American Jewish fiction has often presented Orthodox rabbis in an unfavorable light. Wallace Markfield's popular short story, "The Decline of Sholem Waldman," depicted Orthodox rabbis as noisy mischief makers, who "catered only to those with wealthy children . . . snooped around the kitchen, his nose in every pot." Isaac Bashevis Singer's protagonist in "A Wedding in Brownsville," claimed that Orthodox rabbis "aped the Christian ministers."\(^1\) Other examples abound.

The scholarship of American Judaism has also tended to depict Orthodox clergy, particularly Eastern European rabbis, as sorely out of touch with American values and mores; unable to communicate a message of religious tradition to a generation of immigrants and children eager to Americanize.\(^2\) Thus the scholarship of American Judaism has often failed to fully appreciate the contribution of Eastern European Talmud scholars who came to America from the late 1800s through the early decades of the twentieth century. The synagogues, community organizations, and educational institutions they established remain central features of American Orthodoxy today. Among the important Orthodox rabbis were eminent rashei yeshiva who fled Europe prior to and during World War II, establishing or transplanting European-style yeshivot in America, and several outstanding Hasidic Rebbes who rebuilt their Nazi-shattered communities in Brooklyn, New York, and later in other cities.

Among the thousands of Eastern European rabbis who came to America was Rabbi Mordechai Pinchas Teitz. A scion of a line of rabbis stretching back centuries, Teitz was born in 1908 in Latvia, and trained at the great yeshivot of Lithuania. He first arrived in America in 1933, at
age 25, as a junior assistant to the eminent *rosh yeshiva*, Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Bloch, on a fundraising and lecture tour for the Telshe Yeshiva. Remaining in the United States, R. Teitz inherited the rabbinate of Elizabeth, New Jersey in 1935, following his marriage to Basya Preil, daughter of the city's previous rabbi, Elazar Meir Preil. Thereafter, R. Teitz served as communal rabbi in Elizabeth until his death in 1995.

R. Teitz's family tree and early education resembled that of hundreds of Eastern European Talmud scholars who immigrated to America during the decades prior and subsequent to World War II. Yet unlike many of his European colleagues, Teitz emerged as a formidable figure who left a notable and lasting legacy. An important part of his legacy was his six children, some of whom have made contributions of their own to Jewish life. Dr. Rivkah Blau, his second daughter, was Principal of the Shevach High School for Girls, Kew Gardens Hills, New York for many years. Her loving biography of her father is more than a story of a talented and influential leader; it is a significant contribution to understanding the role and accomplishments of Eastern European rabbis in American Orthodox Jewish life of the twentieth century.

R. Teitz's tenure in Elizabeth spanned a period of dramatic change in American Orthodoxy. At the outset of his career, many predicted that Orthodox Judaism was in terminal decline, as it struggled to retain adherents in the face of a growing movement of Conservative and Reform Judaism. When R. Teitz died in 1995, a massive shift was underway, as American Orthodoxy had a renewed sense of confidence and vigor.

R. Teitz's arrival in the United States in 1933 coincided with enormous controversy among Orthodox rabbis. The leadership role of the Agudath ha-Rabbonim, founded in 1902, was increasingly challenged by several smaller groups of Orthodox rabbis. For almost two decades the Agudath ha-Rabbonim had been the only federation of Orthodox rabbis, and an important voice in support of traditional Judaism. The unity of the Orthodox rabbinate was compromised by the founding of the Knesset ha-Rabbonim in 1920 led by Rabbi Gavriel Zev Margolis, and the Degel ha-Rabbonim (Federation of Orthodox Rabbis of America), established in 1926.³

The Orthodox rabbinate was further polarized, at that time, by tensions between those Eastern European rabbis who rejected acculturation and disdained cooperation with other Jewish denominations, and American-born, Western-educated rabbis who accepted the apparent inevitability of Americanization and encouraged discussion with other Jewish denominations. R. Teitz's career thus coincided with rising ten-
sions between American-born, Western educated rabbis and those whose background and training was from Eastern Europe.

The year that R. Teitz was confirmed to the Elizabeth rabbinate (1935), the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) was founded, as a counter group to the Agudath ha-Rabbonim. The rise and development of the RCA as an organization of Modern Orthodox, English-preaching rabbis closely aligned with the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) of Yeshiva University and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (later the Orthodox Union) represented the effort of Modern Orthodox clergy to integrate tradition with an American way of life. It is also reflected the generational conflict and movement of power from the Eastern European-trained rabbonim to American-educated rabbis. Teitz’s ability to gain the respect of his Eastern European colleagues while maintaining a cordial relationship with modern, American-born, Western-educated rabbis would be an important part of his success.

In Elizabeth, R. Teitz established a European-type rabbinate in which he controlled all matters related to Jewish life, including synagogues, mikvaot, butcher and other kashrut issues. He firmly believed that a broad sweep of rabbinic control over matters pertaining to Jewish life would serve to spur growth and limit dissent. In this instance, the Elizabeth Jewish community grew in numbers and prestige under his leadership. Few other immigrant rabbis succeeded in attaining this level of control in their communities.

Although Pinchas Teitz’s early biography resembles that of numerous Eastern-European rabbis who came to America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, his legacy points to a distinct individual. He was bold and innovative in establishing unprecedented projects. One of his most progressive initiatives was a weekly radio program popularly known as Daf Ha-Shavua. Founded in 1953, as the “Talmudic Seminar of the Air,” the radio broadcast of a Talmud class on WEVD-AM (1050) in New York was an unqualified success. Confirmed accounts underscore that, at its peak, the Daf Ha-Shavua had an audience of tens of thousands of listeners. This daring and enterprising venture points to Teitz’s appreciation of the power of modern technology as an educational tool.

In forging warm relations with local, state and federal politicians, Teitz demonstrated considerable political savvy. When the method of kosher slaughtering was challenged by groups who wished to outlaw it, he lobbied politicians in defense of the humane quality of kosher slaughter. R. Teitz was a strong-willed and articulate public defender of
religious interests, whose political connections gained him clout and respect among his colleagues and the broader Jewish community.

R. Teitz's tireless efforts on behalf of Jewish education led him to establish the Jewish Educational Center, an elementary day school, and later a yeshiva high school. Although J.E.C., founded in 1941, was not the first parochial day school in America, it joined a small, select group of schools in New York, Boston and Baltimore, offering a full range of Jewish and secular education under one institutional roof. Although R. Teitz had not acquired a university education, he had enormous interest in Western knowledge, and firmly believed in the importance of young men and women gaining a supreme Jewish and secular education. The network of schools that he founded always strived to achieve academic excellence in Jewish and general studies.

In 1964, R. Teitz embarked upon the first of 22 trips to the former Soviet Union, where he sought to improve the religious and material needs of Jews denied religious freedom by Communist officials. By all accounts, R. Teitz succeeded in bringing both material support and religious encouragement to what was then an isolated community of Soviet Jews. During the 1970s, when a revival of Jewish consciousness among some Jews in the former Soviet Union led to increasing demands for religious freedom and the right to emigrate to Israel, American Jewish leaders were prompted to sponsor public demonstrations and write-in campaigns to politicians on behalf of the small but vocal community of Soviet Jews. R. Teitz emphatically discouraged public rallies and personally avoided attention to his efforts. It was not modesty but diplomatic strategy that led him to eschew public demonstrations on behalf of Soviet Jews. He firmly believed that communal rallies would undermine the quiet goodwill necessary to assist Soviet Jews. R. Teitz never wavered from this position, and continued to garner financial assistance and communal support for his approach to this matter.

To fully appreciate R. Teitz's achievements, particularly in contrast with those of his Eastern European colleagues, one must emphasize his personal demeanor. He was, by all accounts, a charismatic personality. His tall, imposing bearing kept him the center of attention. His confident, forceful manner of speech, and his keen ability to empathize with and charm people, were central to his success. Shrewd but not wily, R. Teitz accumulated far more admirers than rivals. He was also fortunate to have a small number of financially successful congregants whose philanthropy supported his projects. At the end of the day, the success of the Jewish Educational Center, aid for Soviet Jews, and the numerous
projects initiated or supported by R. Teitz required financial assistance. His magnetic personality was crucial in gaining the confidence of benefactors to support these ventures. Many of these financial supporters were not observant Jews primarily devoted to supporting religious institutions. But they were impressed with R. Teitz's passion and trusted in his ability to succeed.

In contrast to some of his colleagues, R. Teitz did not disparage American culture. Rivkah Blau correctly emphasizes that her father's English sermons, fashionable dress, and stress on good secular education for his own family and students reveal receptiveness to modern ways. Blau's anecdotes and reflections of her father are a welcome addition to the memory of an Eastern European rabbinate, which played a crucial role in the development of American Orthodox Jewish life.

NOTES


2. See, for example, Nathan Glazer's classic though dated treatise, American Judaism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 73-74, where the heroes in Glazer's monograph are the rabbis who broke away from Orthodoxy to found the Jewish Theological Seminary

3. Several other rabbinic federations and local groups were formed during the early decades of the 1900s, including the Jewish Ministers Association (1917) and the New York based, Union of Grand Rabbis of the United States and Canada, located at 9 Attorney Street. For a list and brief description of these organizations, see American Jewish Year Book (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society) series through the 1920s.

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