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*Rabbi Dr. David Zvi Hoffmann (1843-1921):  
scholar, exegete, halakhist, leader January 3rd, 2022*



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

# *Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann, the hero of neolog poskim in Hungary*

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- Trivia question:

What is the connection between rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann and Baruch Spinoza?



# Neolog Judaism in Hungary



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- Early and mid 19th century: mild reform.
- After the 1868 congress and schism (orthodoxy, status quo, neology):
  1. Sociologically:  
spectrum of gradually modernizing and acculturating / assimilating bourgeoisie.
  2. Halakhically:  
spectrum in observance level,                      notwithstanding early-mid 19th reforms,  
of traditional Ashkenazic Judaism.
- Hungarian branch of positive-historical Judaism? – okey, but less ideology

# The *Landesrabbinerschule*



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- Est. 1877, following the Breslau model, mainly with Breslau graduates (e.g., Wilhelm Bacher, David Kaufmann).
- Historical, comparative and philological perspective:  
*history of the Jewish people, history of Jewish thought, history of religion, history of Jewish law, history of biblical motifs, history of Jewish folklore, etc.*
- No specific neolog ideology, neolog theology, neolog halachah
  - Viewing themselves as Jewish mainstream + modern values + *Magyar* values
  - Rejecting extremities: both reform and orthodoxy (*viz.* Hatam Sofer's followers)

# Overview



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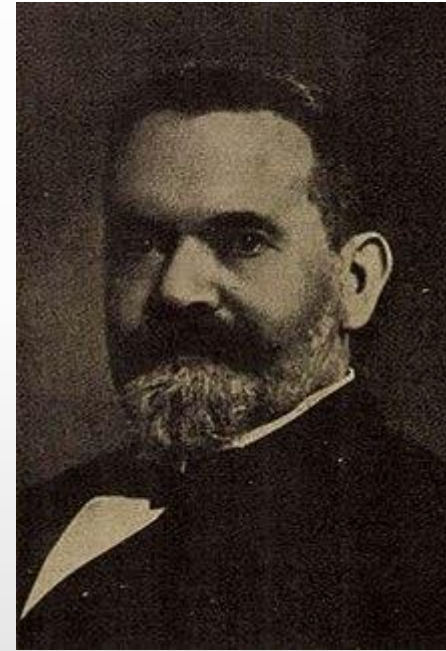
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## Ludwig Blau (1861–1936)



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“This present voluminous Festschrift published in honor of the worthy, of the excellent – both as a teacher and as a scholar – rector, of Hungarian origin, of the Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin by his friends and students, contains 49 articles (35 in German, and 14 in Hebrew).” (p. 232)



Blau Lajos, Hoffmann ünnepi irat [Hoffmann Festschrift], in *Magyar-Zsidó Szemle* 32.3 (1915), pp. 232–236.

**Note: Hoffmann as a great scholar of Hungarian origin**

## Ludwig Blau (1861–1936)



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“[In the oeuvre of Hoffmann] those on the tannaitic literature, on the Mishna and the midrash, are considered to be the most valuable. (...) because on these issues, H. worked with critical methods, without damaging his religious convictions. (...) As Bacher and Friedmann are not alive anymore, H. is [currently] the most successful in studying the tannaitic literature.” (p. 236)



Blau Lajos, Hoffmann ünnepi irat [Hoffmann Festschrift],  
in *Magyar-Zsidó Szemle* 32.3 (1915), pp. 232–236.

**Note: Hoffmann as a  
religious & critical scholar**

# Új Kelet



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*Új Kelet* 4.263 (November 30, 1921; Marcheshvan 29, 5682), p. 6.



## Ödön Kálmán (1886–1951)



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“Let us choose, among the earlier ראשונים and later אחרונים rabbinic authorities, personalities whose decisions we shall eventually accept among the many contradictory opinions. Thus, we can safely rely on the decisions of the *Ba’er Hetev* among the older ones, as well as of the *M’lammed l’hauil* (by David Hoffmann, Berlin) and the *Beeraus Avrohom* (by Ábrahám Klein [1853-1926], Szilas) among the recent ones.”

Ödön Kálmán, *A rabbi könyve* [The Book of the Rabbi], Budapest, 1940, p. 98.

# Ödön Kálmán (1886–1951)



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**Ödön Kálmán's series „Issur v'hetter”** [*issur ve-hetter*] in *Magyar Izrael* [Hungarian Israel]

- Issue 7.8 (Oct. 1914, pp 147-150): on whether electricity is allowed on Shabbat (*Mel. Lehoil* O. Ch. 52 [49?]):

“David Zvi Hoffmann was the one who discussed the issue in details with the engineers of AEG in Berlin...”

- Issue January-March 1937 (pp. 7-8):  
Melamed lehoil (72?) permitting physicians of cohenite descend to perform priestly “rights and functions”, since we are all ritually impure in the golah.

- Issue 13.4 (September – December 1937, pp. 78-79): on the coins used for *pidyon ha-ben*:

“David Zvi Hoffmann, basing himself on the Chasam Sofer, suggests that – due to the steadily changing coin silver fineness – it is preferable if the redemption is performed with a silver object containing 105 grams of silver, which corresponds to the 14 silver Mark (*Melammed l'hauil*, Jore Dea 103 [2:100]).”

# József Schweitzer (1922–2015)



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**TB:** [On neolog rabbis and halacha] (...) *In the case of a funeral... What if an uncircumcised...*

**JS:** He is interred. If he wishes to be buried in a Jewish cemetery... But we do not marry.(...) If I am suspicious about the mila, I require a congregational birth certificate. (...) Although I have seen a psak din in the *Melamed Lehauil* that somebody was married without it.



**Note: Hoffmann  
as lenient *posek***

Interview with József Schweitzer by Tamás Biró (Budapest, May 31, 2012)

# József Schweitzer (1922–2015)



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**TB:** “*In a given situation, does the [neolog] rabbi look up a source on the shelf (...) ? (...)*”

**JS:** “I once had a serious problem somewhere. For some reason, no *mila* could be performed. And he wanted a wedding by all means. Then, I found a *hetter* in the *Melamed Lehauil*. Otherwise, I went my own way. Because the *poskim* took many things into consideration, but they would not know that there will be a dictatorship with a political police in the 20th century in Hungary, and this is where halacha must be applied – this is not something the *poskim* would have thought about. So one went his own way *le-fi tsoyrech ha-sho’o*. One who wished to be a Jew did one’s best to be a Jew.”



Interview with József Schweitzer by Tamás Biró (Budapest, May 31, 2002)

## Hermann Schmelzer (1932–2020)



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“*David Hofmann* (1843–1921), born in Verbó [Hungary], the famous rector of the Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin, a significant halachic author, discusses the legal details of cremation in his responsa collection *Melamed-Lehoil* (Yore Dea 113-114). If the family of the deceased insists on burying the urn in a Jewish cemetery, then it is allowed in a separate plot for urns. The required prayers (tsidduk hadin) can be recited, and so can the Kaddish by the mourners in the presence of a minyan.”



**Note: Hoffmann solving  
contemporaneous issues**

Schmelzer Hermann Imre, Különvélemény hamvasztás-ügyben: „Amiről nem beszélünk” (K. P. cikkéhez) [Dissenting opinion on cremation], in: *Új Élet* (October 15, 1995, p. 2).

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# Neolog Judaism and Hoffmann



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## Neolog Judaism

- Magyar patriotism
- *Wissenschaft*: moderate criticism with religious faith
- Openness to modernity
- Less observant communities
- Seeking an “orthodox hechsher”
- Reject ‘Hatam Soferian’ orthodoxy

## R. David Zvi Hoffmann

- Born in Hungary
- *Wissenschaft*: moderate criticism with religious faith
- Concern with contemporary issues
- Tendency to leniency
- An orthodox halakhic authority
- Neo-orthodox leader

# Neolog Judaism and Hoffmann



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## Neolog Judaism

- Magyar patriotism
- *Wissenschaft*: moderate criticism with religious faith

## R. David Zvi Hoffmann

- Born in Hungary
- *Wissenschaft*: moderate criticism with religious faith

**David Zvi Hoffmann as a 'home-made' and 'undeniably kosher' antipode to the strict orthodox, 'Hatam Soferian' Talmudic scholarship, rejecting the *Wissenschaft*.**

- Reject 'Hatam Soferian' orthodoxy
- An orthodox halakhic authority
- Neo-orthodox leader



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*Thank you for your attention!*

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