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THE RUSSIAN JEWISH QUESTION,
ASKED AND ANSWERED.
VIRTUAL POLEMICS BETWEEN MOISEI BERLIN
AND YAKOV BRAFMAN IN THE 1860s

“Brafman. From my grandfather’s stories I expected to meet someone with the profile of a vulture, with fleshy lips, the lower lip heavily protruding like a Negro’s, deep-set watery eyes, eyelids less open than those of other races, wavy or curly hair, ears sticking out ... Instead, the man I met had a monkish appearance, a fine gray beard and thick bushy eyebrows with those Mephistophelean tufts at each corner that I had seen among Russians and Poles. Religious conversion evidently transforms not just the soul but also facial appearances.”¹ Thus, in his novel “The Prague Cemetery,” a fictional story of the emergence of “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” the most influential antisemitic text of the twentieth century, Umberto Eco describes Yakov Brafman, the “grandfather” of “The Protocols.”²

Yakov Brafman (1824–1879) – a Russian Jew from Minsk province, who at the age of 30 converted to Protestant Christianity and – a few years later – to Russian Orthodox Christianity, started his career as a pioneering photographer in Minsk. Later, he entered the government service, starting as a Biblical Hebrew instructor at the Minsk Orthodox Ecclesiastical Academy and eventually reaching the position of censor of Polish and Jewish literature in St. Petersburg. Both his followers and opponents doubted Brafman’s traditional Jewish learning, while his obvious lack of general education was not even a question. Moreover, as a recent study shows, Brafman himself

¹ Eco, *The Prague Cemetery*, 196.

² Expression of John Klier. See Klier, *Imperial Russia’s Jewish question*, 263.

authored merely one third of his infamous “Book of Kahal” (1869) and “Jewish Brotherhoods, Local and Universal” (1868).³ Notwithstanding his mediocre intellectual ability and bad repute, Brafman’s ideas revolutionized modern antisemitic thought. According to John Klier, the title of the “Russian Johannes Pfefferkorn” given to Brafman by one of his contemporary Jewish opponents, is “simultaneously apt and misleading” because it fails to recognize Brafman’s conceptual innovation, that is, his idea about covert international Jewish government and its anti-human political conspiracy, the core axiom of today’s antisemitic ideologies and politics.⁴ In addition, Brafman’s texts became a frame of reference for contemporary and later Jewish authors, ranging from journalists to serious academic experts in Jewish studies, who conceived their work as a response to Brafman’s denunciations and alleged forgery. Many pioneering Russian Jewish scholars, such as Il’ia Orshanskii and Daniel Chwolson, devoted much of their attention to Brafman, seeking to repudiate his dilettante approach and neutralize his harmful attitude.⁵ “The Book of Kahal” was not conceived in a vacuum, nor was emerging Russian nationalism and judeophobia its only context. Long before Brafman, Jewish life in Russia has been studied and very different conclusions made. This study also continued after Brafman, unaffected by the controversy he caused, tackling the same material and coming to new, impactful conclusions. This wider context of Brafman and “The Book of Kahal” is the focus of my article.

What Came before Brafman?

The studies of *uchenyi evrei* (“expert Jew,” a Russian government expert on Jewish matters) Moisei Berlin, including his official memoranda such as “The History of Hasidism” (1854),⁶ and the pamphlet “Essay on the ethnography of the Jewish population in Russia” (St. Petersburg, 1861), exemplify the embryonic stage of Jewish studies in the Russian language.⁷ Berlin’s works built upon the research and methodology of German *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and anticipated the research interests, concepts, and approaches

³ Klier, *Imperial Russia’s Jewish question*, 266–267.

⁴ Klier, *Imperial Russia’s Jewish question*, 263.

⁵ See Orshanskii, *Ocherki ekonomicheskogo i obshchestvennogo*, 346–367 and the second edition of Chwolson, *O nekotorykh srednevekovykh obvineniakh protiv evreev. Istoricheskoe issledovanie po istochnikam* (St. Petersburg, 1880).

⁶ Russian State Historical Archives in St. Petersburg (RGIA), f. 821, op. 8, d. 331, ll. 20–64.

⁷ Berlin’s life and work are discussed in detail in Schedrin, *Jewish Souls, Bureaucratic Minds* and Schedrin, “Neizvestnaia istoriia khasidizma,” 169–192.

shared by Russian Jewish scholars of the succeeding generations.⁸ Moisei Berlin (1821–1888) was born in Shklov, Mogilev province. Having received a traditional Jewish education along with the basics of a secular education, including several European languages, Berlin went on to complete his studies at the universities of Königsberg and Bonn, where he earned a doctorate with a dissertation on logic. From 1853–1866, Berlin held several appointments as an expert Jew under the governors of various Russian provinces and under the director of the Department of Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Faiths at the central offices of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in St. Petersburg. Berlin combined his service with active literary and research work. In 1859, he published his Russian translation of a Jewish historical chronicle describing the mass execution of Jews during the Cossack uprising in Ukraine in the 1640s.⁹ Berlin's studies and publications brought him prestigious membership in the Society for Russian History and Antiquities and in the Imperial Russian Geographic Society. In 1859, Berlin seized the opportunity to continue this work in a more scholarly fashion. The ethnographic division of the Imperial Russian Geographic Society commissioned the expert Jew to prepare an ethnographic survey of the Jewish population in Russia for the Society's larger survey of ethnic and religious groups residing in the empire. The resulting study – “Essay on the ethnography of the Jewish population in Russia”¹⁰ – written by Berlin and published by the Society, described the historical background and current status of two million Russian Jews for the educated Russian readership. The structure of the “Essay” made it a practical and accessible reference work designed for the general reader.

Thus, ten years before Brafman, Russian officialdom and the general Russian public had already discovered the Jews. In order to distinguish Brafman's later contribution from this discovery, Berlin's “Essay” must be compared with Brafman's “Book of Kahal.” Such a comparison is complicated by the differences in the authors' backgrounds reflected in both the structure and substance of their works. The scholarly, erudite, and highly systematic Berlin is obviously incongruous with the dilettante, biased, and chaotic Brafman, as demonstrated by the contents of the “Essay” and the “Book” compared side by side.

⁸ This development is analyzed in Schedrin, “Wissenschaft des Judentums,” to be published by De Gruyter, Berlin in 2019.

⁹ “Bedstiviiia vremen. V pamiat' bedstvii, postigshikh evreev v 1648 i 1649 godakh v Ukraine, Podolii, Litve i Belorussii ot soedinennykh buntovshchikov pod nachal'stvom Bogdana Khmel'nitskogo. Sostavleno Egoshieiu, synom L'vovskogo ravvina, pravednika Davida iz Zamost'ia. Pechatano v Venetsii v 1656 godu. Perevedeno M. Berlinym,” in *Chteniia Obshchestva istorii*, Vol. 1.

¹⁰ Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii*.

Brafman's "Book of Kahal"	Berlin's "Essay on the ethnography of the Jewish population in Russia"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Factors, principal agents of <i>kahal</i>. - Slaughterhouses, kosher, and treif. - Jewish brotherhoods. - Ritual of aliyah (call to reading Torah in synagogue). - Local powers of <i>kahal</i>. - Holiday of Rosh ha-Shana. - Synagogue compound. - Beit Din (Talmudic court). - Kabbalat-kinion, a ritual of purchase and sale agreement. - Jewish wedding. - Ritual of circumcision. - Title and official power of moreinu. - Melamdim and Jewish education. - Holiday of Yom Kippur. - Ritual of kapporot. - Mikvah (ritual of purification). - Rituals of kiddush and havdalah. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General appearance of the Jews. - Language. - Everyday life (clothing, food, occupations, customs, and rituals). - Social life (social categories and classes, communal administration, professional and charitable associations). - Intellectual and moral skills, education (religious life, traditional education). - Folklore (popular beliefs, songs, and legends).

Because of this evident structural incongruity, I will focus on the main aspects of Jewish life discussed by both authors, namely – power, society, institutes, ritual, status and the role of the Jews in contemporary Russia. We shall start with an examination of Berlin's and Brafman's method, source material, and their approach to Russia's Jewish question.

At the outset, Berlin emphasized political import of his discovery of the Russian Jews for both the Russian government and society. Only complete and accurate information about Jewish life would help to shape adequate policy toward the Jews and to implement it in the most efficient way. However, according to Berlin, before the publication of his "Essay," the "life of two million Russian subjects [i.e. Russian Jews] had been largely unknown not only to the general educated public, but also to the officials entrusted with the care of the wellbeing of this nation." Berlin pointed out that before his publication, in their deliberations on the Jewish question, Russian bureaucracy and public opinion were misguided and misinformed by information derived not from "transparent, publicly accessible" sources, but from "secret, shaky data based on denunciations." It's not surprising then, that the "results of policies based on such information had little relevance to actual circumstances."¹¹ Brafman echoed Berlin, claiming that the main goal of his pioneering publication was

¹¹ Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii*, 47.

to replace common perceptions about “theoretical” Jews with knowledge of actual Jews based on the hard empirical data that he had discovered. This data “reveals actual Jewish praxis that, at present, does not conform, in most part, to its source – Talmudic theory.” Thus, Brafman argued, his material provided a much better “exposition of the insular world of Jewish communal life than all scholarship to date.”¹²

Berlin acknowledged that because his “Essay” was the first systematic study on Russian Jews, it was hindered by an obvious lack of “previous studies and published sources,” so, he was compelled “to create a coherent and systematic work out of chaos” often tapping his own memory and experience for data.¹³ In particular, Berlin regretted that “no one yet took care of publishing” pinkasim – Jewish communal and organizational chronicles and minute books – “including the interesting historical records ... dating back as far as two centuries or more.”¹⁴ Thus, in fact, Brafman merely fulfilled Berlin’s desideratum by publishing the pinkas of the Minsk *kahal* including “more than 1,000 decrees, acts, and bylaws,” which, in Brafman’s expression, “exposed the hidden internal driving forces of Jewish society” not found even in the Talmud.¹⁵

What Kind of a New Window on Jewish Life did Brafman Open Compared to Berlin?

According to Berlin, the ultimate authority in the Jewish community lay in what he called “legal decrees,” but more adequately described as local communal custom or “*minhag*.” Its authority was derived neither from the Written Law of Torah, nor from the Oral Law of the Talmud, but from its status as ancient tradition to be strictly implemented without questioning its origins. The authority of *minhag* rested on its observance by many generations and was confirmed by the Talmudic dictum “*minhag mevatel halacha*” – custom supersedes religious law.¹⁶ Like Berlin, Brafman was also interested in a practical rather than theological explanation of the Jews, but in striking contrast to the nuanced explanation of Berlin and his balanced attention to multiple aspects of Jewish life, Brafman was bent on unearthing the one secret source of power and authority within the Jewish community, the singular driving force of Jewish life. “Upon comparative analysis of Talmudic law and *kahal* decrees,” Brafman found that the authority of the *kahal*, the Jewish communal administrative organ, which is “much more important to

¹² Brafman, *Kniga kagala*, 1.

¹³ Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii*, viii.

¹⁴ Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii*, 57.

¹⁵ Brafman, *Kniga kagala*, 1–2.

¹⁶ Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii*, 21.

any Jew than the Talmud,” reigned supreme in Jewish public and private affairs and beyond.¹⁷

Describing the structure and institutions of the traditional Jewish community, Berlin noted the observation, made by “German writers of the past century,” that Jews in medieval Europe constituted a “status in statu” (state within a state, one of the medieval corporate estates), which engendered debates and the eventual institution of a policy of Jewish emancipation. This observation prompted European governments “to take a closer look at the social organization of the Jews and to reshape it in accordance with the civil organization and social norms of a given country.” In Berlin’s words, the Russian government had adopted and was currently implementing a similar policy with the full and eager support of “loyal and influential people within Russian Jewry.”¹⁸ Establishing this position as a clear positive historical fact, Berlin just left it without further discussion and moved on to his next topic. However, for Brafman it was just the beginning. Friedrich Schiller’s words – “Die Juden bilden einen Staat im Staate” – open “The Book of Kahal” as the epigraph. The idea that Jews still constituted a state within a state was Brafman’s main thesis and the leitmotif of his book, serving as extensive proof that Schiller’s words were not merely a figure of “poetic expression,” but actual “historical truth.”¹⁹ For Brafman, the Jewish state was real. Its secret transcontinental “Talmudic republic” had emerged at the end of the first millennium CE in Babylonia. Now, it had “reached the peak of its development, just slightly changing its external form,” taking the institutional shape of the *kahal*, the locus of political and administrative power, and of the *beit din*, the no less powerful Jewish judiciary.²⁰

Brafman was not the pioneering discoverer of the *kahal* and *beit din* – the two most important institutions of medieval Jewish autonomy. To be sure, Berlins’ “Essay” detailed the history, functions, and contemporary status of the *kahal* and *beit din* in Russia. Berlin pointed out the historical role of these institutions as intermediaries between the autonomous Jewish communities and the non-Jewish state, and the special kind of influence these institutions wield within the Jewish community as organs of both “civil” and “spiritual (religious)” power, which were intertwined with one another and had the same authority for the Jews.²¹ Berlin also pointed out the positive social impact of the *kahal* administration, which based its administrative power on religious ethos and law. In Berlin’s words, “the kahals did their job conscientiously ... working side by side with religious authorities, they main-

¹⁷ Brafman, *Kniga kagala*, 2.

¹⁸ Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii*, 46–47.

¹⁹ Brafman, *Kniga kagala*, 10.

²⁰ Brafman, *Kniga kagala*, 26.

²¹ Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii*, 51.

tained social order and piety through the softest means ... they took great care of the people's morality, so they could justly be called a civil-religious administration."²² Berlin even regretted that after the official abolition of *kahals* in Russia, direct bureaucratic supervision of the Jews proved to be much less effective than the *kahal* administration had been.²³ According to Brafman, who did not even bother mentioning the official abolition of the *kahal* in Russia in 1844, the *kahal's* despotic power did not disappear; conversely, it grew to become a major factor in the shaping of Jewish life in Russia. In Brafman's picture, the secret *kahal*, by means of its administrative power, subjugated and bound the Jews, forcing them to enslave and exploit Christians,²⁴ while the *beit din*, by means of its judicial power, maintained the social and cultural alienation and political isolation of the Jews in Christian societies.²⁵

Describing the social organization of the Russian Jews, Berlin noted that traditional Jewish society was essentially amorphous with porous social borders and ephemeral social status. Berlin described the traditional classifications of Jews, such as historical (Cohen, Levite, Israel), educational (*talmid chacham*, *balabos*, *am ha-arets*), and economical (*gevir*, *katsin*, *kabtsan*). However, he emphasized that these classes did not play a considerable social role and by no means constituted a tangible social hierarchy. The historical classification was only relevant in ritual matters, while the educational and economical classes were fluid, because any Jew might achieve significant improvement of his social status through education and marriage, and the economic status of an individual Jew and any Jewish household was likely to change radically during the lifetime of one generation. Therefore Berlin concluded that "a Jew rarely enjoys the same status for his entire life ... so, in a strict sense, Jews have no castes."²⁶ By contrast, for Brafman, the rigid social hierarchy of the Jews was obvious, and the *kahal* was the principal beneficiary of this social inequality and pertinent social injustice. Moreover, according to Brafman, social inequality was essential to Judaism, because the synagogue – the fundamental Jewish institution – divided Jews into patricians and plebeians through the ritual of *aliyah*, when the "higher classes" of Jews were called to read the Torah before the "lower classes," both manifesting and enforcing social stratification.²⁷

Berlin's "Essay" included a survey of *chavurot* – the traditional Jewish voluntary benevolent societies. In Berlin's words, such societies – *chevra*

²² Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii*, 55.

²³ Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii*, 56.

²⁴ Brafman, *Kniga kagala*, 12–13.

²⁵ Brafman, *Kniga kagala*, 15.

²⁶ Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii*, 51.

²⁷ Brafman, *Kniga kagala*, 9–10.

kadisha, *bikur holim*, *talmud tora*, and others – were established in every Jewish community “despite the scarcity of Jewish communal resources, or maybe because of this scarcity.”²⁸ According to Berlin, *chavurot* were the main form of mutual aid among Jews. These essentially democratic institutions provided material aid and moral support to any Jew, regardless of his social or economic status. Brafman repeated after Berlin that “there is no Jewish community ... without a few Jewish brotherhoods [i.e. *chavurot*], and it’s hard to find a Jew who does not have membership in one of them.”²⁹ However, according to Brafman, the real meaning of the membership was far from philanthropy. For Brafman, *chavurot* were branches of the secret *kahal* government, the “arteries of the *kahal* heart.” The disparate goals of the different *chavurot* merely masked their common “nationalist-talmudist” goals and their subordination to the *kahal*.³⁰

Berlin described the key Jewish life-cycle rituals – circumcision, wedding, burial – in much detail, explaining the meaning and significance of every ceremony, rite, and prayer. In addition, Berlin explained the ritual component of the everyday life of the Jews, whose kitchen, in Berlin’s expression, “is subordinated to the dictates of the rabbi as much as synagogue is.”³¹ Brafman added nothing to Berlin’s description, although for Brafman, the subordination of the Jewish kitchen to the rabbi was not a metaphor at all. For Brafman, ritual was not neutral. It was both a manifestation and enforcement of the *kahal*’s power over the everyday life of ordinary Jews: preparations for a wedding show “slavery to the *kahal*,”³² and immersion in the mikveh reveal the “despotic arm of the *kahal* reaching the most intimate spheres of family life,”³³ etc., etc.

Finally, on the current status and role of the Jews in Russia, Berlin was full of optimism about the future of Russian Jews. In his opinion, “in Russia, thanks to the tolerant attitude of the Greek [Orthodox] church and the inborn good nature of the Russian people, the Jews suffered immeasurably less than in other European lands.”³⁴ Therefore Berlin believed that Russia would be a hospitable new home for the Jews. Brafman, in his turn, was full of pessimism about the future of Christian Russians, because Russia, currently the “main encampment of the Talmud,” had inadvertently become the capital of the “Talmudic republic.” Thus Russia was turned into essentially a

²⁸ Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii*, 56.

²⁹ Brafman, *Kniga kagala*, 9.

³⁰ Brafman, *Kniga kagala*, 9.

³¹ Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii*, 14. On Berlin’s treatment of the ritual of Jewish wedding see Le Foll, “Moïsei Berlin,” 243–252.

³² Brafman, *Kniga kagala*, 23.

³³ Brafman, *Kniga kagala*, 38.

³⁴ Berlin, *Ocherk etnografii*, 76.

Jewish home inhospitable to Russians, where the *kahal* manipulated the Russian government into protecting Jews, while harming Russians.³⁵

As I have tried to show, in terms of information about Jewish life, Brafman added nothing to Berlin. This is especially evident in the aggregate survey of the Jewish population in Russia, published in 1872 by the Imperial Russian Geographic Society, based on both Berlin's "Essay" and the "remarkable," in the editor's expression, books by Brafman.³⁶ The survey included lengthy quotes from Berlin, while Brafman was only referred to as "repeating Berlin." However, Berlin's and Brafman's conceptualization of the same material differed greatly. Berlin believed that Jews and Russians had a lot in common in their everyday life (housing, food, popular superstitions, and folk legends). In order to recognize these similarities, the Russian government and society needed complete and reliable information about Jewish life, which they could obtain from Berlin's "Essay." Brafman believed that Jews were and would be not only alien but essentially inimical towards Russians. Jewish alienation and isolation was perpetuated by the *kahal*. Because it operated secretly, no one could perceive its true import for Jewish life and impact on non-Jews. In order to protect themselves, the Russian government and society needed an analysis of the *kahal*, which they could obtain from Brafman's book.

What Came after Berlin and Brafman?

Not much in terms of methodology and material, but a lot in terms of conceptualization.

In 1883, St. Petersburg University professor Sergei Bershadskii published his highly original and richly documented historical study of the Jews in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from 1388 to 1596.³⁷ Bershadskii singled out the institution of the *kahal* as the locus of Jewish political and social life, and identified Jewish communal autonomy, embodied by the *kahal*, as the foundation of Jewish historical continuity.³⁸ In his study, Bershadskii linked the periodization of the history of Polish-Lithuanian Jews with the development of the *kahal* organization – non-existent in the fourteenth century; consolidated "under the aegis of the Talmud" in the sixteenth century; and reaching its apogee by the mid-seventeenth century.³⁹ Bershadskii sincerely believed that his historical

³⁵ Brafman, *Kniga kagala*, 8.

³⁶ *Trudy etnograficheskoi-statisticheskoi*, Vol. 7.

³⁷ Bershadskii, *Litovskie evrei*. For detailed analysis of Bershadskii's life and work see Soifer, *The Bespectacled Cossack*.

³⁸ Bershadskii, *Litovskie evrei*, v–vi.

³⁹ Bershadskii, *Litovskie evrei*, vi–vii.

analysis of Jewish life in fourteenth – to eighteenth-century Lithuania and Poland would contribute to the solving of the Jewish question in late nineteenth-century Russia.⁴⁰

The dean of Russian Jewish historians Simon Dubnow, who started to publish his work in the 1880s, considered the study of the internal life and institutions of Jewish communities a major priority in his pioneering project of the history of the Jews in Russia and Poland. Like Berlin, Dubnow emphasized the key role of sources – the pinkasim of Jewish communities and organizations – in this work, quoting Bershadskii, who once exclaimed: “Give me the pinkasim and I will write the history of the Jews in Russia.” Like Brafman, Dubnow boldly moved from word to deed, collecting hundreds of pinkasim and publishing the most important ones, such as the Pinkas of the Council of the Four Lands.⁴¹ To be sure, Dubnow fully understood that he was working in the dark shadow cast by “The Book of Kahal,” nonetheless he conceived his work as a foundation for future Jewish scholarship and for the future of the Jewish people in Russia. The historical institution of the *kahal* and the idea of Jewish national cultural autonomy were key concepts for both his historiography and politics.

Dubnow as historian is inseparable from Dubnow as politician, as Viktor Kelner put it.⁴² Dubnow’s political thought was based on his study of the history of the Jews in Russia. In his historiography, Dubnow argued that the institution of the *kahal* represented the “apotheosis of Jewish nation building ... an example of wide autonomy ... that should make us proud ... because only civilized peoples, endowed with original spirit and capable of organizing their life on their own terms, could appreciate and use political and social autonomy.” For Dubnow, the *kahal* was a socio-political institution that “used the full force of its power to protect Jewish interests and the limited human rights of the Jews, either purchased for money or granted by the authorities.”⁴³ Dubnow sought to explain the *kahal* in historical terms based on a wide array of historical sources. Pinkasim stood out among these sources, as if Dubnow had answered the call of Berlin and followed the example of Brafman. In Dubnow’s opinion, national pride should defy the self-preservation instinct to overcome the fear that “the publication of the *kahal* pinkasim would trigger an outcry from the judeophobic press about the *kahal* – the Jewish status in statu.”⁴⁴ As a historian, Dubnow did not idealize the *kahal*, arguing that in the first half of the nineteenth century the policy of the Russian authorities “destroyed the essential integrity of the *kahal*, thus this organ aimed at serving society was

⁴⁰ Bershadskii, *Litovskie evrei*, v.

⁴¹ Published in *Evreiskaia starina*, Russian language journal on Jewish history founded by Dubnow, in 1909–1912.

⁴² Kelner, “Ot istorii k politike” (accessed on April 15, 2017).

⁴³ Dubnow, *Ob izuchenii istorii russkikh evreev*, 54.

⁴⁴ Dubnow, *Ob izuchenii istorii russkikh evreev*, 52.

turned into an organ of domination, oppressing [society] by means of brutal police power.”⁴⁵ However, the political upheavals in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century prompted Dubnow, as a politician, to revisit the *kahal* as an archetypical institution of national-cultural autonomy and national self-determination. In his opinion, the time had come to acknowledge “the inalienable historical right to organize internal social life [of the Jews], to develop our national culture, to create institutions in accordance with our needs and with the needs of our time.”⁴⁶ In short, in Dubnow’s view, a common form of national existence and a common socio-political organization – the Diaspora and the *kahal* – made the Jews a distinct modern nation like other nations.

To conclude. Asking and answering the Russian Jewish question – how to integrate Jews into the Russian state and society? – Berlin optimistically believed that the dissemination of complete and accurate knowledge about all aspects of Jewish life would help both Jews and non-Jews make peace and live together. However, both Brafman and Dubnow, based on the same knowledge, pessimistically envisioned further separation between Jews and non-Jews – either through growing alienation and antagonism, in Brafman’s view, or emerging Jewish autonomy and national self-determination, in Dubnow’s view.

Summary

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Russian authorities had very limited knowledge of their Jewish subjects. The government relied more on its enlightened perceptions of the Jews and Judaism than on empirical observation. This situation changed radically in the 1860s, when at the onset of the Great Reforms era the government sought full and veritable information about all imperial subjects, including Jews, to facilitate the efficient policymaking by framing and answering Russian Jewish question. As a result, Russian language studies – written by Jews, Russian Christians, and Jewish converts to Christianity – on Judaism, Jewish history, society and culture started to appear. The article focuses on two such studies: Moisei Berlin’s “Essay on the ethnography of the Jewish population in Russia” (1861) and Yakov Brafman’s “Book of Kahal” (1869). Virtual polemics between Berlin and Brafman highlights fundamental differences between Russian studies of Judaism and Jewish life and classical Western European Christian Hebraism, namely, Russian scholars’ general lack of interest to the Talmud and to its alleged anti-Christian thrust, and almost exclusive focus on Jewish communal, social, and political institutes – *kahal*, *chavurot* (voluntary societies), *beit din* (rabbinical court) and others – and on their alleged anti-government nature.

Keywords: Antisemitism, Christianity, Jews, Judaism, Russia, Talmud

⁴⁵ Dubnow, “Problema obshchiny,” 10.

⁴⁶ Dubnow, “Problema obshchiny,” 11.

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