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THE MONTREAL *REBBETZIN*: PORTRAITS IN TIME

Reverend Abraham de Sola arrived in Montreal in 1847, single and twenty-one years of age to minister to the Sephardic congregation. Historian Benjamin Sack commented that, with this Jewish Montreal “embarked the local community on a new phase of its social as well as religious life.”¹ Five years later, in June 1852 he married Esther, the youngest daughter of Henry Joseph of Berthier, a highly successful merchant, and active founding member of the synagogue.² One could view Esther as Montreal’s first *rebbetzin*.³ In eulogizing her, the elder brother of her son-in-law Leonard Mendes, Rev. H.Pereira Mendes spoke, “most feelingly and impressively of the virtues of the departed both in her own domestic circle and in the large sphere of public activity in which for so many years she had labored.”⁴ Unfortunately no writings have survived telling us what these “labours” were or what took place in these “spheres of public activity.”

The manifold books, articles and papers written about Rabbi de Sola, and the negligible information available about Esther Joseph indicate the obstacles encountered in one, researching the role of the rabbinical wife, and two, validating the place in Canadian Jewish history of women married to congregational rabbis in the earlier decades of the twentieth century.

This article is an attempt to put forward and reclaim the stories of these wives through examining Montreal’s early cultural and religious life. By exploring various documents and papers written between 1847 through to the end of the Second

World War and the beginnings of the “exodus to the suburbs” (c. 1950), it is hoped that some knowledge can be garnered concerning these wives of rabbis past.

As early as the 1830s, in England (the birthplace of Abraham de Sola), Jewish women had moved toward a more exclusively domestic orientation as they were expected to ... perfect the full-time mother-housewife role already invented by the gentile middle class.⁵ The cultural model put forth by Queen Victoria emphasized that the role of a single woman was to be married, and the focus of a married woman’s life was “home, hearth and heart.”⁶ The premise being to persuade the wife that her sole responsibility “was to make a home happy, raise the children, remain subject to her husband’s will and behave as a model of piety, industry, economics, patience, manners and quiet influence.”⁷

The Victorian lady and by extension the Jewish wife, was also expected to engage in charitable works on the behalf of the sick, the poor, and the newcomer. Religion was seen to be a special concern of women, and by the late nineteenth century the role of the Jewish woman became completely identified with home and spiritual development. The Jewish wife was held responsible for all Jewish home observances such as Sabbath and holiday preparations that would serve to define the Jewish identity of the household.⁸ How much more so did this new role apply to the wife of a rabbi?

Responsa literature indicates that a number of rabbinical wives, in medieval times, were scholars who contributed to the halachic rulings of their husbands as well as being teachers, writers and translators of Biblical materials.⁹ Not only were they integral to the social life of the community but some rabbinical wives, as well as women generally were wage-earners. A woman’s role in the commercial life of the community was seen as an extension of her domestic role. Was this sentiment still in place in Montreal or had the women here also accepted the notion that gainful employment (as a rabbi), rather than study (as a rabbi), was the responsibility now of the husband in order

to provide for his family. Were those days now gone, when the rabbinical family relied for their livelihood on the *rebbetzin's* monopoly on the sale of yeast and candles.¹⁰

There are oral histories, biographies and anecdotes that relate the many roles undertaken by a *rebbetzin* at the turn of the century. The majority of these relate to the American experience. In the new world especially, Jewish families looked to their rabbi — and by extension his wife — to help them integrate, without losing their sense of Jewish identity. To what extent did this modern role develop a new set of expectations for the *rebbetzin*?

Two main issues that arose in researching the wives of early Montreal rabbis were the dearth of information and the usefulness of the information that was found. In introducing his lecture series, “Rabbis and Their Community: the East European Orthodox Rabbinate in Montreal, 1900-1930,” Ira Robinson noted that these rabbis are missing persons — there is “next to nothing in terms of secondary sources and next to nothing in the histories of Canadian and/or North American Jewry.”¹¹ If so little is known about the rabbis who led Montreal’s early congregations, how are we to locate the wives of these rabbis? Several of the sources used in the course of my research raised further issues and questions about the type of information provided and what it could tell us about the rabbinical wife. For example, Lawrence Tapper’s *A Biographical Dictionary of Canada Jewry, 1909-1914*, is a re-listing of social visits, meetings and other data gleaned from the *Canadian Jewish Times*, as is Gordon Dueck’s *Thematic Index to Canadian Jewish Times, 1897-1914*. While one is able to learn that on one occasion Rabbi Abramowitz and his wife sent public New Year’s greetings to the Montreal Jewish community or that on another occasion the family had vacationed in the Catskills, the information in both sources is limited to the social and cultural concerns of the well-heeled middle and upper middle class Montreal Jewish families.¹² Similar to the *Canadian Jewish Times*, Arthur Hart, in his book *The Jew in Canada*, provides biographies of those religious leaders who are associ-

ated with the established synagogues in Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, and Winnipeg. The wives of these rabbis are named along with their genealogy and any children they may have borne in the marriage at the end of their husband's biographies. Another resource under development is the Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives Obituaries Project which involves translation from Yiddish to English of all obituary notices listed in the *Keneder Odler* (Jewish Daily Eagle) since November 19, 1908. While the *Keneder Odler* was mainly concerned with the needs and concerns of the Yiddish speaking immigrant community, it did report about the "goings-on" of the larger Montreal Jewish community. In those cases where a woman was listed in the obituary section she was often listed as mother of, wife of or daughter of. On the odd occasion where the wife of a rabbi was listed, nothing else was offered in terms of her life. For example, the *Keneder Odler* notes that a Mrs. Rivka (Fitch) Berger died February 1928.¹³ In Hart's description of Rabbi Julius Berger, it was noted that Rabbi Berger married a Rebecca Fitch whose family resided in Quebec City.¹⁴ While one can safely assume that this Rebecca Fitch was indeed the wife of Rabbi Berger, her "works" were rendered invisible. Donna Goodman in her research on Montreal synagogue sisterhoods, noted that not only were the sisterhoods in Montreal notoriously poor record keepers, but that there was so little historical data on Canadian Jewish women that much of the material she used for contextualizing her interviews perforce had to be derived from American sources.¹⁵

Unlike American historical data which outline the *rebbetzin's* role in helping to launch the synagogue sisterhood, raise funds for the Hebrew school, and teach the classes, Donna Goodman could find no instance in her research where the Montreal congregations had specifically involved or called upon their rabbi's wife to assist in Sisterhood matters.

What then is known about the "first *rebbetzin*" of Montreal? Between 1853 and 1865 Esther Joseph gave birth to seven children, four boys and three girls.¹⁶ We also know that

her parents were considered by their peers to be exceptionally pious and that every effort was made to educate and encourage Esther and her siblings to maintain their Jewish identity and practices.¹⁷ One can only infer that Esther used the skills and training of her immediate family in raising her children. As noted previously, while she evidently engaged in good works, it is unknown what form these took.

It became apparent through this research that the position of the rabbi's wife was very much influenced by, and a reflection of, the place of her husband and their synagogue in the larger Montreal Jewish community.

In her work on the early Montreal synagogues Sara Tauben noted that the three older synagogues: Temple Emanu-El, the Shearith Israel, and the Shaar Hashomayim, had established themselves "uptown" by the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ It was only in the mid 1920s that several of the "downtown" synagogues moved to the "high windows" area – their congregants having improved their social status.¹⁹ This examination of the synagogues and their congregations through this uptown/downtown dichotomy serves as a useful tool to consider the wives of the rabbis in these early congregations.

The wives of the "downtowners" rarely appeared in either the English or Yiddish newspapers. While they may have been active in their immigrant communities there are only a few writings attesting to this. Attention to the concept *matan b'seter* ("giving in secret") might have restricted the information available concerning the activities of these East European *rebbetzins*.²⁰ Jewish tradition applauds the act of giving charity in secret as one of the highest forms of giving. By engaging in *matan b'seter*, and remaining out of the limelight the wives of rabbis were maintaining a long standing tradition.

While the women married to rabbis who served the established congregations may also have engaged in *matan b'seter*, they were noticed and written about on account of their social and cultural presence rather than their communal activities.

For example, Katie Samuels, daughter of Reverend Samuels, the chazan at Bayswater synagogue in London married Rabbi Meldola de Sola, then spiritual leader of Montreal's Spanish and Portuguese synagogue.²¹ Prior to her marriage, Katie had made the acquaintance of George Bernard Shaw. It appears that a friend of Shaw's was trying to mount an amateur charity performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and was having difficulty finding a suitable young soprano.²² He appealed to Shaw to help him find a singer and Shaw was put in contact with Katie.²³ Katie undertook to learn the part of Donna Anna with Shaw providing accompaniment. They met on a number of occasions to practice, and it is speculated that Shaw was quite attracted to her.²⁴ While the performance was abandoned, eliminating any reason for further meetings, Shaw and Katie did exchange several letters throughout 1884 and Shaw dedicated a poem to her entitled "The Singing Witch Wrestling with a Devil for Her Lover's Soul."²⁵ The chance meeting between Katie and George Bernard Shaw, and the fact that Shaw had made a reference in his diary to "my old flame Katie Samuel," had compelled one Shavian scholar to trace their relationship. In so doing Dan Laurence provided a great service to Jewish scholarship as he unearthed a treasure trove of activities in which Katie was seen to be the *rebbetzin* par excellence. Katie helped establish a support group for the synagogue's free school; she inaugurated a series of free concerts in the synagogue; she herself "[sang] frequently in public concerts both as an amateur and a professional."²⁶ She was not only active in the entertainment field. It seems that a drawing of her appeared in *Le Monde Illustré* (19 October 1895) identifying her as a vice-president of a committee responsible for raising funds for Notre Dame Hospital.²⁷ She was also influential in convincing the Toronto Ladies Montefiore Benevolent Society to organize the National Council of Jewish Women of Canada in order to "help the increasing number of immigrants arriving in North America."²⁸

It is a curious statement about one Montreal Jewish woman's place in history that her "place" is assured, not on

account of her Jewish communal activities or even her marriage to Rabbi de Sola, but because she had the ‘chance’ experience of making the acquaintance of the brilliant Irish playwright and author, George Bernard Shaw. Information about the lives of other “uptown” rabbinical wives is not so available. As mentioned previously Hart does list the names of the wives of those rabbis associated with the Spanish and Portuguese, the Shaar Hashomayim and Temple Emanu-El. Rabbi Herman Abramowitz was newly graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary when hired as the spiritual leader of the Shaar Hashomayim, and he married Theresa Bockar in 1911 with whom he had two children, a boy and a girl.²⁹ Rabbi Nathan Gordon was hired by Temple Emanu-El to be its spiritual leader in 1906, and in 1911 he married Gertrude Workman of Montreal.³⁰ This is the only written source presently accessible concerning Mrs. Gordon. However certain conjectures can be made as to her involvement in the community. Both her parents were very involved in the Temple community as well as the larger Jewish community. Her father Mark Workman was Treasurer of the Temple for a number of years, and was one of the founding members of Mount Sinai Sanatorium until his death; and her mother (Rachel Workman) was, according to Arthur Hart’s accolades, an active member of the Ladies Montefiore Benevolent Society.³¹ It is unlikely that Gertrude was less involved in her community given her husband’s public profile and the activities of her parents.

Rabbi Max John Merritt, a graduate of Hebrew Union College, and of the Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin “accepted a unanimous call to Temple Emanu-El” in 1920 and moved to Montreal with his wife Ruth Davida Wolffe of London, England.³²

Rabbi Joseph Corcos, an author, historian and poet, trained in Mogador Morocco, left New York’s Spanish and Portuguese synagogue to take up the position of rabbi in Montreal’s Shearith Israel in 1922 and he was married to Angelita Henriques of Kingston, Jamaica with whom he had

three sons and four daughters.³³ In Sylvia Stern we encounter someone, who like Kate Samuels, was both newsworthy in her own right and was active in both her community and the wider community. In June 1937, Rabbi Stern, rabbi of Temple Emanuel, met Sylvia Goldstein and in early July they were married by Rabbi Stephen Wise.³⁴ In his biography, Rabbi Stern noted that “Sylvia was a wonderful hostess and opened our home constantly to Temple meetings, confirmation classes, and to visitors from all over the world.”³⁵ Rabbi Stern noted that besides being his helpmate, and mother to their two daughters, Sylvia “organized the Child Study Group, gave leadership in the sisterhood, participated in both Canadian and American Women’s Clubs, and founded the Book Lovers’ Forum.”³⁶ Rabbi Stern noted that Sylvia “was a tower of strength to [him],” and in 1978 at a special dedication ceremony, he again reiterated how she had been his support for over forty years.³⁷ Sylvia Stern, in her response to the various addresses by friends at the ceremony, noted that “I do not ever think of myself thus, but must admit that it is nice to hear ... but I must confess that [the Forum] could not have been accomplished without the ... encouragement of my beloved husband ... our daughters and ... without the interest and support of many friends....”³⁸

In 1947 when Rabbi Abramowitz died, Rabbi Shuchat, having shouldered much responsibility during Rabbi Abramowitz’s illness, was approached to take on the position of rabbi of the Shaar Hashomayim.³⁹ Single when offered this position, Rabbi Shuchat had already been with the Sha’ar eight years before he married his wife Miriam.⁴⁰ No mention is made of any activities by Miriam Shuchat until 1961 when the rabbi initiated a B’not Mitzvah program, and Miriam Shuchat was the instructor for both the course and the ceremony for the next ten years.⁴¹ In conversation with Mrs Shuchat she was quite emphatic that her private life was her own and that her husband had “protected” her from the demands of synagogue life.⁴² In an article by Lynn Heller, an American, highlighting women who “helped build American Jewish communities,” she illustrates

how the rabbinical wives, who were active in the early years of the Conservative movement, managed to balance their involvement with their husbands' congregations and carve out their own area of expertise and interest.⁴³ Her findings represent a sharp contrast to the response of Mrs Shuchat, and others whose husbands served Canadian congregations in the mid 1940s and beyond. In several interviews of women married to Montreal rabbis in the 1950s it was emphasized quite strongly that there was no expectation that these women would be involved in congregational activities.⁴⁴ Carolyn Heilbrun has noted that "anonymity [has been] the proper condition of woman, ... and that unlike the male narrative, the public and private lives of women cannot be linked."⁴⁵ Not only can they not be linked but in the case of Montreal's early Jewish *rebbetzins* there is barely sufficient information that they existed and took part in the religious communities led by their husbands.

In the United States by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was noted that the "native-trained rabbis" became for their congregants "visible symbols of those values which American Jews held dear."⁴⁶

Jicks, in his work *The Americanization of the Synagogue*, commented that "by the 1850's all reputable congregations sought lecturers who spoke English and who were able to represent Judaism to the non-Jewish world: a new type of Jewish religious leadership developed, focused on the pulpit lecture and the public presence."⁴⁷

As previously mentioned there appears to have been a visible distinction between the Jewish public's awareness of the social and communal activities of those rabbis and their families attached to the "uptown" congregations when compared to the same activities of those rabbis and their families who were affiliated with the "downtown" synagogues. The very fact that a synagogue would seek a rabbi who could "represent Judaism to the non-Jewish world" also implied to some extent that the wife of that rabbi had the social skills to be at ease with both the congregation and the larger non-Jewish community.

In Montreal, Canada, as evidenced by the social pages of the *Canadian Jewish Times*, the family activities of the establishment rabbis (who were English-speaking) and their families had a small “presence.” Yet for most of the Orthodox *shuls* of the “downtown” communities, unlike their American counterparts, concerns over the language of the rabbi, and the issues around decorum and “fit” would not emerge until the late 1930s. In the early 1900s these “[downtown *shuls* and *shulelach*] served as a place where the immigrant could feel ritually, culturally, and psychologically at home.”⁴⁸ An article from the 1901 *Jewish Times* announces the election of Rabbi Hirsch Cohen of the Beth Hamedrash Hagadol Chevra Shas to fill the position of Rabbi and Lecturer of Ahavas Achim congregation.⁴⁹ This was an indication that even with the number of *shulelach* forming, there were at that time too few rabbis as well as insufficient funds in the community for a rabbi to be solely supported by one congregation. Even though Rabbi Hirsch Cohen was soon recognized as Montreal’s leading rabbinical authority involved in all aspects of *kashrut* and education, he remained a rabbi of the “downtowners.” Little has been published (in English) about his family life. The *Jewish Times* (April 11, 1902) provided its readers with a brief biographical sketch of Rabbi Hirsch Cohen which noted initially that he (no mention of family) had arrived in Montreal in 1890.⁵⁰ Towards the end of this sketch we learn that while in Kiev (1888) he married Miss Krona/Sarah Fierst.⁵¹ There is no indication in the *Jewish Times* as to when Mrs. Cohen, née Fierst, passed away. According to Atherton’s *History of Montreal*, it appears that the five children named in Arthur Hart’s biographical sketch of Rabbi Cohen were his children through his marriage to Miss Fierst.⁵² By 1913, when he married Leah Nachumowsky, it appears that his children by the first Mrs. Cohen were already married and on the cusp of beginning their own families. Within the Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Cohen Archival Collection there are a number of letters (200 written between 1904 and 1947) that were donated by Herbert Fierst, grandson of Rabbi Cohen. The letters, 164 written by Rabbi

Hirsch to family members and 25 written to his grandson directly, were in Yiddish, Hebrew or a combination of both.⁵³ The letters contained references to family activities, outings, travels, and thoughts. There was one letter noted in Gaetanne Blaiz's summary in which "Mother's health" was addressed and which might have referred to the deteriorating health of the first Mrs. Cohen.⁵⁴ While it would be of interest to excavate Rabbi Cohen's letters to further our understanding of how he perceived these relationships, his personal correspondence reveals only those events that the rabbi had chosen to address and does not provide any detail as to how either the first or the second Mrs. Cohen viewed their place within their husband's professional and social community.

What was the situation for other wives of these "downtown" rabbis? Lily Laxer Bernstein, youngest daughter of Rabbi Getsel and Freda Laxer, notes in her little book *The Laxer Saga* that "the decision to move to Montreal [from Sherbrooke, Quebec] in 1913 was based on two reasons: there were 6 children in the family, five daughters, and one son, and Mama and Papa felt they needed to be exposed to more Jewish people."⁵⁵ *The Laxer Saga* is unique in the Montreal context as it provides a lens through which to observe one rabbinical family's daily life. For a short time her father was rabbi of the Tifereth Israel as well as being active in Montreal's chaotic *schoctim* (kosher meat slaughter) industry. She recalls that, "our home was like a community centre [with] people dropping in all the time for help and advice."⁵⁶ Aside from providing home-baked refreshments, Freda also participated and "took part in all the discussions."⁵⁷ Laxer Bernstein also notes that her mother was very much involved in her father's outreach rabbinical activities, making visits to the sick [*bikur holim*] with him as well as helping to organize High Holiday services.⁵⁸ She relates the following story about her mother:

In order to earn a little more income, Mamma and Papa turned the flat into a synagogue for the High Holidays. Chairs were brought in as well as a

Safir Torah (Scrolled Torah), and all the furniture was pushed against the walls or dismantled.... It seems that in order to turn a home into a synagogue a City permit was required. But Papa had not applied for one. Someone squealed about this to the authorities, and the City of Montreal sent in some inspectors to check. Papa was not home when they came, only Baba Sarah (Papa's mother) and Mamma were present. The inspectors asked the women whether they had organized synagogue services in this home. With a straight face Mamma replied: "Do you see chairs or any evidence of a synagogue here? This is a home, not a synagogue." Mamma and Baba Sarah were not intimidated, and ... stood their ground. The inspectors left with no evidence, and no claim....⁵⁹

Montreal was now home to a growing immigrant community of Russian, Polish and Roumanian Jews. Within the American milieu one can find anecdotes and stories of the many roles undertaken by various American *rebbetzins* within their immigrant communities at the turn of the century. Aside from the *Laxer Saga* are there other stories to be found concerning the wives of the early East European rabbis to Montreal? Leah Rosenberg, for example, dedicated her memoirs to the memory of her parents.⁶⁰ Little is written however about her mother's life separate from that of her father. Rosenberg recalls the Saturday nights when her father entertained the rabbis and her mother "prepared hot tea with lemon slices in tall glasses."⁶¹ Other than learning that her mother taught Leah "to prepare for meals and festivals," and that her mother "believed in *mitzvahs* (good deeds) and performed these avidly," like the first *rebbetzin* Esther Joseph, there is no indication concerning the shape of these good deeds.⁶²

One *rebbetzin* and her deeds became "public" due to Arthur Hart's discussion of the Montreal Jewish Maternity Hospital. He describes Mrs. Taube Kaplan, also called the 'Greene *rebbetzin*'.⁶³ He notes that through her efforts sufficient

funds were raised to open this hospital to serve the poor.⁶⁴ Who was the Greene *rebbetzin* and why was she given this particular title? In 1901 “26.76% of all Montreal born infants did not live to see their first birthday [and this rate] was thought to be lower than only one other major world city – Calcutta, India.”⁶⁵ In Montreal’s working-class districts, diseases that in other places were preventable, claimed a high toll of lives among the urban poor.⁶⁶ Not only was Mrs Kaplan instrumental in raising funds – funds that were collected coin by coin over a long period of time from only poor women – but she was also active in the coalition to organize the Herzl Dispensary.⁶⁷ The funds that she had raised were initially to be used for the Netta Israel Hospital. As this group never achieved sufficient support and funding, she donated the monies collected to the Jewish General Hospital in 1924.⁶⁸ The 40th anniversary booklet on the *History of the Montreal Clinic Society: 5683/1923* noted that, because of her “open heart and devotion to charitable work” and her actions “in the best tradition of *matan beseyser*” (giving to charity in secret) she was known by the “affectionate epithet of the ‘Greene Yidene or Greene *Rebbetzin*.’”⁶⁹ These names were derived from the fact that she was indeed married to a rabbi, Rabbi Jacob Kaplan who was the rabbi at Chevra Shas, and that the women with whom she worked, whom she both assisted and from whom she collected the money for the hospital, were immigrant women. As there is very little in print about this indefatigable woman, the conclusion must be drawn that her modesty prevented her from seeking any sort of public honours. When Allan Bronfman, President of the hospital campaign, expressed his wish to name a ward of the hospital in her honour, she declined asking that the ward instead be named after Sir Herbert Samuel, the then High Commissioner in Palestine.⁷⁰

While rabbinical influence in other Canadian cities during the early twentieth century tended to reflect the growing importance of the United States as a source of “home-grown” rabbis from the Reform and Conservative seminaries, the synagogues of Montreal, even several of the uptown ones, still

tended to look overseas for their rabbinical leadership. A number of synagogues had begun to replace their Yiddish speaking rabbis with rabbis who could deliver a sermon in English. In 1938 the Chevra Kadisha hired its first English-speaking rabbi, J. Weissblatt, and in 1940 the B'nai Jacob hired its first English-speaking rabbi, Ephraim M. Levy from England.⁷¹ In 1938 the Adath Israel incorporated under the name "Adath Israel Congregation and Community Centre of Outremont to appeal to middle and upper-middle class, second-generation Canadians, and lured British-trained Rabbi Charles Bender from the Shearith Israel to be its rabbi."⁷²

Rabbi Bender was single and remained single, but what about the other rabbis who came from England – were they married? In the United States throughout the 1930s and the 1940s, the national organizations for the Reform and Conservative sisterhoods published materials to encourage women to maintain a Jewish home and to participate with their families in their local synagogues. The prevalent attitude seemed to be that "the greatest part the Jewish woman can play in the future of a healthy American Judaism is through the conduct of her own household."⁷³ In Jewish religious communities affiliated with the Conservative movement the role of the *rebbetzin* was to be a role model illustrating that the primary role "of Jewish wife and mother, [was to provide] a home rich in tradition and Jewish experience."⁷⁴ While for Jewish women, the primary role has always been the care and nurture of the family, for the wife of a rabbi, there has been an additional role: her involvement with the synagogue.

In the United States, a number of rabbis' wives had chosen to write about their congregational experiences. Mignon Rubenovitz wife of Rabbi Herman Rubenovitz penned a chapter in their book *The Waking Heart: Adventures in Achievement* about their years with Boston's Mishkan Tefila, and in Israel.⁷⁵ Ruth Wolf Levi wrote about her experiences, and Helen Jacobson and Leona Lefkowitz wrote about the issues that faced the wives of retired rabbis.⁷⁶

There are no writings in evidence to-date from wives of rabbis who held pulpits in Montreal congregations during the interwar years or later. By the late 1940s and early 1950s the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue had relocated; the Temple and the Shaar Hashomayim had undergone expansion; the Shaare Zion had moved to its present location, Bnai Jacob had amalgamated with the Chevra Kadisha; a number of synagogues had merged, and a number of new synagogues, such as the Beth El, the Shaare Zedek, Beth Zion, and Beth Israel had been created to meet new needs.⁷⁷ In these relocations and amalgamations the “downtown” synagogues were now emulating their “uptown” counterparts.⁷⁸ Like the “uptowners” the “downtowners” were also now fund-raising for congregational schools, for kitchen and dining-hall equipment and for the general beautification of the synagogue which remained the responsibility of Sisterhoods regardless of affiliation.⁷⁹ In Donna Goodman’s interviews of women who had been involved in the three establishment synagogues, one of the women, at the time a newcomer to Montreal, noted that she had made the decision to join the Temple Emanu-El sisterhood because she had received a personal invitation from Sylvia Stern, the rabbi’s wife.⁸⁰ It is often through the odd comment, the buried newspaper article, or the reminiscence of acquaintances that evidence surfaces connecting the wives of rabbis to their husband’s congregational communities.

Research demonstrates the paucity of historical materials available thus far on Montreal rabbis’ wives. Carla Freedman, in her exploration of the American Reform *rebbetzin* reflects that one reason we know so little is because “*rebbetzins* have been too busy to keep diaries or write books about themselves.”⁸¹ In the United States there have been memoirs and articles (from the wives of Conservative rabbis) printed through *Outlook*, a magazine published through the Women’s League of Conservative Judaism. It would be intriguing to inquire if any of the women married to Montreal Conservative rabbis during the interwar years and beyond had submitted written anecdotes or observations of pulpit life from their particular perspective.

Material evidence or the lack thereof of a “woman’s contribution” has been an ongoing issue across all disciplines seeking to redress the social, cultural, economic and historical imbalances where women are concerned. Women’s voices, including the voices of those women married to well-known rabbis, have been fragmented, scattered and difficult to locate. Myra Shoub, writing in 1982, addressed various methods that had been used and could be used to explore women’s historical lives in Jewish communities at various points in history.⁸² One approach has been to examine the “status pattern” which requires examining variables such as educational opportunities, religious, cultural and intellectual interests as well as military and political participation in order to establish a “pattern” for each status group.⁸³ An alternate approach was developed by Daniel Bartaux, a French sociologist who gathered life-stories of bakers, their wives, and their employees.⁸⁴ He hypothesized that their life-stories would reveal “patterns of practice” particular to their economic strata in society and that not only would their patterns be unique, but that they would be unique and observable throughout all bakeries in France.⁸⁵ Using the former approach – that of “status pattern” – one could extrapolate from information already available on a group of women, such as rabbi’s wives, and use their “pattern” somewhat indiscriminately to make assumptions about similar groups in other communities. To some extent this is what has been done to-date with the role played by the wives of rabbis of Montreal congregations. Much of what is speculated about their role is almost wholly based on the activities of their more published peers in the United States. Canada is not the United States, and while there are similarities between the two Jewish communities there are differences: regional, cultural, and religious. Superimposing the American experience onto those of past Montreal *rebbetzins* marginalizes and detracts from the contexts in which these women lived.

As for the latter approach, this is only useful to the study of contemporary rabbinical wives as it requires personal narra-

tives that can then be analyzed for “patterns of practice.” However, if on the basis of these narratives one could decipher a set of social relations unique to the role of a congregational rabbi’s wife within a particular community the possibility then exists for using these “patterns of practice” to inform the lives of historical rabbinical wives in those same communities.

Accessible historical documentation continues to challenge the historian seeking to disentangle and recover the many strands that constitute the life of a rabbi’s wife. This survey of the “known” lives of past Montreal *rebbetzins* has served to illustrate some of the “problematics” involved in obtaining basic historical data on women in general and on the wives of rabbis in particular.

Notes

¹ Benjamin Sack, *History of the Jews in Canada*, translated by Ralph Novek (Montreal: Harvest House, 1965), p. 137.

² Anne Joseph, *Heritage of a Patriarch: Canada’s First Jewish Settlers and the Continuing Story of their Families in Canada* (Sillery, Quebec: Septentrion, 1995), p.59; Sack, *History of the Jews in Canada*, p. 137.

³ The Yiddish term for the wife of a rabbi.

⁴ Joseph, *Heritage of a Patriarch*, p. 367. Esther Joseph died in 1898, and an unnamed reporter reported on her funeral held Sunday, May 15.

⁵ Rickie Burman, “She Looketh Well to the Ways of Her Household: The Changing Role of Jewish Women in Religious Life, c.1880-1930,” *Religion in the Lives of English Women: 1760-1930*, edited by Gail Malmgreen, 234-259 (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 36.

⁶ Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody’s Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995), p. 33.

⁷ Lois A. Boyd, “Presbyterian Ministers’ Wives: A Nineteenth Century Portrait,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 59, no. 1 (Spring 1981), p. 3. I have emphasized the phrase “quiet influence.” There seemed to be an understanding amongst women that even though they did not participate in any public role - this being the responsibility of the husband - it was not unusual for women to use their powers of persuasion on their husbands in the privacy of their homes. Elizabeth Langland comments that “Queen Victoria

contributed to a new feminine ideal that endorsed active public management behind a facade of private retirement.” See Langland, *Nobody’s Angels*, p. 33.

⁸ Burman, *Op cit*, p. 249.

⁹ Shoshana Pantel Zolty, *And All Your Children Shall Be Learned: Women and the Study of Torah in Jewish Law and History* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc, 1993), p. 180.

¹⁰ Menahem M. Brayer, *The Jewish Woman in Rabbinical Literature: A Psychohistorical Perspective*, 2 vols (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1986), p. 57. As the wife of a rabbi often provided for the financial well-being of the household, many communities granted rabbis’ wives the monopoly for selling *shabbos* candles and yeast.

¹¹ Ira Robinson, “Rabbis and Their Community: The East European Orthodox Rabbinate in Montreal, 1900-1930”, (Lecture Series, Jewish Public Library, October 30-December 11, 2000, Montreal, Quebec). Lecture 1: October 30.

¹² Lawrence Tapper, *A Biographical Dictionary of Canada Jewry, 1909-1914*, from the *Canadian Jewish Times* (Teaneck, NJ: Avotaynu Inc, 1992), p. 60.

¹³ *Keneder Odler/Canader Adler* (Jewish Daily Eagle) Obituaries, translated by Eiran Harris from Yiddish, November 19, 1908-December 31, 1931. Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives Obituaries Project, Stage II, December 2004.

¹⁴ Arthur Hart, *The Jew in Canada* (Toronto & Montreal: Jewish Publications Ltd, 1926), p. 167.

¹⁵ Donna Goodman, “Montreal Synagogue Sisterhoods (1900-1949): a Female Culture, Community and Religious World” (MA Thesis, Concordia University, 2004). Her study traces the early development and role of the sisterhoods in Canada, focusing on the three oldest synagogues in Montreal: The Shearith Israel (Orthodox), the Shaar Hashomayim (traditional), and Temple Emanu-El (Reform).

¹⁶ Joseph, *Op Cit*.

¹⁷ Sack, *Op Cit.*, p. 93.

¹⁸ Sara Tauben, “Aspirations and Adaptations: Immigrant Synagogues of Montreal, 1880-1945” (MA Thesis, Concordia University), p. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 104.

²⁰ In discussion with Eiran Harris, Archivist, JPL Archives when

researching the “name” of the “Greener Rebbetzin.”

²¹ Dan H. Laurence, “Katie Samuel: Shaw’s Flameless ‘Old Flame’” *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies XV* (1995), p. 414.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10-11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

²⁸ Cynthia Gasner, “NCJW Establishing an Award for Leadership,” *Canadian Jewish News*. (Thursday, November 6, 1986), p. 19. During the celebrations for the 90th anniversary of the National Council of Jewish Women in Canada mention was made of the persuasive powers of Katie de Sola.

²⁹ Hart, *Op Cit.*, p. 92.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 244 and 338.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³⁴ Kenneth Irving Cleator and Harry Joshua Stern, *Harry Joshua Stern: A Rabbi’s Journey* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1981), p. 112.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110-11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³⁷ *Ibid.*; also “Remarks,” in *Consecration of Illuminated Glass-Stained Panel in Tribute to Sylvia and Rabbi Stern (for their work) as Co-Founders of the Book Lovers’ ‘Forum’ of Temple Emanu-El (1946-1978)*, Pamphlet, June 1, 1978.

³⁸ Sylvia Stern, “Response,” *Consecration of Illuminated Glass-Stained Panel in Tribute to Sylvia and Rabbi Stern (for their work) as Co-Founders of the Book Lovers’ ‘Forum’ of Temple Emanu-El (1946-1978)*, Pamphlet, June 1, 1978.

³⁹ Rabbi Wilfred Shuchat, *The Gate of Heaven: The Story of the Shaar Hashomayim of Montreal, 1846-1996* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), p. 170.

⁴⁰ Chapter Thirteen of Rabbi Shuchat’s book is entitled, “The First Years of the Shuchat Rabbinate: From the Late 1940s to the Early 1950s.” Despite its attention to detail there is no commentary on his shift in status

from being an eligible single Jewish male to married man nor is there any acknowledgement of the congregation's response or welcome to his young bride.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 238.

⁴² Taped interview (March 9, 2004)

⁴³ Lynn Heller, "The Pulpit Rebbetzin: Para-Professional? Wife Support System? Career Woman?" *Women's League Outlook* 50 (Spring 1980), p. 12+.

⁴⁴ I will be addressing this issue more closely once interview transcriptions are completed, and incorporating my findings into my thesis.

⁴⁵ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantyne Books, 1988)p. 12 and 25.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Sarna, "Introduction," *The American Rabbinate: A Century of Continuity and Change: 1883-1983*, edited by Jacob Rader Marcus and Abraham J. Peck, 1-9 (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1985), p. 8.

⁴⁷ Leon Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820-1870* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1976), p. 131.

⁴⁸ Tauben, Op Cit., p. 46. Tauben is quoting from a taped interview with Harry Stillman who had attended Machzike Hadath: "It really was more of a *landsleit* type of association than a religious one ... most of the members were not Shabbos worshipers ... this is where they went almost out of habit to embrace a group of people, their own *landsleit*, they felt comfortable with their own."

⁴⁹ *Jewish Times* (July 5, 1901), p. 245.

⁵⁰ *Jewish Times*, (April 11, 1902), n.p.

⁵¹ Ibid. The *Jewish Times* noted that Rabbi Cohen's wife was name Krona, whereas Atherton's *History of Montreal* notes that her name is Sarah.

⁵² William H. Atherton, ed., *History of Montreal From 1535-1914: Biographical*, vol. III (Montreal, Vancouver, and Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1914), p. 297.

⁵³ Gaetanne Blaiz, « Analyse du fonds et de la correspondance du Rabbin Cohen », @ Ottawa/Hull: Canada Postal Museum, June 1999. Amongst the materials in this file were letters between Rabbi Cohen and his grandson which had been summarized into an English translation. While they made mention of his wife or the children's mother, it was mostly in reference to wishing them well, sending regards or going away or feeling better after an illness.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Lily Laxer Bernstein, *The Laxer Saga* (Ottawa: Print Action Ltd., February 2002), p. 7.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 18 and 35.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

⁶⁰ Leah Rosenberg, *The Errand Runner: Reflections of a Rabbi's Daughter* (Toronto: John Wiley & Sons Canada Ltd, 1981).

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 41.

⁶² Ibid., p. 23.

⁶³ Hart, *Op Cit.*, p. 212.

⁶⁴ Ibid..

⁶⁵ CJCCCNA: Herzl Archives: Series A: MB2, Box 1, Dudley Cordell, "The Will and the Dream: An Evolutionary History of the Family Medicine Department – Jewish General Hospital" (Montreal, 1987-90, unpublished), p. 7.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 12; = Hart, *The Jew in Canada*, p. 212; *Keneder Odler*, (August 12, 1940), Frontpage/Obituaries.

⁶⁸ CJCCCNA catalogue #AB Et3 Accession #5971, M.B. Etziony, *History of the Montreal Clinical Society: 5683/1923* (Montreal 1963), p. 26-27.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 28.

⁷¹ Bernard Figler, L.L.L, MSW, "The Story of Two Congregations: Chevra Kadisha and Bnai Jacob," (Montreal, nd), p. 7 and 21.

⁷² Tauben, *Op Cit.*, p. 117.

⁷³ Rose B. Goldstein, quoted in Norma Fain Pratt, "Transitions in Judaism: The Jewish American Woman Through the 1930's," in *Women in American Religion*, edited by Janet W. James, 207-28 (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), p. 214.

⁷⁴ Heller, *Op Cit.*, p. 12.

⁷⁵ Mignon Rubenovitz, "The Waking Heart," (Pages from the Journal of a Rabbi's Wife)," in *The Waking Heart: Adventures in Achievement*, edited by Rabbi Herman H. Rubenovitz and Mignon

Rubenovitz, p. 61-295 (Cambridge, MA: Nathaniel Dane and Co., 1967).

⁷⁶ Ruth Wolf Levi, "I Married a Rabbi," in *I Married a Minister*, edited by Golda E. Bader (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1942); Helen Jacobson and Leona Lefkowitz, "Wives of Retired Rabbis," *Journal of Reform Judaism* 34, no. 3 (1987), p. 1-8.

⁷⁷ Shuchat, *Op Cit.*, p. 167-68.

⁷⁸ Goodman, *Op Cit.*, p 108.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115. Donna Goodman's thesis specifically addresses the sisterhoods of the three oldest synagogues in Montreal: the Spanish and Portuguese (Orthodox); the Shaar Hashomayim (Conservative); and Temple Emanu-El (Reform).

⁸¹ Carla Freedman, *The Rebbetzin in America in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1990), p. 144.

⁸² Myra Shoub, "Jewish Women's History," *Conservative Judaism* (Winter 1982), p. 43.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁸⁴ Daniel Bertaux and I. Bertaux-Wieme, "Artisinal Bakers in France: How They Live and Why They Survive," *The Petits Bourgeoisie: Comparative Studies of an Uneasy Strata*, edited by F. Bechhofer and B. Elliott (London: MacMillan, 1981).

⁸⁵ Daniel Bertaux, "From the Life-History Approach to the Transformation of Sociological Practice," *Biography and Society: The Life History in the Social Sciences*, ed. Daniel Bertaux (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1981), p. 36.