

“The Second Destruction of Cleveland Orthodox Synagogues”: Rabbi Israel Porath and Cleveland Jewry at the Crossroads, 1945

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In late March 1945, as World War II in Europe was nearing its end, an Orthodox rabbi in Cleveland, Ohio, wrote an article for the local Yiddish newspaper, *Di Yiddishe Velt* [Jewish World], which encompassed a remarkably clear analysis of the situation of Cleveland’s Orthodox Jewry at that time¹ and a prescient vision of its suburban future.²

1 On the situation of North American Orthodox Jewry in the immediate postwar period, see Zev Eleff, “From Teacher to Scholar to Pastor: The Evolving Postwar Modern Orthodox Rabbinate,” *American Jewish History* 98 (October 2014): 289–313; Lawrence Grossman, “American Orthodoxy in the 1950s: The Lean Years,” in *Rav Chesed: Essays in Honor of Rabbi Dr. Haskel Lookstein*, ed. Rafael Medoff (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 2009), 251–69; Haym Soloveitchik, “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Tradition* 28 (Summer 1994): 64–130. More generally, see Jeffrey Gurock, *From Fluidity to Rigidity: The Religious Worlds of Conservative and Orthodox Jews in Twentieth Century America* (Ann Arbor: Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, University of Michigan, 1998); Zev Eleff, ed., *Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2016).

2 For a discussion of North American postwar suburbanization, see Doug Owsram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby-Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), chapter 3; Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820–2000* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003). On the suburbanization of Orthodox Jews, see Etan Diamond, *And I Will Dwell in their Midst: Orthodox Jews in Suburbia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); *idem.*, “The kosher lifestyle: Religious consumerism and suburban Orthodox Jews,” *Journal of Urban History* 28, no. 4 (2002): 488–505; Albert I. Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 85–127.

The rabbi's name was Israel Porath (1886–1974).³ Born in Jerusalem, Porath, who was a student of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, came to the United States in 1923 and first served as rabbi in Plainfield, New Jersey. In 1925 he moved to Cleveland, having been offered a rabbinical position by Cleveland's Congregation Ohab Zedek.⁴ Beyond his considerable erudition, Porath brought to Cleveland an ability to articulate his ideas in nearly flawless English.⁵ He devoted his scholarly work to the writing and publication of *Mavo' ha-Talmud* (seven volumes), a guide making Talmud study easier both for young students who had never studied Gemara and for adults who had studied in their youth but had forgotten their learning.⁶

By 1927, Porath was taking a leading role in Cleveland's Orthodox rabbinate,⁷ aiming to solve the contentious issues related to the city's

3 On Rabbi Porath, see Israel Porath, *Mishkaotekha Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Porath, 2017), introduction. For a wealth of documentary material on Porath, see <http://www.cleveland-jewishhistory.net/people/porath.htm> (accessed 15 February 2015). The major account of the history of the Cleveland Jewish community to the mid-twentieth century remains Lloyd Gartner, *History of the Jews of Cleveland* (Cleveland: Western Reserve Historical Society [hereafter WRHS] and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978). On Cleveland's Orthodox community, see my two articles: "A Link in the Great American Chain": The Evolution of an Orthodox Jewish Community in Cleveland, Ohio, to 1940," forthcoming in *Cleveland Jews and the Making of a Midwestern Community*, ed. Sean Martin (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020); and "The Evolution of the Orthodox Jewish Community in Cleveland, Ohio, 1940 to the Present," *Studies in Judaism, Humanities and the Social Sciences* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 105–119.

4 Sally H. Wertheim and Alan D. Bennett, eds., *Remembering: Cleveland's Jewish Voices* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2011), 203.

5 Many of Porath's English-language sermons, including his inaugural sermon from 1925, are preserved in the Rabbi Israel Porath Papers, MS-4753, container 2, folder 7, WRHS.

6 Israel Porath, *Mavo' ha-Talmud* vol. 1 *Gittin* (St. Louis, 1942), introduction, unpaginated. <http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=38100&st=&pgnum=2> (accessed 2 February 2015). It is noteworthy that Cleveland Reform Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver donated five hundred dollars toward the publication of one of Rabbi Porath's books. Abba Hillel Silver to Israel Porath, 17 November 1954, Rabbi Israel Porath Papers, folder 2, WRHS 1.

7 "Visiting Orthodox Rabbis of Three States Welcomed Here," *Jewish Independent* (Cleveland), 29 July 1927. Clipping in Rabbi Israel Porath Papers, MS-4753, folder 4, WRHS.

kosher meat industry.⁸ Cleveland's kashrut was an issue that, as he stated, "embittered our communal life for decades and that constantly brought with it so much desecration [*hillul ha-shem*] and distress [*agmat nefesh*] that it seemed that kosher meat and conflict were like Siamese twins that cannot be separated."⁹ It would not be until 1940 that a new rabbinic organization under Porath's leadership, the Orthodox Rabbinical Council (*Merkaz ha-Rabbonim*), managed to achieve the unity that had eluded Cleveland Orthodoxy until then and was able, in cooperation with Cleveland's Jewish Federation, to create a stable kashrut supervision in Cleveland that lasted for decades.¹⁰

In the 1940s the Cleveland Jewish community stood at a crossroads.¹¹ When Porath had arrived in Cleveland in the 1920s, the center of the Eastern European immigrant community and its synagogues had been the "Central" neighborhood.¹² Over the ensuing years, Porath had witnessed the influx of African Americans and the exodus of Jews from that neighborhood. Cleveland Jews then moved to two new neighborhoods: one, Glenville, coalesced around East 105th Street; the other encompassed the Kinsman Road district. By 1945, however, Cleveland Jewry found itself under pressure to move once again.

As his article shows, Porath saw the Cleveland Jewish situation both as a crisis and as an opportunity. He felt that there was an urgent need for Cleveland's Orthodox Jewry to take stock of itself in this transitional period. In particular, Porath urged synagogue leaders not to repeat their previous mistake of rebuilding existing synagogues separately in new

8 In the *American Jewish Year Book* 29 (1927–1928): 210, the group is called "The Orthodox United Rabbinat of Cleveland" and claims to have eight members, with Porath as chair.

9 "Vi azoi hot der merkaz ha-rabbonim bahandelt di kashrus frage letstn yor?" *Jewish World*, 6–7 October 1940. Rabbi Israel Porath papers, MS-4753, folder 8, WRHS.

10 Sidney Z. Vincent and Judah Rubenstein, *Merging Traditions—Jewish Life in Cleveland: A Contemporary Narrative, 1945–1975; A Pictorial Record, 1839–1975* (Cleveland: Western Reserve Historical Society and the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland, 1978), 57.

11 For an account of the similar developments in the Jewish community of Detroit in this era, see Lila Corwin Berman, *Metropolitan Jews: Politics, Race, and Religion in Postwar Detroit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

12 "Central Neighborhood," *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History* <https://case.edu/ech/articles/c/central-neighborhood/> (accessed 7 March 2018).

neighborhoods. Synagogues should rather try to combine forces and establish an Orthodox bloc to influence the Jewish Community Council.

And indeed, in the spirit of Porath's vision, the Jewish Community Council and Federation did meet with the Orthodox synagogues to help them plan their eventual move to the Cleveland Heights area.¹³ There was a push to effect synagogue mergers so as to establish large conglomerate Orthodox congregations with high membership bases, such as the Taylor Road Synagogue, the Heights Jewish Center, and the Warrensville Center Synagogue. Thus, for example, the Warrensville Center Synagogue, dedicated in April 1959, combined three congregations—the Tetiever Ahavas Achim Anshe Sfard, Bnai Jacob Kol Israel (Kinsman Jewish Center), and Neve Zedek—with a combined membership of over one thousand families.¹⁴ As Porath stated at the new synagogue's dedication: "The shifting of population from the city to the suburbs has changed the whole structure of our local Orthodox Jewry. Old and long-established congregations which had existed for many scores of years in the old neighborhoods had to be reshaped through mergers."¹⁵ As a result of this planning process, in the 1950s Taylor Road in Cleveland Heights became a street central to the Orthodox community; it comprised the Hebrew Academy day school, several synagogues, kosher bakeries, and food stores.¹⁶

13 Sidney Z. Vincent, *Personal and Professional: Memoirs of a Life in Community Service* (Cleveland: Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland, 1982), 180. On the development of the suburb of Cleveland Heights, see Marian Morton, "The suburban ideal and suburban realities: Cleveland Heights, Ohio, 1860–2001," *Journal of Urban History* 28, no. 6 (2002): 671–698.

14 "Three Cleveland Orthodox Congregations Announce Merger," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 22 April 1959, <http://www.jta.org/1959/04/22/archive/three-cleveland-orthodox-congregations-announce-merger> (accessed 26 January 2015).

15 Rabbi Israel Porath Papers, MS-4753, folder 8, WRHS.

16 Sidney Z. Vincent and Judah Rubenstein, *Merging Traditions—Jewish Life in Cleveland: A Contemporary Narrative, 1945–1975; A Pictorial Record, 1839–1975*, 20.

***Der Tzveyter Hurbn fun Klivlander Orthodoxishe Shuln* [The Second Destruction of Cleveland Orthodox Synagogues]¹⁷**

by Rabbi Israel Porath

Twenty-five years ago in Cleveland there was a flourishing Jewish settlement on Cedar and Central Avenues and their vicinity. There existed large, magnificent synagogues with beautiful study houses that were packed with Jews who prayed in several *minyanim*¹⁸ each day and which housed tables and benches where Torah scholars and those who had acquired [Torah] learning would study daily sessions in *Talmud*, *Mishna*, *Eyn Ya'akov*,¹⁹ etc. These were Jews from the old country and synagogues in the old style.

After a while there came prosperity and the Jews began to run from their homes. In a short time the entire Jewish settlement there was destroyed. Many synagogues were sold as churches; the rest were left empty and abandoned and a significant Jewish resource was lost.

In those years the banks gave mortgages for community buildings. The [congregations] bought and built large new synagogues in the two new Jewish settlements around 105th Street and around Kinsman Road. In these synagogues the study sessions were smaller and fewer, but people still prayed. Many synagogues had three *minyanim* and others two, but it became a more compact Jewish community.

The community built a community *mikveh*²⁰ with modern and hygienic fixtures which cost tens of thousands of dollars. There were also magnificent institutions like the Old Age Home,²¹ the Orphanage,²² and

17 *Di Yiddishe Velt* [The Jewish World], 28 March 1945, p. 2. Translated from the Yiddish by Ira Robinson.

18 In this context, *minyan* means a Jewish prayer service.

19 A compendium of the non-halakhic content of the Talmud, edited in the sixteenth century by Rabbi Jacob ibn Habib.

20 Ritual pool.

21 Founded in 1906 and in 1945 situated on Lakeview Avenue.

22 Chartered in May 1919 and opened in August 1920 as the Orthodox Jewish Orphan Asylum.

later the *Hakhmosos Orkhim*.²³ As well, the Yeshiva Adas [Bnei Yisroel]²⁴ and the Talmud Torahs placed their central institutions and their branches in the new Jewish neighborhood and a great Jewish community was formed anew that pulsed with life and activity. A traditional Jewish community was established with the old attributes.

As was mentioned all the synagogues were mortgaged by the banks. However, five years ago there began a movement to pay off the mortgages. The Neve Zedek Shul was the first to publicize its joy at burning the mortgage and after it other synagogues, one after the other, were freed from debt and became a Jewish community possession in the full sense of the term.

After a while there was once again a tumult. Jews began to flee from their beautiful middle-class homes. At the beginning this flight was sporadic and intermittent; later it was at a quicker pace and in masses. The prosperity coming from the bloody war has once more made everyone drunk. We see once again how Jewish neighborhoods are becoming abandoned and emptied. It is now a normal experience to see great Houses of Study looking for a tenth man for a *minyán*. If this goes on we will once more see the old spectacle which we now experience regarding the old Jewish neighborhoods. Parents will travel downtown with their children and show them the churches where Sammy became bar mitzvah, where Eddy graduated, and where Charlie and Penny were married.

Yes, this appears to be the situation. The synagogues that have just been freed from their mortgages are simultaneously becoming abandoned by their members and supporters. The Conservative element has more or less adjusted to the new surroundings and has already been consolidated with local schools and activities. However, the Orthodox element, which always sees itself as coming too little too late goes about in the new areas like wandering sheep. There has suddenly come a crisis in their long-established way of life and they feel that they have somehow lost their footing.

23 A traditional institution giving shelter to itinerant Jews.

24 Founded in 1915. Gartner, *History of the Jews of Cleveland*, 287.

I want to point out that this misfortune would not be so great if our communal life was not so concentrated around the synagogues. In a city with a *Kultus-Gemeinde*,²⁵ when [Jews] move from one neighborhood to another, [the *Kultus-Gemeinde*] takes with it all the communal institutions which will continue functioning on the same basis as previously. In the Land of Israel or in Diaspora countries from which the local Jewish population came synagogues constitute a part of the general communal property, like the Talmud Torah, Kosher meat, Old Age Home, Orphanage, Mikveh, etc. However, in American Jewish life, synagogues function as separate communities. Each synagogue constitutes an institution by itself, with its own membership and functions. There is a mutual influence and feeling of loyalty between the synagogue and its members, the sisterhoods and men's clubs and with the children's schools. Each synagogue justifies its own existence according to its own vision and ability. And when a sudden crisis erupts it is brought to a serious state of affairs.

Simultaneously with the decline of the synagogues, the Orthodox Jewry of Cleveland has also experienced in the past three years great losses. The entire traditional way of life has been shattered. The hygienic *mikveh* that was purchased with communal money has become the private property of individuals. These individuals have found that from a financial standpoint they can do without continuing the hygienic regime of cleanliness and exactness. As soon as it becomes a private business, no one else's opinion counts and no one can demand that they go to the extra expense.

Three years ago, there existed a rabbinic supervision over kosher meat that was satisfactory and effective. Lately the question of supervision of kashrut has completely disappeared from current concern. Today there is no supervision at all, neither over kosher meat nor delicatessen. As well, the supervision in the slaughterhouses has become significantly weakened. A slaughterhouse that once had four rabbinical supervisors has, bit by bit, gotten rid of three and the one who remains is on sufferance.

25 A city-wide communal organization that took care of all the needs of the Jewish community. This sort of community organization characterized European Jewry but not American Jewry.

The foundation of traditional Jewish family life has begun to crack and the entire edifice is teetering. Jewish divorces according to the Law of Moses and Israel have been reduced to a minimum. This is already an old trouble. However now we are also threatened by a wave of mixed marriages. This plague which until not long ago was felt only in the smaller cities in which only a few Jewish families lived, has begun to appear and spread also in larger communities, and Cleveland has found itself strongly affected by the assault. This is a growing phenomenon in which the Conservative element needs to be interested as well.

Among our defeats we need to consider that of our local newspaper, the *Jewish World*, which has had to stop publication as a daily paper. It is only thanks to the devotion of the employees that it was possible to continue its publication as a weekly.²⁶

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It is self-evident that the above-mentioned problems are not just Cleveland problems. All of them are shared by many. In all cities there are Jewish neighborhoods that are decaying. Family purity is a vexed issue that we do not speak of. Kosher meat is an old, talked out issue. Mixed marriages have become a nationwide disease. Yiddish newspapers in Philadelphia and Chicago have gone under.

Certainly, Cleveland is but a link in the great American chain. However, that does not mean that we can ignore our local problems because other Jewish communities suffer from the same troubles. When there is an outbreak of plague each locality must undertake its own measures to protect and save itself from destruction.

I think that now, when Cleveland's Orthodox Jewry is packing to move to a new neighborhood, is the right time to evaluate our circumstances and weakness. Now is the right time for many in the remaining remnant of synagogues to not make the same mistake of moving all

26 The newspaper was founded in 1907 and ceased publication in 1952. "Cleveland Yiddish Newspaper Ceases Publication, Existed Since 1907," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 6 March 1952, <https://www.jta.org/1952/03/06/archive/cleveland-yiddish-newspaper-ceases-publication-existed-since-1907> (accessed 7 March 2018).

existing synagogues but on a smaller scale. A way must be found that several synagogues can combine forces so that it will be possible to found two or three larger synagogues in different parts of the Heights. (I do not want to advise that we should contemplate a synagogue that is too large and powerful because the experience of the [Cleveland] Jewish Center demonstrated that Orthodoxy is not strong enough to protect its interests in time of crisis. There must remain some reserves to protect the balance between the aspirations for modernity and the nostalgia for authentic tradition).²⁷

The coming together of the new settlement in the Heights is in certain respects different from the settlement that happened 25 years ago. Then the different elements could be divided into three. The neighborhood between Superior and St. Clair was mostly settled by businessmen and the middle class. The Kinsman neighborhood was taken by the working classes and the Heights was occupied by the professional classes. Now the new settlement will be made up of all three classes together: professionals, businessmen and workers. This fact will certainly have an influence on the establishment of the religious and cultural life of the area. I think that now is the best time for the presidents and directors of the Lithuanian, Polish, Galician, Grodner, Tetiever Synagogues, etc., to come together to discuss the problem and decide to adopt measures for a united plan on how to save the synagogues from total disappearance. There are a few synagogues here that deal now only with a cemetery, and a number of others are destined for the same fate.

The time has also come that Orthodox elements must group together in a strong block in the [Jewish] Community Council. The Council is a democratic institution that has existed for a good number of years. Nearly all the synagogues are represented, however until now they have not shown their strength. A strong block with a rational plan and policies would have a great influence on the entire thought process of the Council. For example, it would not be any sin to exert pressure through

27 On the conflictual conversion of the Cleveland Jewish Center from Orthodoxy to Conservatism in the 1920s, see Ira Robinson, "A 'Jewish Monkey Trial': the Cleveland Jewish Center and the Emerging Borderline between Orthodox and Conservative Judaism in 1920s North America," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 68, no. 2 (2016): 90–118.

the Council on the Welfare Federation which makes a campaign for over one million dollars a year that it should allocate a few thousand dollars to make order in the kashrut question in order to be rid of the constant scandals and desecrations which were only caused by monetary issues. It is my impression that now is the optimum time for a satisfactory solution to these incessant problems to be made without substantial opposition. The overwhelming majority of the local rabbis is ready to cooperate in such an undertaking. There must, however, be a legal and well-appointed committee that will understand how to handle the problem in a practical manner.

The proper organization that could give itself to the solution of all the above mentioned and similar problems should be the Mizrahi Council of Cleveland. To the Council belong many synagogues which understand more or less the importance of organization in community life. The Council must not limit its influence only to gather money for the Mizrahi [movement]. It must deepen and enlarge its activities in the area of strengthening the Torah and Judaism, especially in the area of Jewish education, on a purely traditional basis.

For this purpose, it would be necessary to utilize our old-new weekly the *Jewish World* to illuminate all these questions and to shape public opinion that should not be focussed on scathing criticism and strife, but only on earnest constructive work to be done with reason and persistence.

And if not now, when?²⁸

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28 Mishna Avot 1, 14.