



My Uncle, Rabbi Herman Hailperin, of Tree of Life Congregation: American Jewry in Mid-Twentieth Century and Now

Daniel J. Lasker* | 02.11.2019

On the occasion of the anniversary of the murderous attack a year ago on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Daniel J. Lasker, Professor Emeritus of Jewish Thought at Ben Gurion University, wrote the following article on his uncle, Rabbi Dr. Herman Hailperin, who many years ago served as rabbi of that congregation for 49 years.

It was my son who first saw the news after Shabbat had ended. “Wasn’t your uncle rabbi of Etz Chaim in Pittsburgh?” he asked. Not understanding what had happened, my first reaction was, “No, he was rabbi of Tree of Life,” only then realizing that Etz Chaim and Tree of Life were the same shul. Then I found out about the terrible murders which had occurred in that shul a few hours earlier. I was heartsick like the rest of the Jewish People, but I also had my own special relation to this particular synagogue. My uncle, Herman Hailperin, was rabbi of Tree of Life for half a century, the only pulpit he ever served.

Rabbi Dr. Herman Hailperin (1899-1973) was exactly 50 years less one day older than I. He was the son of my great-grandfather, Rabbi Dov Ber Hailperin (1859-1921). Rabbi Hailperin the father received rabbinic ordination from three of the leading rabbis of Minsk, before immigrating to the United States in 1887 and serving as chief Orthodox rabbi and supervisor of the kosher slaughterhouses in Newark. All six of his children were born in Newark, five sons and a daughter, Fanny, who married Rabbi Samuel Price and was my grandmother. As a child, the fact that I had an American-born grandmother was quite unusual and a matter of pride; my other grandparents, and all the grandparents of my friends, were born in Europe. None of the six children remained Orthodox; my grandmother, as a rebbitzen, and my Uncle Herman, as a rabbi, were the only “professional Jews” among them.

I have some vivid memories of Uncle Herman. He told us of the family tradition that we were descended from Rashi, an exciting fact for children who didn’t know who exactly Rashi was (subsequently, I have been able to reconstruct the family tree and get back close to Rashi, if not to Rashi himself). He was an amateur magician who did tricks on Shabbat with coins which he designated only for that use, deciding, thereby, that he had successfully circumvented the prohibition of using money on the Sabbath. He also talked about his wonderful library which included important manuscripts and books, in Hebrew and Latin, including incunabula (printed books before 1500). He said he would give the library to me if I became a rabbi, which at the time I thought I would do. Unfortunately for me, but probably fortunately for the books, he did not wait to see what my career plans were and, instead, donated them to Duquesne University. Duquesne is a Catholic university where Uncle Herman was an adjunct professor, and it maintains his collection in a separate room in the main library. Perhaps it is ironic that although I did not become a rabbi, my research interests in the medieval Jewish-Christian relations do coincide with his own interests and many of the books in his collection.

The trajectory of Herman Hailperin’s life, and his synagogue Tree of Life, reflects the history of American Judaism. His father was an Orthodox immigrant; but the son turned to the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary of America for his training. Although Rabbi Dov Baer Hailperin was killed in an automobile accident when his son was only 22, Herman had already chosen his direction and was in rabbinical school. Uncle Herman’s first and only pulpit was Tree of Life Congregation, founded

originally as an Orthodox synagogue in 1864. When he was rabbi, Tree of Life expanded and became a major institution. The present synagogue building, completed in 1953, has a main sanctuary with a seat capacity of 1200 (now named after Rabbi Hailperin). Uncle Herman was convinced that Judaism had to change with the times, often to the point of disagreement with the rest of the Conservative Movement. When Tree of Life eliminated the second day of holidays in the diaspora and introduced an organ, Hailperin was just too important for any sanctions to be administered. Although most Conservative synagogues still observe the second day of the holidays, the movement has continued to liberalize in many other directions. Raised in an Orthodox rabbinic home, Uncle Herman believed that liberal Conservative Judaism was the wave of the future of American Jewry (I remember that when I began always covering my head, Uncle Herman objected, arguing that it was not halakhically necessary; although that is true, I don't think that that is what concerned him).

From the news reports, it would seem that Tree of Life, so vibrant when Herman Hailperin was its rabbi, has fallen on hard times. It merged with another synagogue, Or L'Simcha, in 2010. It rents out space for two additional congregations to hold services; on the day of the murders, its own Shabbat morning service began with the participation only about a dozen older congregants, may their memories be for a blessing. Its rabbi is a cantorial graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary, but his rabbinic ordination is not from there. Squirrel Hill in Pittsburgh is still the home of a vibrant Jewish community, but Uncle Herman's Tree of Life apparently is no longer the premier Jewish institution of the neighborhood. Many other American Conservative synagogues can tell a similar story of numerical decline.

Rabbi Herman Hailperin was not solely a congregational rabbi; he was a prominent academic scholar. Unlike today's "Rabbi Doctors," who often have merely honorary doctorates from their rabbinical seminaries, Hailperin's was an earned doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh. He commanded the languages of scholarship, including a solid knowledge of Medieval Latin. Although he once published an article on "Pro-Jackson Sentiment in Pennsylvania, 1820-1828" (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20086610.pdf>), his chosen area of expertise was the interface between Judaism and Christianity in the Middle Ages. Uncle Herman was well aware of the unhappy history of the Jewish-Christian encounter through the ages, but he was on the constant look out for the positive aspects of the relationship. On November 25, 1944, at the height of World War II and the destruction of European Jewry, Uncle Herman gave a talk to the National Council of Teachers of English on the subject: "Community of Ideas among the Great Faiths through the Ages." The following excerpt is typical of his optimism: "If we could meet together for many days to examine the many, many documents, we would see clearly that the thread of intellectual relations and contacts among the great faiths is unbroken - that this history is of a continuous nature." Speaking to teachers of English, Uncle Herman concluded with a discussion of John Milton's dependence on Jewish sources (see <https://www.jstor-org.ezproxy.bgu.ac.il/stable/pdf/371065.pdf>).

Although Hailperin wrote a number of articles on Jewish subjects and also edited Jacob S. Raisin's *Jewish Reactions to Gentile Ideas*, after the death of the author; his major claim to fame is his *Rashi and the Christian Scholars*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963. The book is an examination of how the Christian Franciscan Nicholas de Lyra (c. 1270-1349) made extensive use of the biblical commentaries of the most prominent Jewish exegete, Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, known as Rashi (1040-1105; Hailperin believed that Rashi was born in 1030, since it is hard to imagine he accomplished everything he did in only 65 years). The story of the great dependence of De Lyra on Rashi fit nicely into Hailperin's world view in which Judaism and Christianity share a common intellectual heritage, a position which was not very popular in the first half of the twentieth century, as anti-semitism grew and culminated in the Holocaust. As he describes it in his introductory "An Intellectual Adventure," the discovery of a medieval Christian friar who constantly peppered his commentaries with the words: "Rabbi Salomon dicit" (Rabbi Solomon says) was a thrilling and eye-opening event. The book is a thorough examination of how De Lyra incorporated Rashi's interpretations into his own Christian understandings of the biblical text.

According to Hailperin, “there is no polemic” in Nicholas’s use of Rashi. True, Nicholas did write two anti-Jewish polemical treatises, but “these small polemical tracts are ‘anti-Jewish’ for the most part only in the *academic/scholastic* sense.” Given De Lyra’s overall anti-Jewish views, it is hard to agree with Hailperin’s presentation of the medieval Franciscan as “enlightened, impartial and objective” (as one critic put it); knowledge of Hebrew and reliance on Rashi does not necessarily make a philo-semitic. Uncle Herman, however, presented Nicholas de Lyra as he wished his own contemporary Christian clergy would be. *Rashi and the Christian Scholars* is an important piece of scholarship, but it reflects the times and presents an idealized De Lyra which ignores the anti-Jewish aspects of his career. In a sense, the book is just one part of Hailperin’s rabbinic career and ideology. In the mid-twentieth century, many American Jews saw a world in which Judaism was modernized and made appropriate for America, yet still with the trappings of tradition. And, despite the Holocaust, they believed that Jews and Christians could work together towards a better future. That was my Uncle Herman’s optimistic worldview.

I am sure that the murderer at Tree of Life did not know anything about Rabbi Dr. Herman Hailperin and his vision of a fully Americanized, yet traditional, Judaism, during a period of unprecedented Jewish-Christian amity. Rather, he viewed Jews as unassimilable others, undermining his darker view of what the nature of America should be. The Christian (and Muslim) sympathetic responses to the murder have been heartwarming, but I can’t help but feel that if Uncle Herman were still alive, he would cry not only for the victims but also for the demise of his American Jewish dreams.

Editorial remarks

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