

“A Strike in Heaven”: the Montreal Rabbis’ Walkout of 1935 and its Significance¹

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Abstract

The standard narrative of the development of the Eastern European Jewish community in North America attributes great importance to the development of the Jewish labor movement, while often ignoring the immigrant Orthodox rabbinate. Yet the two seemingly disparate phenomena shared common values and were more often mutually reinforcing rather than antagonistic in their goals and strategies.

This article will examine in detail events within the Montreal Jewish community in 1935 when the majority of the rabbis of the Rabbinical council of the Jewish Community Council [*Va 'ad ha- 'Ir*] of Montreal walked out in protest and created what an observer described as "a strike in heaven". The article will reconstruct from newspaper and archival sources the course of this "heavenly strike". It will contextualize the rabbinic action with respect to the structure and history of the Montreal Jewish community and its kosher meat industry. It will also attempt to use the Montreal incident to examine broader issues regarding the social and cultural development of the immigrant Jewish community in North America in the first half of the twentieth century.

Introduction

The standard narrative of the development of the Eastern European Jewish immigrant community in North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as expressed classically in works like Moses Rischin's *The Promised City*,² attributes great importance to the development of the Jewish labor movement and its ethos, while often ignoring the immigrant Orthodox rabbinate.³ In my recent work on the immigrant Orthodox

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Simcha Fishbane for encouraging me to publish this article here, and to Dr. Steven Lapidus for a helpful suggestion.

² Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (New York, Harper and Row, 1970). Cf. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975).

³ Jenna Weissman Joselit, "What Happened to New York's 'Jewish Jews'?: Moses Rischin's *The Promised City* Revisited", *American Jewish History* 73 (1983), pp. 163-172. On American Orthodoxy in general, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2009).

rabbinate in North America, particularly in my book *Rabbis and Their Community*,⁴ I have asserted the importance of the immigrant Orthodox rabbinate in the development of Jewish communities in this era. In this article, I will demonstrate how the two seemingly disparate social phenomena of the Orthodox rabbinate and Jewish labor can be seen to have shared common values and were as often as not mutually reinforcing rather than antagonistic in their goals and strategies. Thus while much of the leadership of the North American Jewish labor movement may indeed have been religiously non-traditional, specifically anti-religious attitudes did not predominate in the North American Jewish labor movement, in the way that they tended to do in the more doctrinaire political environments of Eastern Europe and Palestine. Many in the rank and file of Jewish labor tended to have positive attitudes toward much of the Judaic tradition and its practices. There is considerable evidence that prior to the Second World War many of the supporters of Jewish labor unions attended Orthodox synagogues, purchased kosher meat, and gave their children Jewish educations in which they did not always distinguish what may seem to many observers incompatible "religious" and "secularist" ideologies. The rabbis, for their part, often championed the cause of the Jewish labor movement, supported the organization of Jewish labor unions, and publicly sided with the workers in their labor disputes.⁵ When circumstances were appropriate, rabbis also engaged in actions influenced by the ethos of Jewish labor.

The study of the immigrant Jewish community of Montreal in the first decades of the twentieth century allows us to examine this interactive phenomenon between rabbis and Jewish labor in detail. Starting in the 1920s the Yiddish-speaking immigrant Jewish community of Montreal established a self-governing body, the Jewish Community Council

⁴ Ira Robinson, *Rabbis and Their Community: Studies in the Immigrant Orthodox Rabbinate in Montreal, 1896-1930*. (Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 2007).

⁵ Gurock, *Orthodox Jews*, p. 120.

[*Va 'ad ha- 'Ir*—henceforth VH], that explicitly empowered the leadership of the Jewish labor movement to join in community governance and control over such "religious" activities as supervision of the kosher meat industry and the subsidy of Jewish educational institutions.⁶ The Montreal immigrant Orthodox rabbinate, for its part, was organized by VH as the Rabbinical Council [*Va 'ad ha-Rabbonim*—henceforth VR]. VR integrally participated in the activities of the Jewish Community Council and thus necessarily interacted with the Jewish labor leadership.

The influence of the Jewish labor movement in Montreal was felt considerably beyond formal labor-management issues, as evidenced in the student strike at the Aberdeen School in 1913.⁷ In this context, one of the more interesting results of the influence of the Jewish labor movement in Montreal includes consumer strikes in the 1920s against the high price of kosher meat⁸ as well as labor actions by Montreal's rabbinically trained slaughterers [*shohtim*], who formally organized a union of their own, the *Agudat ha-Shohtim* [henceforth AS] and repeatedly engaged in standard labor tactics against the VH.

Against this background, this article will examine in detail events within the Montreal Jewish community in 1935 that resulted in almost all the rabbis of the VR of the VH of Montreal walking off their job in protest, creating what one of their number, Rabbi Hirsch Cohen, somewhat facetiously described as "a strike in heaven" [*a strayk in himmel*].⁹ This article will reconstruct from newspaper and archival sources the course of this "heavenly strike" and its influence on the VH and its governance. It will particularly examine

⁶ Ira Robinson, "The Foundation Documents of the Jewish Community Council of Montreal", *Jewish Political Studies Review* 8, nos. 3-4 (1996), pp. 69-86.

⁷ Roderick Macleod and Mary Anne Poutanen, "Little Fists for Social Justice: Anti-Semitism, Community, and Montreal's Aberdeen School Strike, 1913", *Labour/Le Travail* 70 (Fall, 2012), forthcoming.

⁸ Ira Robinson, "The Kosher Meat War and the Jewish Community Council of Montreal, 1922-1925", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*. 22 (2) (1990) pp. 41-53; Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: the Third Migration, 1880-1920* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 94.

⁹ This was the title of an essay written by Rabbi Hirsch Cohen and published in Montreal's Yiddish daily newspaper, *Keneder Adler* [henceforth KA] on April 12, 1935.

the ways in which the local Yiddish language daily, *Der Keneder Adler* [henceforth—KA],¹⁰ and its editorial policy influenced the course of the rabbinical strike, the structure of the Montreal immigrant Orthodox rabbinate, and the ultimate resolution of the crisis that precipitated the "strike". It will contextualize the rabbinic action with respect to the inherent structural tensions within the Montreal Jewish community and, particularly, within its kosher meat industry with its often conflictual relationship between rabbis, slaughterers, meat packing companies, butchers, and consumers.

This article will also attempt to use the Montreal incident to raise and examine some broader issues regarding the interplay of "religious" and "secular" elements in the social and cultural development of the immigrant Jewish community in North America in the first half of the twentieth century. In so doing, it will serve to nuance our understanding of the social, cultural and religious dynamics of early twentieth century North American Jewish communities.

The Immigrant Orthodox Rabbinate

The significance of the immigrant Orthodox rabbinate at the turn of the twentieth century for the development of American Judaism had long been downplayed by those for whom the master narrative of the development of the American Jewish community did not encompass traditional Orthodox Judaism. However it is apparent, upon reflection, that the religious expression of the immigrant generation was largely guided by the model of eastern European Orthodox Judaism. This was so not because the majority of the immigrants were necessarily ideologically committed to the specific

¹⁰ On KA, see David Rome and Pierre Anctil, *Through the eyes of The eagle : the early Montreal Yiddish Press (1907-1916)* (Montreal, Vehicule Press, 2001).

doctrines of Orthodox Judaism. It was simply because Orthodoxy, in its Eastern European guise, happened to be the Judaic religious model most easily available to the immigrants as they moved to establish their synagogues and communal institutions.¹¹ In any event, the religious institutions founded by the immigrants soon attracted immigrant Orthodox rabbis who, though often bewildered and dismayed by the many changes in the level of religious observance by Jews in America,¹² doggedly began creating an institutional framework for rabbinical organization and supervision of kashrut and other areas of Jewish life.¹³

The forces of rabbinic organization that played out in community after community in North America in the first decades of the twentieth century were at work in Montreal as well.¹⁴ One major characteristic of the development of the North American rabbinate was the existence of sharp rivalries between rabbis as they competed for a limited number of positions related to the supervision of the production of kosher meat, which alone could afford these rabbis decent remuneration. In Montreal there existed a rivalry between two rabbinical coalitions that lasted for most of two decades.

¹¹ It is noteworthy that Reform Judaism at the turn of the twentieth century essentially gave up on influencing the immigrant generation religiously, hoping instead to attract their Americanized children. Conservative Judaism, significantly, got much of its impetus from the 1901 reorganization of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America supported by American Jews predominantly affiliated with the Reform movement who hoped to influence the Judaism of the immigrants' children. On the Seminary reorganization, see Mel Scult, "Schechter's Seminary" in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *Tradition Renewed: a History of the Jewish Theological Seminary* (New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997) volume 1, pp. 45-102. Cf. also Michael R. Cohen, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

¹² An interesting expression of this bewilderment is Jonathan D. Sarna, trans., *People Walk on Their Heads: Moses Weinberger's Jews and Judaism in New York* (New York, Holmes and Meier, 1981).

¹³ Jeffrey Gurock, "Accommodators and Resisters"

¹⁴ On the Montreal Jewish community and its history, see Pierre Anctil and Ira Robinson, eds., *Les Communautés juives de Montréal: histoire et enjeux contemporains* (Sillery, QC, Septentrion, 2010). For Canada as a whole, see Gerald Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews: a People's Journey* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2008). On trends in the North American immigrant Orthodox rabbinate, see Kimmy Caplan, *Orthodoxy in the New World: Immigrant Rabbis and Preaching in America (1881-1924)* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2002).

At first (1907-1918), the struggle took place between Rabbis Hirsch Cohen and Simon Glazer and their respective partisans. This struggle for control ultimately resulted in Rabbi Glazer leaving Montreal, and being replaced by Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, who inherited Glazer's following as well as his struggle with Rabbi Cohen.¹⁵

Rabbis Cohen and Rosenberg continued all their careers as rivals. Nonetheless they were also able to cooperate, at least intermittently. In the early 1920s, they first tried combining against a newly arrived rabbi, Sheea Herschorn, who was, like his rabbinic rivals, set on carving out a place for himself in kashrut supervision.¹⁶ Ultimately, the logic of the situation convinced the rivals that cooperation was better than competition. This led to the founding in 1922 of the Jewish Community Council [henceforth--VH] of Montreal, an organization with an ambitious mandate to create order out of seeming chaos in the kosher meat industry, establish a rabbinical council [*Va'ad ha-Rabbanim*—henceforth VR], fund Jewish education, and much else.

What resulted was, however, far short of the vision that animated the Jewish Community Council's founders. Almost immediately, the factions led by Rabbis Cohen and Rosenberg, respectively, that had united to found the Council split apart and left the Council in the hands of Rabbi Cohen and his partisans. Rabbi Rosenberg and his allies sought to present to the Montreal Jewish public an alternative rabbinic structure and a rival network of kosher butchers. What followed was two years of often bitter rivalry between the two factions that amounted to a "Kosher Meat War". It lasted from 1923 to

¹⁵ Robinson, *Rabbis*, pp. 21-68.

¹⁶ On Herschorn, see Ira Robinson, "'The Other Side of the Coin': The Anatomy of a Public Controversy in the Montreal Jewish Community, 1931", *Studies in Religion* 40 Issue 3 (September 2011) pp. 271 - 282.

1925, and only stopped because neither side was able to completely defeat the other. Ultimately the sheer waste of the rivalry and the exhaustion of any viable alternative led the two sides to reform their alliance based upon the previous status quo.¹⁷

Reestablishing the original structure of the Jewish Community Council and its Rabbinical Council did not, however, ensure completely smooth sailing. That is because the rabbis of the VR were not the only important factors in this equation. Another important group that was influential in the continued unrest in this area was that of the slaughterers [*shohtim*]. It is of considerable significance that these men were not merely envious of the prerogatives of the rabbis—their official supervisors—whom they did not necessarily consider their superiors in rabbinic education and erudition; they also organized in a union, the *Agudat ha-shohtim* [henceforth--AS].¹⁸ Thus, in 1929, Rabbi Getsel Laxer led a strike of *shohtim* that lasted nearly five months and caused no end of bitterness and recriminations.¹⁹ In the aftermath of that strike, the AS signed a contract with the VH that stipulated that the *shohtim* would receive 62% of the gross income from slaughtering and an income of \$53.00 per week.²⁰ Labor relations between the AS and the VH were no better in 1933, the depths of the Great Depression. When the *shohtim*'s salaries were reduced in that year,²¹ AS called a strike that lasted between March and September.²² One of the reasons for the AS discontent, beyond the obvious wage issue, was that the administration of the VH was increasingly under pressure to

¹⁷ Robinson, "Kosher Meat War". On some of the legal and political tactics utilized, see Ira Robinson, "Toward a History of Kashrut in Montreal: the Fight Over Municipal Bylaw 828 (1922-1924), in *Renewing Our Days: Montreal Jews in the Twentieth Century* (Montreal, 1995), pp. 30-41.

¹⁸ Robinson, *Rabbis*, pp. 69-86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-81.

²⁰ KA, February 27, 1935.

²¹ KA, March 11, 1935.

²² KA September 28, 1934.

fulfill one of the promises made at the VH's inception, to help fund the Jewish educational institutions of the city that were feeling the severe financial pinch of the depression. VH had thus begun giving significant amounts of money (over \$31,000 between April 1933 and May, 1935) to these institutions.²³ The strike actions of AS were publicly condemned in the Jewish community media. The *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* [henceforth CJChr] editorialized that the “uncompromising Agudath ha-Shochtim”, that had “let loose a torrent of abuse” directed at the VH, “stands today discredited and unmasked before the entire community”.²⁴ It is no wonder that, at the beginning of 1934, Toronto's Yiddish-language daily, looking at the state of kashrut in Canada, opined that “The kosher meat question has brought disgrace [*shande*] on the name of the Jew in several communities. The rabbis are dragged into gentile courts and the kosher meat industry is widely considered a “racket”.²⁵

The autumn of 1934 found the AS again opposing the VH in Quebec Superior Court, this time over the qualifications of slaughterer Itamar Brenner. Brenner, who had received a certificate indicating his qualifications as a slaughterer from Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, had practiced his trade in the small Jewish community of Glace Bay, Nova Scotia. However, when he moved to Montreal and attempted to establish himself as a *shoḥet* in that city, the VH went to court to obtain an injunction against him on the grounds that he was not considered to be qualified to slaughter in the eyes of the

²³ Keneder 'Id, August 23, 1935.

²⁴ *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* June 2, 1933.

²⁵ *Idisher Journal* (Toronto), January 30, 1934. On issues of kashrut before American courts in this era, see Bernard J. Meislin, *Jewish Law in American Tribunals* (Hoboken, NJ, KTAV Publishing House, 1976), pp. 175-188.

Montreal rabbinate and had refused the rabbis' summons to appear before them.²⁶ The issue, then, was the authority of the VH and its VR to be the sole authority for kashrut in Montreal. The *shohtim*, were once again under the leadership of Getsel Laxer, and he denied in his court testimony that the VH had the sole authority to certify slaughterers. Rabbi Rosenberg, who had granted the license for Brenner to become a *sho^het* in Glace Bay, was called to the stand and affirmed that he certified Brenner to slaughter only poultry, not cattle. When Brenner was called to the stand, however, he testified that Rabbi Rosenberg had indeed asked him to slaughter cattle for the VH during the 1933 AS strike but he that had refused to betray his colleagues and become a scab.²⁷ It was further reported that the meatpacking companies of Montreal, for whom the kosher trade was a not insignificant part of their business, had an interest in the results of this dispute and favored the slaughterers over the VH.²⁸ During the hearing, a KA reporter heard one of the lawyers comment facetiously that this dispute should be brought before the League of Nations for resolution.²⁹

Entering the year 1935, it was clear that tensions between the VH and the AS had not been resolved by the Brenner trial. For Laxer and others, it seemed clear that the only way to deal with the VH was in further court cases in which they could assert their independence from the VR.³⁰ At the same time, the Depression was taking its financial toll. In December, 1934, the annual meeting of the VH reported expenses of \$83,741.72

²⁶ KA, September 27, 1934.

²⁷ KA, September 30, 1934.

²⁸ KA, October 9, 1934.

²⁹ KA, September 28, 1934.

³⁰ KA, April 12, 1935.

and income of \$73,737.99.³¹ There was, in other words, a significant deficit of some \$10,000 that needed to be dealt with. This resulted in pressure to reduce expenditures. There were two possible areas of reduction, each with its own pitfalls. One was to cut salaries and risk the renewed wrath of the *shohtim*. The other, no less risky for VH was to cut the financial subsidies it had been paying to several Montreal Jewish educational and cultural institutions. But how could these already penniless institutions, some of whose teachers had not been paid in months, absorb a further cut in their meager income?³²

Thus the first issue at play in the VH at the beginning of 1935 was financial in nature. To help meet these challenges, on January 22, the VH presented its financial state to the rabbis, and proposed a 15-20% reduction in salaries.³³ The fallout was not long in coming.

On February 19, KA reported that the VS, under the leadership of the ever militant Rabbi Getsel Laxer, had broken its contract with VH.³⁴ For its part, VR tried to arrange a compromise to attempt to placate the VS, while still keeping faith with the schools, which, under this compromise, would continue to get at least \$5,000-10,000 annually.³⁵ But once the issue of pay cuts for the rabbis of the VR was broached, the situation deteriorated rapidly. On February 25, KA reported that VH, in order to continue giving financial support to the schools, would have to reduce the salaries of the

³¹ KA, December 10, 1934.

³² The VH annual meeting reported that over \$15,000 had been allocated to four schools and the Jewish People's Library. KA, December 10, 1934.

³³ KA, March 13, 1935.

³⁴ KA, February 19, 1935.

³⁵ KA, February 24, 1935.

supervising rabbis, which ranged from \$25.00 to \$65.00 weekly by 15-20%. For the rabbis, once confronted with this new and disturbing reality, enough was enough. The KA reported that in response to the proposal to cut their wages, the majority of the rabbinical members of the VR staged a walkout and joined the VS in their strike against the VH. The VH, for its part, claimed that the kosher slaughtering it supervised was ongoing with well-known and qualified slaughterers and the supervision of Rabbis Moshe Yomtov Wachtfogel and Yitzhak Shternberg.³⁶ This meant that only one of the eight rabbinical members of the VR, Rabbi Wachtfogel, was still on the job. The seven others walked out, including the VR's chair and vice chair, Rabbis Cohen and Rosenberg. Other rabbis participating in the walkout were Aaron Zalmanovitz, Abraham Samuel Dubitsky, Joshua Ha-Levi Herschorn, Yosef David Berger, and Nathan Nata Aframovitz. These rabbis continued to regard themselves as constituting the VR and in this guise published a statement in KA that in VH slaughterhouses where five *shohtim* were normally stationed, there were now only three, and that the possibility for non-kosher meat to be marked as kosher was very likely under these conditions.³⁷

The KA, as in the past, firmly sided with the VH in its struggle against dissidents, and its editor, Israel Rabinowitz, stated on February 26 in his front page column:

The VH is, after all, the elected Kehilla corporation of Montreal Jewry.

Any attempt to attack it, from whatever side, attacks the will of

³⁶ KA, February 25, 1935.

³⁷ KA, February 27, 1935.

the majority.³⁸

The Montreal rabbinical strike had thus begun. The English-language CJChr, which often commented on Jewish labor issues, used standard labor terms to describe this incident, and spoke of the rabbis as having “downed their tools”.³⁹ The VH charged the rabbis with having walked out for no reason and with no warning.⁴⁰ Other charges were hurled back and forth. KA reported on March 4 that Rabbi Cohen had, in a meeting of leaders of congregations, stated that the rabbis had walked out because the VH was concerned only with issues of kosher meat and not other communal questions. Not so, retorted the VH, on the contrary, the VH had for years wanted the rabbis to fulfill functions other than kashrut, including visiting hospitals and schools but that it was the rabbis who had balked at such extra work.⁴¹ Moreover, the VH charged, the rabbis had walked out because the VH continued to support the schools at the expense of their salaries.⁴²

In his response, published in the KA on March 6, Rabbi Cohen quoted the “gentile Shakespeare” [*der ‘orel shekspir*] and asserted that “the devil can quote scripture.”⁴³ He pleaded for a nonpartisan committee to hear the rabbis’ complaints.⁴⁴ The very next day, Rabinowitz in his daily KA column replied to Rabbi Cohen, asking openly and pointedly who was at fault in this situation of kashrut. This position was

³⁸ KA, February 26, 1935.

³⁹ CJC, March 1, 1935.

⁴⁰ KA, March 3, 1935.

⁴¹ KA, on March 15, 1935, quoted Rabbi Herschorn who stated, in response to a request that the rabbis visit hospitals, that this was for priests who were there to “kidnap souls”.

⁴² KA, March 4, 1935.

⁴³ William Shakespeare, “Merchant of Venice”, Act 1, scene 3.

⁴⁴ KA, March 6, 1935.

repeated in the next day's CJChr.⁴⁵

On March 11, the dispute ratcheted up a notch. The VH placed an advertisement in the KA, claiming to employ eleven *shohtim*, ten *mashgichim* [supervisors] and to be supervising 67 butcher shops. More significantly, the advertisement claimed that Rabbis Wachtfogel and Shternberg constituted the legitimate VR.⁴⁶ For their part, the dissident rabbis formed an organization called Va'ad ha-Kashrut [VK] to oppose VH. At a meeting held in the Chevra Kadisha synagogue, the rabbis promised \$10,000 yearly from VK to support the Talmud Torah.

It is noteworthy that the dissident rabbis, organized as VK, had positioned themselves as a specifically Orthodox body, as opposed to the VH, which was inclusive of elements in the Jewish community that were not strictly Orthodox. It is at this point that one of the major fault lines in the rabbinical walkout became publicly visible. In its inception, the VH had been purposefully constituted so as to be inclusive of elements of the "radical" Jewish community and to undertake to support financially not merely the religiously-oriented education of the Talmud Torah, but also the "radical" [i.e. "secular"] educational institutions of the Folks and Peretz Shules. The fact that Rabbi Cohen offered VK's financial support only to the Talmud Torah indicates that he wished to have no part in this inclusive coalition. He further charged that "radical" elements had gained control of VH, and that the opponents of the rabbis and their VK came from people who possessed neither *tefillin* nor separate meat and dairy utensils at home.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ KA, March 7, 1935; CJChr, March 8, 1935.

⁴⁶ KA, March 11, 1935.

⁴⁷ KA, March 11, 1935. An article that appeared in KA on March 15, 1935, refuted this charge, saying that of 55 representatives to the VH, only 9 represented the "radical" institutions.

This meant, of course, that Rabbi Cohen and his striking colleagues probably saw in this crisis an opportunity to recreate the VH in the image of a strictly Orthodox institution and to put an end to communal subsidies of non-Orthodox Jewish schooling.

As Israel Rabinovitch commented, this strike had now taken on the aspect of a “holy war”. As far as he was concerned the key issue was money, though the rabbis wished people to believe that there were other issues.⁴⁸

A handbill, dated April 6, 1935⁴⁹ gives the Rabbis’ side of the affair. It is entitled “Why Change the Vaad Ha-‘Ir? [*Farvos darf men tshengen dem Va’ad ha-‘Ir?*]. It accused the VH of misallocation of funds. VH supports “radical” educational institutions that teach Jewish children to become “complete nonbelievers [*apikorsim*]”; and it further pays \$25.00 weekly to a man unacceptable to the religious community, who was characterized as a “black sinner [*shvartsen ba’al avera*]”. In general, the handbill portrayed the rabbis’ battle against the VH as a fight for Torah and Judaism and against antireligious radicals. Furthermore, the rabbis reiterated their charges that VH now had inadequate supervision over kosher meat. VH, it was charged, stations three *shohtim* where the rabbis say there is a need for five. There is, furthermore, no rabbinical supervision of VH butcher shops which thus operate in a state of anarchy [*hefker*]. Kashrut for the upcoming Passover season, during which the rules are more complex than in the rest of the year, is now the hands of people at VH who are as adequate to do this job “as a Cossack knows [the intricate Aramaic liturgical hymn] *akdomus*.”

⁴⁸ KA, March 11, 1935.

⁴⁹ April 6 is a handwritten note on the handbill, the original of which is in the possession of the author. KA of April 9, 1935 reacts to this circular.

However partisan the message of this handbill was, it was signed “The new committee for peace”. By April, in other words, while recriminations still flew back and forth between the two sides, people on all sides of this issue were looking for a way out of the mess the rabbis’ walkout had caused. The VH and its supporters could not see themselves as dispensing with the services of the most important Orthodox rabbis of the city. The rabbis, for their part, had hoped to form a VK that would become the communal institution that worked specifically for their religious interests in a way that the VH did not. However their hope was disappointed. The key to their disappointment was their failure to come up with a recognized communal leader to become the head of VK. They had hoped to persuade Mr. A. Drazin, a Vice-President of VH, to become its president and it was reported in KA of March 15 that he had in fact accepted this post.⁵⁰ The very next day, however, the newspaper reported Drazin’s claim that he had not in fact accepted the post.⁵¹ In retrospect, it is the VK’s failure to attract a viable lay leadership that ultimately doomed the rabbis’ walkout to failure.

Israel Rabinovitch commented on April 21, “One day this [dispute] will be settled and we will have to look each other in the face”.⁵² Two days later, a meeting held at the Nusah Ari Synagogue called for a peace conference between both sides of the conflict.⁵³

A key break in the conflict came about a month later, when Rabbis Rosenberg, Aframovitz and Berger asked to be go back to serve the VH and were reinstated by VH.

⁵⁰ KA, March 11, 1935.

⁵¹ KA, March 15, 1935. Cf. also KA, March 17, 1935.

⁵² KA, April 21, 1935.

⁵³ KA, April 23, 1935.

They, along with Rabbis Wachtfogel and Shternberg were accepted back into the VR. According to a KA article, these three rabbis had seen the error of their ways and had all written letters to VH expressing their regret for their actions. Due to the extenuating circumstances, the VH had decided to take them back.⁵⁴

This event, which constituted a cruel blow to the hopes of the dissident rabbis, received an immediate response on the part of the remaining dissidents. A handbill was issued entitled “Appeal to All Shuls and Orthodox Jews in Montreal”. It was signed by Rabbi Zalmanovitch, the most prominent dissident then in the city (Rabbi Cohen was then in the United States) proclaiming that the founding of kehillot in cities like Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal had been unmitigated disasters for Orthodoxy. The VH continued to support the radical schools where the students were taught not to believe in the Torah of Moses and whose leaders had no need for either the rabbis or the Talmud Torahs.⁵⁵

Rabbi Rosenberg responded on the next day on behalf of the VH that he had rejoined with a call for the remaining dissident rabbis to come back as well. Resignedly he stated that from this sort of communal division, no one profits except Satan, whose purpose it is to increase senseless hatred in Israel.⁵⁶

Thus through the summer of 1935, the newly reconstituted VR functioned with five members: Rabbis Rosenberg, Wachtfogel, Aframovitz, Berger, and Shternberg.⁵⁷ Remaining for the moment outside the new consensus were Rabbis Cohen,

⁵⁴ KA, May 24, 1935.

⁵⁵ Handbill dated Iyar 5695/MAY 25, 1935 in possession of author.

⁵⁶ KA, May 26, 1935.

⁵⁷ These five rabbis signed a pronouncement of the Montreal Rabbinical Court. KA, July 3, 1935.

Zalmanovitch, Dubitsky and Herschorn. This continuing division within the Montreal Orthodox rabbinate is symbolized by the fact that, when the Rabbi Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook, Ashkenazic chief rabbi of British mandated Palestine died in early September, an official Montreal eulogy was delivered by Rabbis Berger and Afromovitz of the VH.⁵⁸

A few days later, however, the leading holdout rabbi, Hirsh Cohen, had returned to Montreal after what KA described as “a lengthy vacation” and visited the offices of KA.⁵⁹ Cohen immediately began asserting his presence in the city and, on September 23, KA reported that he and Rabbi Zalmanovitz had publicly eulogized Rabbi Kook a second time.⁶⁰ The division between VR and the holdout dissident rabbis was still apparent in early October, when a KA report presented Rabbi Wachtfogel as spokesman for the VR.⁶¹ However on the 17th of October, when the VR appealed for funds for the Isaac Elchanan Yeshiva in New York, Rabbi Hirsch Cohen was once again listed as chair of the VR, taking his former place.⁶² By the annual meeting of the VH in December of that year, things had returned to at least a semblance of “normal” and it was reported that the VH once again was in control of “96%” of the kosher slaughter in Montreal.⁶³

So did the “Strike in Heaven” result in anything meaningful? The answer to this question is neither an unequivocal yes nor no. On the one hand, the rabbinic

⁵⁸ KA, September 9, 1935.

⁵⁹ KA, September 13, 1935.

⁶⁰ KA, September 23, 1935.

⁶¹ KA, October 2, 1935.

⁶² KA, October 17, 1935.

⁶³ KA, December 16, 1935.

personalities and the financial situation that brought about the crisis of February to October 1935 remained almost exactly the same. On the other hand, the crisis did bring about some important structural changes in the way the rabbis and *shohtim* did their business.

One of these changes involved the payment of rabbis and slaughterers. The reality of the situation, which indeed satisfied no one, was that the VH income was truly insufficient to support eight rabbis and twenty-four *shohtim*. Rabbis' salaries were thus cut still further so that in the VH budget presented in October, 1936,⁶⁴ the salary of the chair of the VR, Rabbi Hirsch Cohen, was set at \$40.00 per week, the vice-chair got \$35.00 weekly, two other rabbis got \$25.00 a week and four others \$50-75 monthly. For their part, the *shohtim* were divided into three categories in terms of their work and remuneration: those who were able-bodied with large families; those who were able-bodied with small families or other sources of income; and older men with limited physical strength.

These measures, while unpopular, with the rabbis and *shohtim*, served to mitigate the budgetary crisis by trimming what had been an inflated payroll of rabbis and *shohtim*. Many of the men of the payroll had been rabbis who had emigrated to Montreal from the ruined Jewish communities of Eastern Europe after the destruction of the First World War and had been given jobs in the VH even though they were admittedly not fully able to work.⁶⁵

The rabbinical walkout of 1935 also clearly exposed the changing role of the

⁶⁴ KA, October 30, 1936.

⁶⁵ KA, April 21, 1935.

Orthodox rabbinate, as well as new expectations that rabbis ought to be performing pastoral duties like other clergymen, such as visiting the sick. It further delineated the tension within the immigrant Jewish community of Montreal between Orthodox and “radical” Jews that would ultimately result in VH becoming a decidedly Orthodox institution with hardly a memory of its initial “radical” presence.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ On the later history of VH, see Steven Lapidus, “Orthodoxy in Transition: The Vaad Ha‘ir of Montreal in the Twentieth Century”, doctoral dissertation, Concordia University, 2011).