

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

Lecture proposal

International Conference: Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann (1843-1921):

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Surprisingly, Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann, an orthodox halakhist, was highly esteemed among Hungarian neolog rabbis. In an interview I conducted with the late prof. József Schweitzer, he repeatedly referred to the *Melamed lehauil* (using the German Ashkenazic pronunciation, considered archaic in Hungary nowadays). The practical handbook for neolog rabbis by Ödön Kálmán (*A rabbi könyve* [The Book of the Rabbi], Budapest, 1940) refers to him more times than to the Hatam Sofer. Among his recommendations to the posek, he includes (p. 98, no. 5): “Let us choose, among the earlier (*rishonim*) and later (*ahronim*) rabbinic authorities, personalities whose decisions we shall accept among the many contradictory opinions. Thus, we can safely rely on the decisions of the *Ba’er Hetev* [probably referring here to Zechariah Mendel ben Aryeh Leib] among the earlier ones, as well as the *M’lammed l’hauil* (by David Hoffmann, Berlin) and the *Beerot Avraham* (by Ábrahám Klein [1853-1926], Szilas).”

In my talk, I shall first present the positive reception of Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann’s halakhic work in neolog Judaism, the Hungarian branch of positive-historical Judaism. Then, I shall argue that within the context of the ‘schism’ between orthodoxy and neolog Judaism in Hungary, Hoffmann’s “concern with contemporary conditions, and a tendency to leniency, wherever possible”¹ was a big help to neolog poskim. These rabbis often came from a traditional (orthodox) milieu – some of them even attended yeshivot before entering the *Landesrabbinerschule* in Budapest – and so they defined themselves primarily with respect to orthodoxy. Unlike some thinkers of positive-historical Judaism in Germany and the US, they did not develop theological arguments in support of a non-orthodox halakhic system, but rather they emphasized the identity of orthodox and neolog halakha. Consequently, aiming at a less rigid and modernized, but still halakhic form of Judaism, they looked for a neo-orthodox authority to help to ‘kosher’ their leniencies, and hereby to reject the criticism of the strictly orthodox.

Two more factors might also have contributed to Hoffmann’s positive reputation among Hungarian neolog rabbis: his Hungarian origins and his openness to critical scholarship. Thus, in the eyes of many neolog rabbis, I propose, David Zvi Hoffmann would serve as a ‘home-made’ and ‘undeniably kosher’ antipode to the strict orthodox, ‘Hatam Soferian’ Talmudic scholarship, rejecting the *Wissenschaft*, that characterized the contemporaneous Hungarian pre-war orthodoxy.²

¹ Moshe David Herr and David Derova, “David Hoffmann.” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., Macmillan Reference USA, 2007.

² A follow-up question could be what about the similarly ‘home-made’ and ‘undeniably kosher’ Solomon Breuer?