africa. These communities held unique attitudes toward oral tradition that differed from the Babylonian authorities. She argues that with the culmination of the Muslim conquests in 732 C.E., the entire Jewish world came under the jurisdiction of the Babylonian Jewish leadership and that the Babylonians used this opportunity to exercise the authority of the Talmud over the entire Jewish world. Early forms of resistance to their jurisdiction, according to Polliack, generally took the form of a rejection of the Talmud, which had become a new source of authority for the Babylonian Jewish authorities. She claims that after a century of dissent, these parties were unified by a Babylonian sectarian, Benjamin Nahwandi, under the banner of Karaism. For these dissidents, scripturalism was a mode of resistance against the Babylonian Jewish authorities.¹⁹ Thus, Meira Polliack views the rise of Karaism as the result of an intellectual and religious crisis that was internal to the Jewish tradition. This context of resistance allows for a better understanding of the phrase “search scripture well, and do not rely on my opinion.”

If we accept Polliack’s claim that the Talmud and the system of transmission associated with it was new for many “proto-Karaites,” then we might understand the axiom as a rejection of the new traditions that the Babylonian Jews attempted to force upon proto-Karaites. Of course,

this is just one explanation of the rise of Karaism; there are other views in existence that consider contemporary Islamic parallels, and possible connections to earlier Jewish sectarian movements, to provide a better account of the formation of the Karaite movement. Although it is clear that we cannot claim Rabbinic Judaism is the antithesis to the implications noted above, if we accept Polliack's claim that proto-Karaite Jews were not comfortable or familiar with the style and traditions of the Talmud, then the implementation of the Talmudic system might have seemed contrary to the scripturalist traditions that were commonly practiced in their communities.

Sources contemporary to Qirqisani confirm that the Karaite axiom came under attack from several Rabbinic figures, including Saadiah Gaon. Saadiah claimed that for Karaites, *happisu* (usually translated as "search") was taken as a directive to search for a possible hidden meaning or alternative reading not implicit within the text. Saadiah wrote, "*Hippisu*, meaning the production or creation (*izhar wa-ijaad*) of something that did not [previously] exist, so that its existence becomes established."²⁰ Therefore, contrary to the scripturalism that defined the Karaite movement, Saadiah understood the Karaite interpretive enterprise as ungrounded in text and thus invalid.

In Chapter 10 of Book 2 of the *Kitab Al Anwar*, Qirqisani outlined his understanding of the axiom "search scripture well" and directly responded to Saadiah's criticism. Qirqisani argued, based on several biblical passages (Proverbs 2: 4-5, Psalms 77:7, Lamentations 3:40), that

Happisu never denotes the discovery of something new and that the term most commonly describes rational investigation. He argued that the true reality of the laws and commandments exists in one's soul, and it is necessary to "search for them (*yaffatishu anha*)," and to "seek (*wa-yabathu*)" in order to discover them. For Qirqisani, this did not mean the creation of something new, for the meaning is already within the Torah and within the reader's soul.²¹

The Religious Thought of Abu Yusuf Al Qirqisani

Before delving into analysis of the *Kitab Al Anwar*, it is important to evaluate scholarly opinions on Qirqisani's religious thought formed on the basis of analysis of textual evidence from the *Kitab Al Anwar* and his other writings. The evaluation of Qirqisani's theology is indebted to the thorough research of three outstanding scholars: Haggai Ben Shammai, Jacob Frank and Bruno Chiesa.

Qirqisani's religious convictions were rooted in rational speculation, or *ahl al nazar* and *bahth*. Qirqisani believed that speculation is valid because it either proves what is intuitively known to be correct, because its rejection leads to ignorance (*jahl*) or because the knowledge acquired by speculation becomes necessary (*daruri*), insofar as it is based on prior intuitive knowledge.²² Ben Shammai believes that Qirqisani placed rational speculation at the forefront of his religious beliefs because of opposition from contemporary Rabbinic figures such as Saadia. These religious leaders believed that rational speculation was prohibited on

religious grounds because it led to heresy and was invalid or inconsistent on logical grounds.²³ Haggai Ben Shammai outlines the importance of rational speculation for Qirqisani:

Further texts reveal that Qirqisani means actual [*sic*] speculation on all religious matters: since it is inadmissible that the tenets of all religions are either all true or all false, speculation is the only way to distinguish between true and false. Therefore rational speculation is a religious obligation, in addition to its being logically necessary.²⁴

For Qirqisani, rational speculation was essential in understanding of ambiguous aspects of scripture. He did not comment on why some aspects of scripture are ambiguous and some literal; however, ambiguous passages (*mutashabih*) were nonetheless problematic for him. According to Qirqisani, ambiguous expressions may lead to wrong opinions or may mislead the reader in the comprehension of a different passage. The only way to understand the non-literal interpretation of scripture is through rational speculation. Qirqisani derived what he believed to be the commandment to implement rational speculation from his interpretation of biblical texts. For example, Qirqisani referenced the following passage from Psalms:

The Torah of G-d is perfect, restoring the soul. The testimony of G-d is trustworthy, making the simple one wise. The orders of G-d are upright, gladdening the heart. The command of G-d is clear, enlightening the eyes. The fear of G-d is pure, enduring forever. The judgments of G-d are true, altogether righteous. (Psalm 19. 8-10)²⁵

Qirqisani read this passage as a five-step poetical expression of speculation that proves that knowledge is the truth.²⁶

Fred Astren places Qirqisani's emphasis on rational thinking in the greater intellectual context of the period. He argues that rationalism was a viable alternative to the Rabbanites' traditionalism during the medieval period. He writes, "Rationalism offered a reasonable angle from which to critique the traditionalism of the rabbis and to understand scripture."²⁷ Astren also points out that Karaite rationalists likely drew inspiration from contemporary Islamic developments in the Mutazilite group, which was battling against analogous traditionalist elements in the conservative Sunni camp.²⁸

Qirqisani classified man as has having a soul, based on the phrase from Genesis, "*nefesh hayah*" (living soul).²⁹ He argued that the difference between humans and animals is that animals understand through sense perception (*tarkib tab*), whereas man is endowed with understanding (*fahm*) and discernment (*tamyiz*), both of which require speech and language (*nutq*). Qirqisani asserted that the light of G-d in man's body described in the book of Proverbs is the rational spirit which enables him to perceive remote and hidden objects (Proverbs 20. 27).³⁰ Qirqisani claimed that truth can be established on five levels: (1) sense perception, (2) what is indicated by that which the senses perceive, (3) arithmetical or geometrical knowledge, (4) a conclusion founded on two or more premises, and (5) application of the power of a cause on every possible effect.³¹ Furthermore, Haggai Ben Shammai isolated four sources of knowledge

upon which Qirqisani relied for biblical interpretations and theology: (1) sense perception, (2) self-evidence, (3) demonstrative knowledge, and (4) tradition and transmitted knowledge.³²

Qirqisani's Views on Scripturalism and Transmitted Knowledge

Daniel Frank and Haggai Ben Shammai present two opposing views on Qirqisani's attitude towards transmitted knowledge. According to Ben Shammai, Qirqisani defined transmitted knowledge as "*khavar*," which in Arabic means "any statement" and in Islamic contexts is confined to mean a religious tradition or law that is orally transmitted. Ben Shammai argues that Qirqisani only accepted transmitted knowledge as valid in very few instances and that the main reason for the discussion of the topic was to refute Rabbinic claims of the divine nature of Oral Law. According to Ben Shammai, Qirqisani had three criteria for transmitted knowledge: (1) conformity with scripture, (2) rational proof, and (3) general consensus. He writes: "This criterion presupposes the 'logical' absurdity of premeditated agreement (*tawatu*) of a whole society on a lie. The general consensus must be proved to have existed successively from the first generation of the transmitters, which is called *al-asl* (the origin)."³³

In "The Limits of Karaite Scripturalism," Daniel Frank demonstrates that Haggai Ben Shammai's understanding of Qirqisani's attitude towards transmitted knowledge is not necessarily accurate. Frank argues that while Karaites generally tried to adhere to the strictest meaning of the text, they had to create a system for valid transmitted knowledge

that allowed them to step outside the boundaries of scripturalism when necessary. Frank defines scripturalism as a “dogmatic insistence on the primacy of Holy Scripture and its literal exposition.”³⁴ He argues that the adoption and acceptance of ancestral tradition (*naql*) meant that Karaites had a license to adopt certain practices without a scriptural basis, such as the use of wedding contracts, the procedures for ritual slaughter or the Karaite insistence that the calendar be determined on the basis of direct lunar observation.³⁵ Frank asserts that Karaite scholars nonetheless tried to stay as close to the literal meaning of the text as often as possible. In “The Exegetical Strategy of Abu Yusuf Al Qirqisani,” Bruno Chiesa takes Daniel Frank’s claim of a lenient adherence to scripturalism even further. He argues that the exegetical strategies of Qirqisani and those of Saadiah Gaon are actually very similar.³⁶ For example, Saadiah’s famous four principles that question the validity of a literal meaning of a biblical text³⁷ are identical to the exegetical attitude of Qirqisani:

It is possible to determine with nearly absolute certainty, that despite the different beliefs of the two exegetes in important religious questions, one Rabbinite, the other Karaite, they are both Jews. The central principle defining Qirqisani’s exegetical strategy is undoubtedly founded on that of Sa’adiah Gaon.³⁸ One must interpret The Scripture as a whole and complete text except for the cases when a passage defies our understanding of logic and when it causes confusion with another passage.³⁹

It is important for us to recognize another anomaly in Yakub Al Qirqisani’s scripturalist attitude. There is evidence from several of his commentaries on biblical texts in the *Kitab Al Anwar* that he did not

believe that scripture was “perfect,” but rather that it failed to include some important facts, events and tenets. It seems that Qirqisani believed that only through oral tradition (*naql*) and/or speculation can we discover the historical and religious truth contained in scripture. The best evidence of this position is found in Qirqisani’s discussion of Jeroboam, where he writes, “There are differences and changes which Scripture attributes to Jeroboam. It is possible that the changes and alterations which he made in the religious law were more numerous and that the Scripture did not report them but restricted itself to some of the most heinous.”⁴⁰ At another point, Qirqisani argues that two golden calves were instituted by Jeroboam for the purpose of substituting the two golden cherubs at the opening of the ark (Kings 1.18), a fact not mentioned or made explicit in the text.

These examples clearly indicate a leniency in the scripturalist attitude quite unlike the dogmatic devotion to scripture commonly attributed to Qirqisani and fellow Karaites by early historians of Karaism. These passages also reflect another idea: Qirqisani, and likely other Karaites, did not necessarily believe in the idea of a perfect transmission of an oral tradition.

An Introduction to the Problem

Historical descriptions of the Karaite movement are usually problematic because historians tend to make general statements about the movement based on a specific quality that they observe at one period in

the movement or in one writer. For example, Karaism is often referred to as a “messianic” and “Palestinocentric movement,” and while this was an accurate characterization of a segment of the movement in the tenth and eleventh centuries, it was not true of later, strongly Diasporic Karaite communities in Crimea and Egypt.⁴¹ The most common and inappropriate generalization is the claim that Karaism was totally bound to strict scripturalist ideologies. While this was true of some early Karaites, such as Benjamin Nahawendi, it is inappropriate to apply this statement to the whole movement. As noted in the previous section, scholars believe that Karaites like Yakub Al Qirqisani went beyond literal scripturalism to develop a legal system that, in a sense, mirrored the Talmudic system of the Rabbanites. Thus the student of Jewish history usually encounters Karaism in a generalized form, written by a scholar who is trying to explain the movement in the greater context of a specific phenomena or period in Jewish history.⁴² Equally problematic is the scholarly neglect of the individual Karaite writings.

Of all the medieval Karaite figures, Qirqisani has undoubtedly received the most scholarly attention. The discovery of the *Kitab Al Anwar* by Abraham Harkavy in the late nineteenth century intensified interest in Qirqisani as an author as well as his place in the medieval Jewish world and Karaite history in general. There are numerous potential explanations for this scholarly interest. Firstly, the *Kitab Al Anwar* exhibits far less brazen, anti-Rabbanite polemics than modern scholars had previously noted in Karaite writings. Secondly, Qirqisani provided unique and reliable

dating of several key historical events, notably the Abu Isa uprising.⁴³ Furthermore, the *Kitab Al Anwar* contains some of the most detailed extant information on Karaite *halakha* of the period. Finally, scholars who came from the school of thought associated with *Wissenschaft des Judentums* – a major force in early modern scholarship of Jewish history – would have favoured Qirqisani's text over other Karaite texts because of its focus on skeptical inquiry and the dominance of rationality in religion.

The result of these interpretations and analyses of the text was a scholarly approach that dealt with only specific portions of Qirqisani's text that coincided with or aided in investigation of the researcher's other interests. As will be discussed in greater detail, when the text did not provide them with answers to the questions they were looking for, these first scholars labelled the text as insufficient or ungrounded in the principles that Qirqisani claimed to have defined in his religious thought. The result is fragmented scholarship on the work, leaving the average student of Karaism with only partial, incomplete translations and commentaries of *Kitab Al Anwar* depending on the sections of the work that were of interest to a particular scholar.

Overview of Karaite Historiography as it Pertains to the *Kitab Al Anwar*

The *Kitab Al Anwar* first came to the attention of modern scholars through the work of Abraham Harkavy, who, in 1894, collected numerous fragments of the text and published a significant amount in the *Transactions of the Imperial Russian Archaeological Society*.⁴⁴ Harkavy was the first scholar to highlight the significance of Qirqisani's thought in the

medieval period. Alongside the publication of the text, Harkavy wrote commentaries in Russian⁴⁵ on selected chapters of the book. Most notable was his commentary on the first section, which deals with Qirqisani's account of Jewish and Christian sects from Jeroboam until the emergence of Karaism. Harkavy's commentary on the first chapter named Qirqisani as an extremely important medieval historian for modern scholarship on that time period. In the commentary Harkavy wrote:

On this subject they [Al Qirqisani's notices on the sects to be found in the introduction] are an original source, which was incompletely and incorrectly used by later writers on the same subject These notices are remarkable as coming from a Karaite author since, in general, Karaites are the most indifferent of men with regard to history, and in all the rich Karaite literature, both in Hebrew and Arabic, there is extremely little historical information, even concerning the Karaites themselves, and such as there is, is usually unreliable or confused. It is true that the bulk of Al Qirqisani's information was borrowed from the However he constitutes an exception in Karaite literature in that he interested himself in the sects and collected information about them.⁴⁶

From the time of Harkavy's publication of the text until the 1940s, only two scholars dealt with the *Kitab Al Anwar*. The first analysis of the text was by W. Bacher, who wrote "Qirqisani and His Work on Jewish and Christian Sects" in 1987. In the article, Bacher analyzes the significance of Qirqisani's account of Karaite history and the historical accuracy of Qirqisani's historical claims.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, Bacher's inability to read Russian prevented him from understanding the significance of Harkavy's groundbreaking commentary on the text.⁴⁸

By far the most substantial contribution to the study of Qirqisani's text came from Samuel Poznanski, the second scholar to follow Harkavy in the study of the *Kitab Al Anwar*. Poznanski was the first scholar to immerse himself in Karaite sources and to attempt to make historically grounded claims about the movement in its formative years. Between 1898 and the 1920s, Poznanski published dozens of articles discussing Karaite writings in the context of the polemical exchanges between Saadiah Gaon and the early Karaite leadership. Poznanski, a scholar of Talmud and the Gaonic period, wrote about Karaism as it pertained to Rabbinic leadership. He aimed to highlight the ways in which Karaite figures had construed and allegedly corrupted Jewish sources for polemical and ideological gains.⁴⁹ During the course of his academic career, Poznanski published over ten articles discussing the heated debate between the Rabbanite and Karaite camp. Poznanski published a series of five articles, entitled "The Karaite Literary Opponents of Sáadiah Gaon in the [Tenth to Eighteenth] Century,"⁵⁰ which traced the ways in which Karaites intentionally misinterpreted the writings of Saadiah to fortify their own position. Of particular significance is Poznanski's introduction to Mordechai Zultansky's *Zecher Kaddikim*, entitled "*Mavo al Ofen Ketab Ha-Karaim et Dibrey Yemeihem*" ("An Introduction to Karaites' Manner of Writing Their Own History"), which deals with Qirqisani's account of other, non-Karaite, Jewish sects that will be discussed below. To date, Poznanski's introduction is the only article written on Karaite historiography, and it investigates Qirqisani's own understanding of Karaite history.

There are a number of problems associated with Poznanski's analysis of Qirqisani. Poznanski opens his account of Qirqisani's writings by discussing the inability of Karaites to acknowledge the novelty of their own movement.⁵¹ This claim is simply not true. Although this issue will be explored to greater detail later, it is worth mentioning in the meantime that Salmon Ben Yeruham, a contemporary Karaite of Qirqisani, calls the Karaites "*Chadashim*" (newcomers), denying the antiquity of the movement.⁵² In Bruno Chiesa's "A Brief Note on Karaite Historiography," the author notes the problems permeating Poznanski's account of Qirqisani's writings:

Poznanski's interest lies more in tracing out the developments of Jewish-Karaite polemics than in evaluating Karaite works on their own merits. Looking for historical pieces of news he takes at face value historical data of quite different origin. Leaving aside any consideration of literary genre and linguistic difference Apparently his monolithic attitude prevented him from maintaining different attitudes towards past events.⁵³

Furthermore, Poznanski's approach to Qirqisani's text was laden with preconceived assumptions of what he would discover. When Poznanski did not get the particular answers that he was searching for from it, he simply concluded that, "Concerning all these questions it is difficult to find out any answer in Al Qirqisani's text."⁵⁴

The student of Qirqisani's text is also indebted to the work of Leon Nemoy (1901-1998), for bringing attention to and translating a significant amount of unpublished material from the *Kitab Al Anwar*. Like Poznanski, Nemoy was born in Tzarist Russia and was raised in a traditional Jewish

home, where he was educated in Talmudic and Rabbinic texts.⁵⁵ By the 1930s, Nemoy had mastered the nuances and style of Karaite Judeo-Arabic writings and began to write commentaries on Qirqisani's texts that were in stark contrast to Poznanski. Nemoy treated the *Kitab Al Anwar* as a piece of independent literature and focused the majority of his energy on translating sections of the book while providing very little commentary. However, when Nemoy did choose to provide commentary, he was often unable to remove himself from his own Jewish tradition. In 1939, Nemoy began copying the entire *Kitab Al Anwar* into his own handwritten manuscript of the text in the form of a photolithograph. Nemoy spent the rest of his life translating selected chapters of the *Kitab Al Anwar* that were of interest to him.

When researching Karaism, one finds only a fragmented historical analysis of Qirqisani's work. One has access to Poznanski's commentaries, which seek to discredit the contribution of Qirqisani to Karaism and Judaism. On the other hand, the other principle source, Nemoy's English translations of several important chapters of the *Kitab Al Anwar*, although it contains scarce commentaries, is one without any scholarly revision of the influential and overarching claims of Poznanski's work.

While more recent scholars, such as Chiesa, Frank, Astren and Shammai, have developed insights on the religious thought and context of Qirqisani's writings that seem to be independent of obvious discriminatory tendencies, they have not revised the historical assumptions of Poznanski or Harkavy in a substantial way. The exception to this trend is a lecture

delivered in 1988 at the University of Pavia by Chiesa entitled, "A Brief Note on Karaite Historiography," in which Chiesa calls for a revision of Poznanski's work on Karaite historiography and a re-examination of the significance of Qirqisani's writings. To this day, nobody has answered this call.

An Analysis of a Section of the *Kitab Al Anwar*

With awareness of this historiographical background, one can attempt to re-examine a section of the *Kitab Al Anwar* with the goal of shedding light on previously overlooked aspects of the text. Alternative explanations for problematic passages are sought wherever possible.

Chapter 1: An account of Jewish sects

The first chapter of the *Kitab Al Anwar* is a detailed survey of Jewish sectarians from the time of Jeroboam until Anan. The section was first studied by Abraham Harkavy, who wrote a detailed commentary on the chapter after its publication in 1894. The text was instantly popular for a number of reasons. Firstly, Qirqisani provided unique dating and some new information regarding a number of sectarian activities, including the Abu Isa uprising. Secondly, the text was the earliest, and to this date, one of the only records of a Karaite's attempt at writing a history of the movement. Moreover, the text provides the reader with a unique perspective of one way that Karaites viewed their connectivity with the Jewish tradition and past. Several translations of the chapter have appeared since Harkavy's

time. In 1952, Nemoy translated portions of the chapter into English for his *Karaite Anthology*, and Bruno Chiesa and W. Lockwood published a corrected translation of this chapter with a translated copy of Harkavy's Russian commentary in 1984.

The first section is broken down into nineteen subsections. Of particular significance to the present discussion of Qirqisani's significance are the first three subsections:

- (1) An introduction to the topic
- (2) A chronological account of the Jewish sects
- (3) A description of the doctrines which distinguish the Rabbanites from all other Jewish sects, except for those who practice what Qirqisani termed contradictory interpretive tools

Introduction

In the introduction to Qirqisani's discussion of Jewish sects, he quotes the following anonymous anti-Karaite polemic:

[I recognize neither Anan nor] Benjamin nor other of this class since they are heretics and associated with the Gentiles. I recognize only the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai who are the foundations and who were close to the prophets and received and passed on traditions from the prophets. In addition they are authorities in matters of language, besides which they make up the great majority.⁵⁶

He then comments on the passage,

Though someone might say that this is a better opinion than that which associates 'Anan with the Rabbanites

and claims that his way is essentially theirs, that which investigation imposes, that to which study leads, must be adopted, whether it be the opinion of the Rabbanites, or 'Anan' or yet others. What is more, if scholars or researchers should arrive at a conclusion which has never been put forward, this is to be adopted, in so far as it be not impugned and contain no fault.⁵⁷

Why would Yakub Al Qirqisani, a great defender of Karaism against Rabbinic authority, begin his work by stating that he rejects the authoritative distinction between the Rabbanites and Karaites and claiming that truth can be achieved only through study and investigation regardless of one's sect when he is about to enter into a rejection of such sectarianism?

There are two possible answers to this question. One might argue that statements that disregarded sectarian divisions and promoted a pursuit for a higher religious truth were common amongst Karaite writers during this period. For example, in the closing remarks of Benjamin Nahawendi's ninth century "Book of Rules," Nahawendi concludes his arguments with the following statement:

Let there be abundant peace to all the exiled, from me, Benjamin son of Moses ... I, who am dust and ashes beneath the soles of your feet, have written this book of Rules for you Karaites, so that you might pass judgments according to it upon your brethren Rabbanites and for which I could find no pertinent rule I have indicated the pertinent verse of Scripture. As for other rules, which are observed and recorded by the Rabbanites for which I could find no pertinent biblical verse, I have written them down also, so that you might observe them likewise if you so desire.⁵⁸

One might conclude, in comparing these two statements, that the distinction between Karaites and Rabbanites was not completely defined. Furthermore, it would appear that there proselytizing efforts were carried out by both camps. It is clear from both of these statements that these Karaite religious leaders were familiar with Rabbinic literature; perhaps a sharp, antagonistic division between the two groups had not yet developed. While the two statements seem to have different motivations – Qirqisani was primarily concerned with the triumph of rational investigation in religious discussions – the authors both seem to be implying two concepts: sectarian lines do not matter in the pursuit for religious truth, and each individual is responsible for seeking out religious truth and evaluating the writings of all thinkers, be they Rabbanite or Karaite. This claim that the lines separating the two groups were not clearly defined is further strengthened by a prayer found in the work of Qirqisani's colleague, Salmon Ben Yeruham, who ended his anti-Rabbinical polemical treatise with the following prayer: "[May G-d] restore the glory of the tents of Judah and Israel as of old; may they become one. No longer will they be divided into two nations, but rather will be one nation, the chosen people."⁵⁹ Thus, when Qirqisani's introduction is analyzed alongside the statements of Yeruham and Nahawendi, an alternative understanding emerges of Karaite self-perception in the ninth and tenth centuries. As opposed to Second Temple period sects, which sometimes segregated themselves from normative Judaism and imposed radical dietary, liturgical and theological changes on their communities, these passages

raise the possibility that Karaism did not aim to break radically from other forms of Judaism. Rather, it desired to be a corrective movement whose goal was to restore all of Judaism to its proper path. This opinion is also held by scholar Moshe Gil, who supports this interpretation by arguing that a solidified Karaite movement did not begin until the tenth century and was still developing into a cohesive and separate group during the period of Qirqisani and Salmon Ben Yeruham.⁶⁰

However, such a situation seems unlikely. As we shall see, the rest of the chapter indicates that Qirqisani believed he had indeed completely split from the Rabbanites.⁶¹ This view is favoured by scholars such as Fred Astren. He argues that the entire first section of the *Kitab Al Anwar* reflects a complete rejection of the traditional view of the past. Astren writes:

[Qirqisani stipulates] that ignorance and error have been the defining circumstances in understanding the Jewish past, and that ignorance is a condition of exile (and exile is a consequence of ignorance). Those such as the rabbis who would claim a true transmission from the past are transmitters of error.⁶²

Astren therefore sees the entire first section as attempting to discredit the Rabbanite leadership's views of the *shalshelet ha masorah* (chain of tradition).

Jeroboam

Qirqisani's treatment of Jeroboam has long been recognized as the most unusual aspect of his book. Qirqisani argues that the beginning of

sectarianism coincided with Jeroboam's reforms. He argues that Jeroboam was the first to propagate dissent in religion and "to sow rebellion in the family of Israel."⁶³ The reason for Qirqisani's use of Jeroboam seems to be Qirqisani's belief that Jeroboam was the first to introduce the Rabbanites' school of thought.⁶⁴

There are a number of unique claims that Qirqisani makes about Jeroboam, including the radical claim that Jeroboam was not necessarily a polytheist. He writes:

Jeroboam did not deny or disbelieve in the Creator-exalted is His name-, nor did he worship idols, as some imagine. This is clear from two considerations. Firstly, as we have said, he substituted for each law another it in its place; had he re-nounced religion altogether, he would have abandoned, caused to vanish, and thrown away the law entirely, and would have not have needed to substitute for them. The only reason for his alterations and changes was the fear of losing the kingdom.⁶⁵

Qirqisani goes on to discuss Jeroboam's introduction of two golden calves, and argues that:

Some of our fellows have asserted that he introduced these two calves only so as to substitute them for the two cherubs, and this is not at all unlikely.⁶⁶

Neither of these statements are supported by the biblical text. The biblical text dealing with the subject at hand reads as follows:

The king took counsel, and made two calves of gold; and he said unto them: 'Ye have gone up long enough to Jerusalem; behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And he set the one in Beth-

el, and the other put he in Dan. And this thing became a sin; for the people went to worship before the one, even unto Dan. And he made houses of high places, and made priests from among all the people, that were not of the sons of Levi. And Jeroboam ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, like unto the feast that is in Judah, and he went up unto the altar; so did he in Beth-el, to sacrifice unto the calves that he had made; and he placed in Beth-el the priests of the high places that he had made. And he went up unto the altar which he had made in Beth-el on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, even in the month which he had devised of his own heart; and he ordained a feast for the children of Israel, and went up unto the altar, to offer.⁶⁷

These verses clearly state the reasons for the changes: Jeroboam was interested in stopping the annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem, which was at that time in the possession of his enemy, King Rehoboam. Jeroboam seems to have been afraid of the effect that going to Jerusalem would have on his people. He is cited as having said in his heart:

If people go up to offer sacrifices at the house of Hashem at Jerusalem. Then will the heart of the people turn back to their lord, even unto Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me, and return to Rehoboam.⁶⁸

Qirqisani wrote about Jeroboam in both a positive and negative manner. On the one hand, he argues that Jeroboam was the first to “propagate dissent in the house of Israel”; he simultaneously defends Jeroboam against the traditional Rabbinical claim, which is also the biblical claim, that he was pagan. How can this apparent inconsistency be accounted for? Traditionally, scholars have considered Qirqisani’s treatment

of Jeroboam as problematic and have viewed it as a distortion of a biblical figure for his own polemical purposes. Harkavy was the first scholar to write a commentary on this passage. He writes:

With this king, asserts Qirqisani, Rabbinism originated, and with a plain polemical intention he attempts to distort the Biblical report that the Israelite king in question was an idolator.⁶⁹

It is important to identify a number of problems in Harkavy's treatment of Qirqisani's writings on Jeroboam. Firstly, Harkavy's claim that Qirqisani had a "plain polemical intention [in that] he attempts to distort the Biblical report [of Jeroboam]" suggests that Harkavy did not believe Qirqisani was familiar with an oral tradition which claimed that the scripture did not describe other changes Jeroboam instituted.⁷⁰ In fact, Qirqisani confirmed that this is an oral tradition by using the phrase "some of our fellows have asserted."⁷¹

Harkavy does not provide any evidence that led him to believe that Qirqisani was fabricating an oral tradition in order to distort the biblical account of Jeroboam. This is problematic since there is hardly any midrashic record of Rabbinic or Karaite attitudes to Kings, except for the statements in the *Kitab Al Anwar*. In light of this lack of evidence, the question that Harkavy should have asked is whether this oral tradition conforms to Qirqisani's requirements for valid transmitted knowledge. These requirements were threefold: conformity with scripture, rational proof, and general consensus.⁷² The oral tradition cited by Qirqisani conforms to the latter two requirements. The phrase "and this is not

unlikely” seems to mean that Qirqisani believed in the rational validity of the claim; moreover, the interpretation presumably had enough communal support for him to state “some of our fellows have asserted,” which perhaps indicated a consensus. In the case of “conformity to scripture,” it is clear that these changes do not match up with the biblical account of Jeroboam’s motives. However, if Qirqisani was truly bound to these requirements, then we might interpret Qirqisani’s understanding of conformity to mean only “non-contradictory.”

It is impossible to know the true motives of Qirqisani’s writings on Jeroboam. However, scholars who attribute to Qirqisani “a plain polemical intent” clearly exclude other motivations and have a notable dearth of evidence in support of their claim; this is thus a strong example of the problems associated with Karaite scholarship to date. With so much evidence lacking, it might be more beneficial to conclude that Qirqisani was merely attempting to understand Jeroboam through his own ideological lens.

This paper also proposes an alternative explanation for Qirqisani’s treatment of Jeroboam not suggested by Harkavy or any scholar who raises the possibility that Qirqisani applied the typology of Jeroboam to a contemporary Karaite figure, Daniel Al Qumisi.

Daniel Al Qumisi (also known as Al Damaghani⁷³) was born in the city of Damaghan in the Qumis district of the state of Tabaristan. He was an early leader of the Karaite movement in Qumis and wrote several commentaries in which he praised the Anan’s contribution to the Karaite

movement, just as Qirqisani did. Later in his life, Al Qumisi seems to have changed, ideologically and religiously, in a significant manner. In the early tenth century, Al Qumisi moved to Jerusalem and founded a totally Palestino-centric form of Karaism called *Avelei Zion* (Mourners of Zion).⁷⁴

At the start of the chapter in question, Qirqisani wrote a paragraph-long polemic against Al Qumisi in which he characterized Al Qumisi as inconsistent and irrational. Qirqisani claimed that while Al Qumisi practiced reason and speculation in some religious matters, he failed to do so universally. Qirqisani described Al Qumisi as a person who “whatever argument [is imposed] upon him he adopts and embraces.”⁷⁵ Qirqisani claimed he knew of several instances where Al Qumisi asked his students to change his books following a change in opinion. Furthermore, he argued that Daniel Al Qumisi’s reputation decreased significantly among fellow Karaites because of his “excessive detestation of the followers of Anan with whom he wages open war.” Qirqisani argued that at the beginning of his career Al Qumisi praised Anan, calling him “chief of the enlightened,” while he later he referred to Anan as the “chief of the fools.”⁷⁶

As Yoram Erder has demonstrated in *The Negation of the Exile in the Messianic Doctrine of the Karaite Mourners of Zion*, the Avelei Zion had two main opponents: the Babylonian Rabbinical authorities, who equated their ideologies with the exile, and the group referred to in Avelei Zion writings as the “Eastern Karaites,” who did not accept the ascetic life in Jerusalem that members of Avelei Zion had chosen.⁷⁷ Qirqisani is representative of “Eastern Karaism,” a school that rejected the ascetic pietistic model of the

Avelei Zion and continued to live a life in the Diaspora. It seems possible that, considering the dispute between Al Qumisi and Qirqisani, one can understand Qirqisani's mixed treatment of Jeroboam on another level. Qirqisani might have claimed that Jeroboam was not an idolator because Qirqisani was himself associated himself a type of anti-palestinocentrism similar to that which characterizes Jeroboam in the biblical text. He might have seen the innovations of Qirqisani as similar to those of Qumisi which would explain his placement of the biblical figure at the start of the chain of dissent.

This explanation is not without its flaws, which makes it difficult to draw a clear connection between the biblical figure and the contemporary Karaite writer. However, it is a good example of the way in which, when considered in the larger context of Karaism during this period, several of Qirqisani's writings appear in a new light. A deeper understanding of Karaite texts outside of the traditional confines of anti-Rabbanite polemics may be achieved if the study of Karaites and their own intra-groups struggles are paid more scholarly attention.

As will become clear, the explanation offered above is not entirely likely; there is, in fact, an explicit connection between Jeroboam's actions and the Rabbanites. However, it is possible for a tenth-century Karaite reader familiar with intra-sectarian politics to view Qirqisani's treatment of Jeroboam as multi-vocal and as resonating with more than one political or religious issue. It is incredibly important to consider explanations such as these, and to attempt to view Karaite writings as not only polemics

but as independent texts that should be analyzed as functioning within multiple contexts, be it broadly Jewish, Rabbanite or Karaite.

The Doctrines which Distinguish Rabbanites from All Other Sects

Qirqisani's account of the history of Jewish sects culminates in a discussion of the differences of the Rabbanites from all other Jewish groups. He begins his discussion by relating the practices of the Rabbanites to Jeroboam:

We begin with these because we have said that the laws in which they differ from Scripture are inherited from Jeroboam and that he was the first to introduce dissension in religion. We have mentioned what the Bible tells of the things on which he differed, and we have told how the people persisted in his practices during the exile, how it was scattered through the world, how it has continued to hand down these practices to the present day, and how these are the practices of the Rabbanites and their licence.⁷⁸

Qirqisani justified his previous discussion of the sectarians by stating plainly that he believed that that Rabbanites continued a chain of dissent that began with the changes introduced by Jeroboam. He goes on to mention fifty areas of Jewish law and practice where the Rabbanites differed from the plain *halakhic* law found clearly in scripture. Once one reads Qirqisani's account of the doctrines that distinguish Rabbanites from all other sects – and where Qirqisani believed the Rabbanites strayed from the original meaning of the text – the previous discussion of Jeroboam becomes newly illuminated.

When one looks at the examples Qirqisani provided, it is easy to see how he associated the reforms of the Rabbis with the reforms of Jeroboam. In the fourth doctrine discussed in the third chapter, Qirqisani argues that:

They [the Rabbanites] have discarded prayers from the Book of Psalms and have substituted their own compositions. This is at variance with the Biblical text which says; "To praise the lord after the order of David". (Ezra 3,10) However at the beginning of their prayer, they say: "Who chose His servant David and accepted his sacred songs", etc. and, this confirm that praise and honour and glorification of G-d great is his praise- must be in the words of David, though they do not practice it as they should, but say it, while sitting merely as a reading or a remembrance.⁷⁹

Qirqisani continues in part 5:

They have forbidden the people to touch the ground with their faces while bowing in prayer, which is contrary to the scripture: "And thy bowed themselves with their faces to the ground upon the pavement and worshipped."⁸⁰ (II Chron. 7, 3)

It is not difficult to see how a Karaite thinker might have associated these changes with those of Jeroboam. It is quite likely that Qirqisani saw no difference between substituting prayers that he believed were commanded for Rabbinic prayers and a king who substituted cherubs that were biblically commanded for golden calves.⁸¹

To accept this possibility, it would be necessary to acknowledge the authenticity of the statements "some of our fellows have asserted"

and “this is not at all unlikely.” This requires the acceptance of two claims: Qirqisani was familiar with a tradition that claimed that Jeroboam introduced the two calves as a substitution for the two cherubs, and that the tradition fit his criteria for a valid transmitted knowledge.^{82, 83} Similarly, it is not unlikely that Qirqisani viewed the prohibition against touching the ground during prayer, which was supported by a biblical commandment as being analogous to Jeroboam’s prohibition against pilgrimages to Jerusalem.⁸⁴

When viewed in this light, Harkavy’s claim that “Qirqisani distorted Jeroboam’s character with a plain polemical purpose” becomes less plausible.⁸⁵ Rather, this analysis has shown that Qirqisani was likely interpreting Judaism according to his rationalist theological views. In these two instances, both the Rabbanites and Jeroboam negated a biblical commandment and substituted a tradition or custom of their own. For both the biblical and the Rabbinic actors, the goal seems to have been to alter religious law to serve political purposes. The Rabbanite reforms might be seen by a Karaite as an attempt to boost their levels of authoritativeness and power and stop a practice that can be viewed as empowering another person or group. Consequently, the comparison with Jeroboam is apt.

Conclusion

As an undergraduate student of Jewish history, I was always particularly fascinated by periods in history where the Jewish people stood at a major crossroads. It should come as no surprise then that I find

the Karaite movement so intriguing; the tension between the “divinely inspired” Bible and the “authoritative oral law” in Jewish theology always seemed particularly problematic. When I sat down to read histories of the Gaonic and Medieval Periods, as well as Karaite histories, I found that scholars were generally unsympathetic to the Karaite mission. Over time I became convinced of a strong bias that existed amongst traditional Jewish historians against the Karaite movement. In my search to understand and analyze the formation of these biases I began to examine the primary sources. It was then that I noticed Yakub Al Qirqisani, a scholar who did not seem to fit into any set Karaite stereotype. He was neither discussed thoroughly in the analysis of Daniel Frank, Meira Polliack or Geoffrey Khan in their discussions of Karaite biblical interpretation nor thoroughly discussed in the writings of Haggai Ben Shammai in his studies of Karaite polemics. Nonetheless, he was unanimously recognized as a scholar of immense scholastic achievement who arguably codified the largest amounts of Karaite *halakha* in history.

I started to read Nemoy’s translations of Qirqisani’s works and came upon some interesting conclusions. First, I began to understand how little is known about the Karaite movement in the early medieval period. This has been acknowledged by Daniel Frank, who, in his introduction to *Search Scripture Well*, argued that it is impossible to make overarching claims about the Karaite movement because of the vast amounts of literature that wait to be published in St. Petersburg, Cambridge and other Cairo Genizah archives. This is proving to be an accurate assessment.

I became interested in the Karaite movement because of its axiom “search scripture well and do not rely on my opinion” – a beautiful commandment charging the Jewish people with a responsibility to investigate religious matters on an individual level. I am by no means the first to find a personal and ideological connection to Karaism. For example, in the ideological upheaval that followed the *Haskalah*,⁸⁶ Raphael Mahler re-examined Karaism through a Marxist lens and concluded that the movement was largely a socio-economic dissident movement.⁸⁷ With the considerable potential for subjective interpretation of Karaism in mind, we can return to Qirqisani and propose that his work does not represent any set typology that has traditionally been attributed to Karaites. The *Kitab Al Anwar* does not contribute to philology or Hebrew grammar in the same way as fellow Karaites Elijah Ben Nun, or Yefet Ben Ali, nor does it possess the same polemical intent that seems to have characterized the work of some Karaites like Salmon Ben Yeruham or Moses of Damascus.

This paper has proven that there are numerous historical and philosophical considerations that have to be taken in reading a text like the *Kitab Al Anwar*. In an academic environment where the very nature of the Karaite movement is being questioned, classifying a text such as Qirqisani’s as having strong polemical elements is problematic. The time has come for a critical re-examination of Qirqisani’s writings in light of new scholarship on the period and the Karaite movement. I am certain that once completely re-examined, the *Kitab Al Anwar* can stand as a meaningful part of our tradition and can be interacted with in a profound way.

Endnotes

- 1 Daniel Frank, *Search Scripture Well: Karaite Exegetes and the Origins of Jewish Bible Commentary in the Middle East* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 8.
- 2 Leon Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 43.
- 3 Ibid., 44.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 See, Geoffrey Khan, "The contribution of the Karaites to the Study of the Hebrew Language," in *Karaite Judaism: a guide to its history and literary sources*, ed. Meira Polliack (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 291-318, and Meira Polliack, "Major Trends in Karaite Biblical Exegesis in the 10th and 11th centuries," in *Karaite Judaism: a guide to its history and literary sources*, ed. Meira Polliack (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 363-416.
- 6 Saadiah Gaon was the head of the religious academy of Sura in Babylon. He is considered to be one of the most important figures of the Gaonic period. He composed numerous works including *Emunoth VeDeot* (book of beliefs and opinions).
- 7 For more see, Meira Polliack, "Rethinking Karaism between Judaism and Islam," *AJS Review* 30, no. 1 (2006): 67-93; Moshe Gil, "The origins of the Karaites," in *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to its history and literary sources*, ed. Meira Polliack (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 98-112. For an account of the rise of Karaism not based on literary sources see the introduction of Zvi Ankori, *Karaites in Byzantium: The formative years, 970-1100* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).
- 8 This paper will not consider any research connected to similarities between Second Temple Sectarrians and the Karaite movement. However, it is a significant field of research that must be considered in any complete overview on the rise of the Karaite movement. For more on this subject see: Yoram Erder, "When did the Karaites first encounter Apocalyptic Literature akin to the Dead Sea Scrolls?" *Cathedra* 42 (1987): 54-68 (In Hebrew), and Yoram Erder, "The Karaites and the Second Temple Sects" in *Karaite Judaism: a Guide to its History and Literary Sources*, ed. Meira Polliack (Leiden: Brill, 2003). Also see Nathan Weider, *The Judean Scrolls and Karaism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

9 See, Samuel Poznanski, "Karaites Miscellanies," Center for Advanced Studies, University of Pennsylvania 1896; Samuel Poznanski, "The Karaite Literary Opponents of Sa'adiah Gaon in the 10th century," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 4 (1906): 110-124; Haggai Ben Shammai, "On a Polemical Element in Sa'adiah's Theory of Prophecy," in *Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume, Pt. 1* (= *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 7), ed. Moshe Idel, et al. (Jerusalem: Magnus Press, 1988): 127-46. Also see Ofra Tirosh-Becker, "The use of Rabbinic sources in Karaite writings," in *Karaite Judaism: A guide to its History and Literary Sources*, ed. Meira Polliack (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 319-38.

10 While I was writing this paper, Marina Rustow published "Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatamid Caliphate." The book questions the nature of the conflict between Rabbanite and Karaite camps and concludes that it was likely that the Karaites were not even considered a sect until well into the twelfth century. Rustow claims that early scholars of the movement exaggerated the tensions that existed and fabricated the polemical nature of both groups in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Marina Rustow, *Hersey and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatamid Caliphate* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2008).

11 See Haggai Ben Shammai, "Qirqisani on the oneness of G-d," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 73, no. 2 (1982): 105-111; Paul Fenton, "Karaism and Sufism," in *Karaite Judaism: A guide to its History and Literary Sources*, ed. Meira Polliack (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 199-212; and Fred Astren, "The Islamic Context of Medieval Karaism," in *Karaite Judaism: A guide to its History and Literary Sources*, ed. Meira Polliack, (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 145-178.

12 See Qirqisani's account of Daniel Al Qumisi and subsequent commentary in Burno Chiesa and W. Lockwood, *Yaqub al-Qirqisani on Jewish Sects and Christianity. A translation of 'Kitab Al Anwar' with two introductory essays* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1985), 95; and Yorman Erder, "The Negation of the Exile in the Messianic Doctrine of the Karaite Mourners of Zion," *HUCA* 68 (1997).

13 The latter movement is commonly attributed to be a Karaite phenomenon, although not all proponents of the Avelei Tzion movement were Karaites. For more information on Abu Isa and the Yughdanites see Israel Friedlander, "Shi-itic Influences." For more information on Avelei Tzion see Yoram Erder, "The Negation of the Exile."

- 14 Dating the origins of the Karaite movement is a contentious subject. For a few opinions on the subject see Moshe Gil, "The origins of the Karaites," Meira Polliack, "Rethinking Karaism," and "The Dead Sea Scrolls in the Historiography and Self-Image of Contemporary Karaites" *Dead Sea Discoveries* 9 (2002), 281-312.
- 15 Fred Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 78.
- 16 Ibid., Yefet ben Ali, a tenth century Karaite Exegete, attributes this statement to Anan Ben David, who was traditionally regarded as the founder of the Karaite movement.
- 17 Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 78.
- 18 This is an oversimplification of Pollaick's argument; however, the scope of this paper does not permit us to carry out a full investigation into the reasons behind Karaism's formal rejection of the oral text.
- 19 Meira Polliack, "Rethinking Karaism," 88.
- 20 Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 69.
- 21 Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 76.
- 22 Haggai Ben Shammai, "The Doctrines of Religious Thought of Abu Yusuf Yaqub Al Qirqisani and Yefet Ben Eli" (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1978), IV.
- 23 Ibid., XV.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Jewish Study Bible, Psalm 19: 8-10.
- 26 Ben Shammai, "The Doctrines of the Religious Thought," V.
- 27 Fred Astren, "History or Philosophy? The Construction of the Past in Medieval Karaite Judaism," *Medieval Encounters* 1, no. 1 (1995): 234..
- 28 This is quite a lengthy topic that cannot be addressed in the present paper. For more on the connections between Karaite developments see Israel Freidlander, "Shi-itic Influences" and Haggai Ben Shammai, "Kalam."
- 29 Ben Shammai, "The Doctrines of the Religious Thought," XIV.
- 30 Ben Shammai, "The Doctrines of the Religious Thought," XX.
- 31 Ibid., Ben Shammai also notes that the five principles are quoted by Qirqisani as that of the Mutakallimun.
- 32 Ibid., XIX.
- 33 Ibid., XVI.

34 Daniel Frank, "The limits of Karaite Scripturalism," in *Davar davur 'al ofnaḇ : meḥkarim befarshanut ha-Miḵra vḥa-Ḳoran bi-Yeme ha-benayim : mugashim le-Hagai Ben-Shamai*, ed. M. Ben Asher (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2007), 48.

35 Ibid.

36 Bruno Chiesa, "The Exegetical Strategy of Abu Yusuf Al Qirqisani" in *Davar davur 'al ofnaḇ : meḥkarim be-farshanut ha-Miḵra vḥa-Ḳoran bi-Yeme ha-benayim : mugashim le-Hagai Ben-Shamai*, ed. M. Ben Asher (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2007), 72.

37 Saadia's four principles that exclude the validity of a biblical text are listed in his introduction to the Pentateuch. He states that the literal meaning of the a verse should not be accepted in four cases; if the verse contradicts sense perception, reason, a contradictory biblical verse, or a Rabbinic teaching. See Hagai Ben Shammai, "The tension between literal interpretation and exegetical freedom," in *With Reverence to the Word*, ed. Jane Dammen Mcauliffe et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

38 Chiesa, "The Exegetical Strategy," 72.

39 Ibid.

40 Chiesa and Lockwood, *Yaqub al-Qirqisani*, 97.

41 See Zvi Ankori, *The Karaites in Byzantium*, who characterizes the movement as being highly Palestinocentric

42 An excellent example of this can be seen in Leon Nemoy, "Maimonides' opposition to the occult: The influence of the writings of Jacob Qirqisani on Maimonides," *Harofe Haivri Heb. Med Journal* (1954).

43 Recently Steve Wasserstrom has rejected Qirqisani's dating of the Abu Isa Uprising and proposed relying on the dating of Sharhastani, *Between Muslim and Jew: The problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995).

44 Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Understanding*, 99.

45 W. Lockwood recently translated Harkavy's Russian commentary on the first chapter of the *Kitab Al Anwar* into English, making an essential chapter in the progression of Karaite historiography accessible to English students of Karaism. The translation is available in Chiesa and Lockwood, *Yaqub al-Qirqisani*, 55.

- 46 Ibid., 59. For further clarification on the claim that Qirqisani borrowed material from the Rabbanites, see Q. Tirosh Becker, "The Use of Rabbinic Sources in Karaite Writings," in Polliack, *Karaite Judaism*. Harkavy's claim that Karaites were not concerned with history is not necessarily correct. See A. Ben Elijah, "Hilluq Ha Karaim ve Ha Rabbanim" 12th century, in Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 112.
- 47 Wilhelm Bacher, "Qirqisani, the Qaraite, and His work on Jewish Sects," *JQR*, o.s., 7 (1985): 688.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Samuel Poznanski, "The Karaite Literary Opponents of Saadia Gaon," in *Karaite Studies*, ed. Phillip Birbaum (1908), 134.
- 50 Ibid., see other articles by Poznanski in Birbaum collection.
- 51 Chiesa, "A Brief Note of Early Karaite Historiography," 66.
- 52 Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 19.
- 53 Chiesa, "A Brief Note of Early Karaite Historiography," 72.
- 54 Ibid., 59.
- 55 See the biographical data by Sperber in the introduction to *Studies in Judaica, Karaitica and Islamica*, ed. Sheldon Brunswick (Bar Ilan: Ramat Gan, 1982).
- 56 Chiesa and Lockwood, *Yaqub al-Qirqisani*, 98.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Nemoy, *The Karaite Anthology*, 29.
- 59 M. Rustow, "Laity versus Leadership in Eleventh Century Jerusalem: Karaites, Rabbanites and the affair of the ban on the Mount of Olives," in *Rabbinic Culture and its Critics, Jewish Authority, Dissent and Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Times*, ed. Daniel Frank and Matt Goldish (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 54.
- 60 Moshe Gil, "The Origins of the Karaites," 124.
- 61 For example, in the third chapter of the first section entitled "On the doctrines which distinguish the Rabbanites," Qirqisani discusses over 40 ways in which the Rabbanites have strayed from "true Judaism." In addition the opening quote, this reflects a common opinion that Karaites were not considered to be a part of Judaism and are likened to "Gentiles."
- 62 Astren, *Karaite Judaism and Historical Understanding*, 102.
- 63 Chiesa and Lockwood, *Yaqub al-Qirqisani*, 98.
- 64 Bacher, "Qirqisani, the Qaraite, and His work on Jewish Sects," 694.

- 65 Chiesa and Lockwood, *Yaqub al-Qirqisani*, 95.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 JPS Bible 1 Kings 12, 28-33.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Chiesa and Lockwood, *Yaqub al-Qirqisani*, 55.
- 70 See Chiesa and Lockwood, *Yaqub al-Qirqisani*, 97
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Ben Shammai, "The Doctrines of the Religious Thought," XVI.
- 73 Qirqisani refers to Daniel Al Qumisi as Daniel Al Damaghani in chapter 18 of the first section of the *Kitab Al Anwar*, after initially referring to him as Daniel Al Qumisi in chapter 1 of the same section. Scholars are unanimous in their agreement that Qirqisani is referring to the same person. For more see Chiesa's commentary on the *Kitab Al Anwar*, preceding Lockwood's translation. Chiesa and Lockwood, *Yaqub al-Qirqisani*, 22.
- 74 The Mourners of Zion were a aesthetic movement which advocated for a mass migration of Diaspora Jews to Jerusalem. The clearest testimony of Qumisi's views on the movement are to be found in his "Epistle to the Diaspora". For more on the Mourners of Zion see Yoram Erder, "The Negation of the Exile in the Messianic," 111.
- 75 Chiesa and Lockwood, *Yaqub al-Qirqisani*, 94.
- 76 Chiesa and Lockwood, *Yaqub al-Qirqisani*, 95.
In the *Epistle to the Diaspora* Daniel Al Qumisi uses the term "chief of the fools", strengthening the validity of Qirqisani's claims. See Epistle in Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology*, 43.
- 77 Erder, "The Negation of the Exile"; also see Daniel Al Qumisi's "Epistle to the Diaspora" in Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology*, 42.
- 78 Chiesa and Lockwood, *Yaqub al-Qirqisani*, 105.
- 79 Ibid., 106.
- 80 Ibid.
- 81 See page 26 of the present study
- 82 For Qirqisani's criteria for a valid transmitted knowledge see page 12 of our present study, and Ben Shammai, "The Doctrines of Religious Thought," XXVII.
- 83 Clearly, A. Harkavy and S. Poznanski could not accept this statement
- 84 See Chiesa and Lockwood, *Yaqub al-Qirqisani*, 95.
- 85 Ibid., 60.

86 A movement to modernize Judaism and harmonize it with broader European culture beginning in the late eighteenth century.

87 See Raphael Mahler, "Karaism a Medieval Movement of Deliverance," 1947.

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Interview with Dr. Eugene Orenstein

Peter Fusco

At the end of the 2009-2010 academic year the McGill Department of Jewish Studies will say “shalom” – in the “farewell” sense of the word – to Dr. Eugene Orenstein, professor of Jewish history. Dr. Orenstein, who is much loved for his Bronx accent and energetic lecturing style, will retire after 39 years at McGill. On behalf of *Dorot: The McGill Undergraduate Journal of Jewish Studies*, I sat down with Dr. Orenstein on a cold February morning for bagels, coffee, and a discussion about his life and long academic career.

Dorot: Could you speak a little about your family and childhood?

Dr. Orenstein: My parents had a very strong connection to Jewish culture, particularly modern secular Yiddish culture. I grew up in that environment, I imbibed it and it was a very enriching experience. My father was a very active trade unionist. My parents were very much involved in all sorts of struggles for social justice, which really helped to mold me. My earliest memories are of endless discussions of politics and history. Very early in my life I became interested in history. My dad, I think, was

a frustrated historian; he was well-read yet he had little formal education in a western sense. He had a traditional Jewish religious education, a deep biblical and Talmudic education but was basically self-educated in secular subjects. Very early in my life I became deeply interested in history and I don't think I ever had a question about career choice.

D: Can you tell us about your early education?

Dr. O: I went through the New York City public school system. I was very lucky and was accepted into one of the specialized high schools in New York City, the Bronx High School of Science. Even though I was not very adept at the sciences, the school had an extremely stimulating intellectual environment. Although I applied to various colleges and universities, and received a number of acceptances, I chose to go to CCNY (The City College Of New York) for economic reasons. At that time CCNY was still a free municipal college. I caught the last echoes of a famous period in the history of CCNY, the leftist intellectual and political ferment of the 1930s and 40s that produced the beginning of the career of many of the New York Intellectuals. CCNY was an intellectually rewarding experience in addition to offering a sound and well-rounded liberal arts education.

D: Where did you earn your Master's Degree and Doctorate?

Dr. O: After CCNY I went into the graduate program in Jewish history at Columbia University. I was very fortunate because during my time at Columbia, for a short while, one of the most brilliant Jewish scholars was there, the late Gerson D. Cohen. He was not only one of the most insightful historians I've known – a great critical mind – but he had an innate talent as a teacher. He was one of the greatest teachers I've ever had and it was a real privilege to study with him. This was when I was working on my Master's, which was a very stormy period. Students seized control of several buildings on the Columbia campus until they were evicted by the police with brutal force.

D: Were you involved in any of the student unrest in the late 1960s?

Dr. O: I was involved to a certain degree; Prof. Cohen debated me on that. I was disappointed in a way because when I stayed on to do my doctorate at Columbia, Gerson Cohen left to become chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. I also had the good fortune to have the late Dr. Arthur Hertzberg as my doctoral advisor. Hertzberg was a rabbi, scholar, educator and Jewish communal activist. By that time the late Salo W. Baron – “the dean of Jewish historians” – was Professor Emeritus, but I was lucky to have some contact with Baron. Although he was deeply involved

in research, almost to the end of his long life, he liked to have contact with young people and to see what graduate students were doing. He would meet with us from time to time, though I was never lucky enough to take a course with him. We would present our research to him, he would comment and we would have discussions. That was a great experience.

D: What was the subject of your Master's thesis?

Dr. O: My Master's thesis was on the Deists, their attitude toward Judaism and toward contemporary Jews. I focused on an English Deist, John Toland. He was exceptional in that although the Deists were so radical intellectually and destroyed so many medieval conceptions of thought, many of them clung stubbornly to the animus against Judaism and the Jews of their time. John Toland was quite different in this respect so I did my Master's about him under the sponsorship of a distinguished historian, Peter Gay. It was a very interesting experience because Peter Gay had published an influential book, *The Party of Humanity*, about the Enlightenment, particularly the French Enlightenment. I opposed the view he expressed in that book regarding the antisemitism of the Enlighteners, particularly of Voltaire, and yet he was the sponsor of my Master's.

D: And your Doctorate?

Dr. O: My doctoral dissertation was a history of the Jewish Socialist Federation of the Socialist Party of the United States and Canada, which was, I think, an exciting chapter of eastern European Jewish history in America, both politically and intellectually. This organization propagated revolutionary Marxian socialism, and synthesized it with modern Jewish identity and Jewish national continuity, in the spirit of the Bund in Czarist Russia. The majority of this organization helped to create the Jewish section of American communism. My interest in radicalism and socialist history found expression in this work. I started working at McGill before I completed my doctorate.

D: Can you speak about your appointment at McGill?

Dr. O: Jewish Studies at McGill was a very young sprout when I arrived in September 1971. The program was actually established in 1968 by two wonderful people with whom I had the good fortune to work. They were the most dynamic and influential of the founders. First and foremost was Ruth Wisse, basically a native of Montreal. Her work was in literature and she was in the Department of English. She started teaching modern Yiddish literature in English translation, first in the Department of English and then expanded it to establish the Jewish Studies Program. The other

influential architect of the program was a man in the Department of Philosophy at McGill, Prof. Harry Bracken. Bracken is a David Hume specialist. The Department was small; there were five professors and of course some sessional people teaching Hebrew and Yiddish. A position was opening up because Professor Wisse had decided to settle in Israel. I was invited to try out for this position. The original appointment was a kind of combination of historical studies and Yiddish literature. I prepared a guest lecture in my area of specialization, the Jewish labour and socialist movement in the United States. I came at a very sad moment in Canadian history, the October Crisis of 1970. Although my guest lecture, being taken out to lunch, and the exchange between people who became my colleagues are wonderful memories, I also have a very disturbing memory of seeing a troop of Canadian soldiers with rifles and bayonettes marching toward the McGill campus -- quite disturbing. This was a result of the state of emergency declared by Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau. When Ruth Wisse left for Israel I began teaching. Things worked out differently and she decided to return to McGill. She took on her own work in Yiddish literature and I moved solidly into history.

D: What were your early impressions of McGill?

Dr. O: Don't forget this was my first academic appointment. It was very exciting and very challenging. Everything was very new to

me; I'm a native New Yorker. This was my first time away from New York on an extended basis. Although the distance is not very great in miles, don't forget I was quite young, only 26 years old. It was extremely enriching. I had wonderful colleagues. Now that I'm retiring I'm the only person left of the first group of the Jewish Studies Program. All my present colleagues joined the Department during my tenure – in fact, I played some role in hiring some of them.

D: Can you describe your early impressions of Montreal and its changes in your forty years here?

Dr. O: I've lived through the first Parti Quebecois victory in 1978, all of the turmoil starting out with the October Crisis and the referendums. I think things have quieted down considerably, but there were some very troubling times when I felt quite uncomfortable. But, basically through the whole run I've been very fortunate. I met my wife in Montreal, she's a native Montrealer. We have two wonderful daughters who were born and grew up here and are both McGill graduates. My life in Montreal has been a wonderful experience; the quality of life for us has been very good. It is a wonderful place to have a family and to raise children. When I received the appointment at McGill I thought, "Oh, I'll come to McGill, get some experience. I'll be here three years or so and then I'll look for another job." I was very much a New Yorker, very "patriotic," and I didn't see myself living

anywhere but in New York City. Three years turned into forty. It's been a great experience; if I weren't happy I would have looked for other things.

D: How has Jewish Studies as an academic discipline changed throughout your career?

Dr. O: When I was a graduate student at Columbia University in Jewish history in 1968, I had the good fortune to participate in the founding of the Association for Jewish Studies, which is the premier academic organization in Jewish Studies, not only in North America now but internationally. At the founding convention in 1968 there were approximately 90 members. I attended the 20th anniversary meeting in Boston in 1988, and there were around 1000 members. So I have been witness to the tremendous flowering and expansion of Jewish Studies. There was a time when Jewish Studies was unrecognized and not accepted as a valid academic discipline. To break out of those restrictions and those boundaries, being a part of this movement in my own tiny way, has been a great intellectual accomplishment not just for people in Jewish Studies but for the world of the mind, the ever expanding area of knowledge. Indirectly, who derives benefit? Not just people interested in Jewish Studies; there is benefit that goes beyond.

D: What do you think to be the future of Yiddish culture?

Dr. O: Well, Yiddish is the language of Ashkenaz, which is a significant chunk of the Jewish historical experience, maybe a quarter of Jewish history. I don't think you can grasp the millennium of Ashkenazic Jewry in intellectual, religious and cultural terms without an understanding of what was produced in Yiddish. That experience was lived in that language. I think that all people engaged in various fields of study of that period are required to know Yiddish. That's the academic aspect, but there is also a Jewish communal aspect of Yiddish. I personally think that this is a very rich culture. I would like to see it have continuity in some way, but that's beyond academics. As an individual, a human being, and as a Jew, the type of Jew I am, Yiddish culture is very dear and very meaningful to me. But I am not a prophet. I don't know what the future holds. I think one of the problems here is there is too much stargazing into the future and too much moaning and groaning and mourning and predicting when the last Yiddish creator will die and when the last Yiddish speaker will die. We're all mortal and we know what the end of all mortals is. It's not very healthy to dwell on this. What healthy people do is live full and meaningful lives. The same thing applies here. I want to enjoy the treasures of Ashkenazi Yiddish culture. I'm a voracious reader of Yiddish literature. I love poetry and there are Yiddish poets who speak to me. You'll ask grandchildren or great-grandchildren of the next

generations. I'm not going to be a prognosticator. It's not productive.

D: Do you think there are any over-arching lessons to be derived from the whole of Jewish history?

Dr. O: This is a very dangerous question to ask a historian. As historians we have to cultivate a dispassionate view and simply try to understand. But obviously historians are also human. Part of being Jewish in the modern period is wanting to know one's own history. As a person, not an academic, I think that Jews can draw a great deal of pride from Jewish history because Jew have been a permanent minority for a long period of time yet they have not surrendered their distinct identity. One could argue that perhaps there is something courageous about that. One can also see extremely tragic aspects of this history. What I have tried to do all these years in my courses is to stimulate students to think critically, to think in historical terms, to try to understand. The conclusions they draw from this is their choice. It is wrong for me to attempt to impose my feelings or loyalties on the academic study of Jewish history.

D: Do you have any advice for students in general?

Dr. O: I would hope that students would try to take advantage of all the opportunities that are available at a university, not just course

requirements. I would hope that they would find their own interests and develop their critical faculties, to expand their intellectual and cultural horizons. That's the most gratifying thing for me as an instructor.

D: And for professors?

Dr. O: I would just say I would hope that young professors starting out would be sensitive to their students, not feel that just lecturing or doing research is sufficient but to see students as human beings in the process of developing their own intellectual lives and the professors should be a positive influence in this process.

D: Are there any hobbies or other interests that will perhaps keep you busy during retirement?

Dr. O: I'm getting this now. People are saying, "What are you going to do in your spare time?" I'm not a rocking chair person and I have many interests. When you have a professional working life you don't have the time to do many things you love. You're on a schedule. Both my wife and I love to travel and we have traveled but not to the extent that we would like. I look forward to new places and going back to places that I love. As far as my work is concerned, I love teaching and I hope that some day when I am in the mood to give a new course that the Department would entertain the idea of giving me the opportunity to do so.

Author Profiles

ADAM EILATH graduated from McGill in 2009 with First Class Honours in Jewish Studies. He is now living in Jerusalem, where is he earning an M.A. in Jewish Philosophy at Tel Aviv University and studying Rabbinics and Jewish Education at the Shalom Hartman Institute. Adam also lectures and writes curriculum for Mizrach Shemesh, a Beit Midrash for social change in Jerusalem, and serves as a project researcher for Diarna, an initiative that seeks to map and preserve Mizrahi heritage using Google Earth.

ROBERT EISENBERG is currently a fourth-year student completing an Honours degree in History with a Minor in Political Science. His academic interests lie primarily in the fields of comparative imperialism with an emphasis on the Roman Empire and eighteenth to twentieth century Britain. In fall 2010 he will begin a M.Sc. in Theory and History of International Relations at the London School of Economics with the ultimate goal of drafting and implementing defence and security policy for the Canadian government.

RICKY KREITNER is a fourth-generation New York Jew who is currently a U2 student studying Philosophy, Political Theory, and Humanistic Studies. He does not feel chauvinistic in suggesting that there is quite a lot of which Jews should feel proud. Ricky would like to dedicate this, his first published writing, to his grandparents, both living and deceased.

ELANA WENNER is originally from Vancouver, BC, and is currently in her third year of undergraduate studies at McGill University. She will graduate in 2011 with an Honours degree in Jewish Studies and a Minor in Philosophy. Elana plans to eventually study Medieval Jewish Philosophy at a graduate level and to pursue an academic career in Jewish Studies. Elana is pleased to be a part of *Dorot*, and is excited for the future, in general.