

**RELIGIOUS REFORM: AN OPTION FOR THE JEWS OF RUSSIA  
IN THE FIRST QUARTER OF THE 20TH CENTURY?  
EXAMPLE OF ST. PETERSBURG-LENINGRAD<sup>1</sup>**

*Michael Beizer*

The paper is a pre-research of a little discussed topic. It was triggered by the author's studying of the Petrograd-Leningrad Jewish community.<sup>2</sup>

Calls for reform of the Jewish religion were heard in Russia since the middle of the 19th century.<sup>3</sup> It started in Odessa, where the Jewish community was well advanced along the path of modernization.<sup>4</sup> In 1840 a group of well-to-do merchants from Galicia established the modern Brodsky Choral synagogue in Odessa. The service and the atmosphere there were more orderly and formal, more aesthetic, than in a traditional synagogue. In 1860 the community appointed Rabbi Dr. Simon Schwabacher from Wurttemberg. Rabbi Schwabacher introduced the celebration of weddings within the community synagogue, rather than in the traditional outdoor manner. He started confirmations for girls and gave western-style sermons in German. The synagogue had an excellent choir. Men and women sang in it together. The community also bought an organ to play on Sabbaths and holidays. First a Gentile operated it; later on he was replaced by a Jew.<sup>5</sup> Some prayers were recited in Russian, and certain changes were introduced in the prayer book.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Avraham (Alfred) Greenbaum for his advice and for bibliographical assistance in the course of writing this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Beizer, *Evrei Leningrada (Petrograda) mezhdu mirovymi voinami* (Jews of Leningrad [Petrograd] in the Inter-War Period), Doctoral Thesis, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem- 1995 (hereafter - Beizer, thesis).

<sup>3</sup> On attempts to reform Judaism in the 19th century Russia see: Michael Meyer, "The German Model of Religious Reform and Russian Jewry," *Danzig, Between East and West: Aspects of Modern Jewish History*, Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 67-91 (hereafter - Meyer); Sergei (Israel) Tsinberg, "Reforma v iudaizme: Reformistskoie dvizhenie v Rossii (Reform in Judaism: The Reform movement in Russia)," *Evreiskaia Entsiklopedia*, St. Petersburg, 1908-1913, vol. 13, col. 463-465. There are no such publications on the post-October Russia.

<sup>4</sup> See Steven J. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History, 1794-1881*, Stanford, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, the organ played prior to the blowing the *shofar* on Yom Kippur (see Zvi Ram, "Tsofe," *Moi put' v Izrail'* [My way to Israel], Jerusalem, 1977, pp. 273-277; see

In Vilna, the *Taharat Ha-Kodesh* community, established in 1846, in the beginning differed little in its service from a regular synagogue. The innovations were: a choir of ten boys, modern style sermons in Hebrew, and, as at the Odessa “Broder shul”, the use of cards, indicating the sequence of those to be called to the Torah, instead of public sale of these honors.<sup>7</sup> In the 1860s choral synagogues started to appear in other cities. Graduates of state sponsored rabbinical seminaries started to give sermons in Russian.<sup>8</sup>

Paraphrasing Michael Meyer “religious reform was not the essence of the Haskalah program, but it was at times a part of it.” In 1858 Joachim Haim Tarnopol (1810-1900), a wealthy Odessa merchant and a champion of Haskalah, suggested some modest reforms of religious life in Russia. He wanted to educate Russian rabbis in a modern way. At the same time, he considered radical German reformism destructive. He focused his attention upon the synagogue and service in it. The synagogue, he said, must be made more capable of attracting the new enlightened generation.<sup>9</sup>

Leon Mandelstamm (1819-1889), the first Jewish graduate of a Russian university, in his criticism of Judaism focused on some substantive matters, rather than on aesthetic ones. He criticized the text of *Kol Nidre*, the blessing of the New Moon, post-biblical expansion of the dietary laws, and the status of women in Judaism.<sup>10</sup>

Moses Leib Lilienblum (1843-1910) called on the Russian rabbis to take halachic (religious legislative) initiatives in order to reestablish the link between religion and life which had existed in Talmudic times. The synagogue service for him was of secondary importance. What was important for him was to ease the burden of Jewish law and customs in order to prevent complete divorce between traditional and enlightened

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also Yigal Kotler, *Ocherki po istorii evreev Odessy* [Sketches on history of Jews of Odessa], Jerusalem, 1996, p.55.).

<sup>6</sup> Meyer, pp. 70-71. Also: “פולמוס התיקונים בדת בספרות העברית באמצע המאה ה-19”, *הי”ט*. “*העבר*”, חוברת א’, תשי”ג, עמ. 129.

<sup>7</sup> Meyer, pp. 73-74.

<sup>8</sup> Shlomo Minor (Zalkind, 1826-1900) was the first to give sermons in Russian He was crown rabbi of Minsk (1859-1869) and then of Moscow (1869-1892). About his views on Judaism see: “השקפותיו של זאלקינד מינור ‘הרב מטעם’ של קהילת מוסקבה”, ע. שוחט, *ספר זיכרון ליצחק בער*, ציון, חוב’ א-ד’, ירושלים, תשל”ט (1979), עמ. 320-303.

<sup>9</sup> Meyer, pp. 81-82.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82-83.

Jews<sup>11</sup>. Since he incurred the enmity of the religious public, his calls for reform did not have practical significance.

The St. Petersburg Jewish community was unusual in several ways:

- Like the Odessa community, it was wealthier, better educated, and more acculturated in Russian culture than the norm;
- It developed under the considerable influence of Haskalah movement, and of Western - primarily German - ideas.
- Already in 1868 a choir had been introduced into synagogues services.
- All the crown rabbis of the community had been educated in Germany.

Avraham Neuman (1809-1875) served as Rabbi of the St. Petersburg community from 1863 to 1874. It was he who introduced choral singing in the service. Like Rabbi Schwabacher, Rabbi Neuman knew little Russian. His sermons were in German.

The next Rabbi, Avraham Drabkin (1844-1917), was born in Mogilev. He studied at the Volozhin yeshiva, at the Rabbinical institute in Vilna, and at the *Juedisch-Theologisches Seminar* of Breslau. He served as crown rabbi in St. Petersburg for thirty four years, till 1908.

The last crown rabbi, Moisei Eisenstadt (1869-1943) got his education at the Volozhin yeshiva and at the University of Berlin, and at the *Hochschule fur die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin, from which he received his Ph.D. He was rabbi at the Choral synagogue from 1912 to 1923. His sermons were in Russian. They were so good that they attracted educated Jewish youth and even some members of the non-Jewish public.

The *maskil* and Hebrew poet Yehuda-Leib Gordon (1831-1892), who settled in St. Petersburg in 1872, was a fervent proponent of moderate reform in Judaism.<sup>12</sup> In his personal life he was far from Orthodox. Thus, Herman Genkel` (Henkel), a German Christian and an Oriental scholar who lived in St. Petersburg, remembered how Gordon hosted him with bread, butter and ham at his home during Passover, 1891.<sup>13</sup> The facts that Gordon had previously held the position of secretary of the St. Petersburg Jewish community, and that the community rabbi, Avraham Drabkin, had frequented his home, throws an interesting light on the attitudes in the community or at least of its board members.

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<sup>11</sup> M. Lilienblum, "O neobkhozimosti reform v evreiskoi religii" (On necessity to reform the Jewish religion), *Voskhod* Jan.-Feb. (1882), pp. 160-189, March (1882), pp. 100-135, Jan.-Feb. (1883), pp. 85-108, March (1883), pp. 17-34.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Stanislawski, *For whom I Toil? Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry*, New York - Oxford, 1988 Esp. pp. 87, 90, 182-187, 229.

<sup>13</sup> German Genkel, "V starom Voskhode" (In the old *Voskhod*), *Evreiskaia Letopis`*, vol. 2, Petrograd-Moscow 1923, p.137-145.

Another famous St. Petersburg citizen, the Jewish historian Semeon Dubnow, when he was young, was an extreme reformer. In his article “*Kakaia samoemansipatsia nuzhna evreiam?*” (What kind of self-emancipation do Jews really need?)<sup>14</sup> published in 1883 he called for a drastic reform of everyday life of Jews in accordance with the principles of individual freedom.

One should note that the pre-revolutionary community of the Choral synagogue rather resembled the German (or Odessa) model. The services looked like theater performances. The crown rabbi preached in Russian. The public wore top hats (not *kippahs*). Numbered cards were given to those called to the Torah. The very beautiful synagogue hall, dedicated to the memory of Alexander the Second, contained a permanent *huppah*. So that weddings could be performed indoors, similar to the innovation introduced by Rabbi Schwabacher in Odessa. Members of the board were often far from regular religious observance. Some of them lived far from the synagogue, in better quarters of the city. They came on the Sabbath by carriage to the nearby Theater square, and proceeded by foot to the synagogue from there.<sup>15</sup> The community building adjoining the synagogue housed not an *yeshiva* (such did not exist in St. Petersburg), but a school for vocational training.

When at the beginning of the century a Hebrew scholar Nehemiah Pereferkovich (1871-1940) translated halachic *midrashim* (*Mekhilta* and *Sifra*) (1899-1906), and *Mishna* and *Tosefta* (1908) into Russian, he had reform in his mind. He wrote that it would take 20 times less time to learn the sacred books in Russian than in Hebrew or Aramaic.<sup>16</sup> In 1911 he published a pamphlet *Religious problems among the contemporary Jews of Russia*<sup>17</sup>, where he suggested certain reforms in the Jewish religion, among them such major ones as the abolition of circumcision.<sup>18</sup> In 1913 he attempted though in vain, to register a reform Jewish community in St. Petersburg.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Voskhod*, July-Aug. (1883), pp. 3-30, May-June (1883), pp. 219-246.

<sup>15</sup> Beizer, thesis, p. 185, 210, 451.

<sup>16</sup> Nekhemia Pereferkovich, *Religioznye voprosy u sovremennykh evreev v Rossii: Razbor zaklucheniĭ Osobogo s`ezda pri ravvinskoi komissii 1910 g.* (Religious problems among the contemporary Jews of Russia: Discussion of the resolutions of the special conference by the Rabbinical Commission of 1910), St. Petersburg, 1911, p.44.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.53.

<sup>19</sup> Olga Dashevskaiia, “Documents on the History of the Jews of St. Petersburg in One Collection in the Russian State Historical Archive,” *Jews in Eastern Europe* 2 (27) (1995), p. 93.

Thus, there existed in the pre-revolutionary community of St. Petersburg Choral synagogue certain innovations in the service, and an inclination among part of the communal leadership to further innovation. There were ideological and practical grounds for this.

The first post-October years with their hardships, when physical survival became the main issue, were not proper time for religious renovation. However, with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and its partial liberalization, the Jewish community in Petrograd gained strength, and the idea of reforming religious life there was apparently revived.

In 1921 the board decided to invite a mixed choir (men and women together) to sing during the High Holidays (*Yamim Noraim*). The spiritual rabbi of the community David-Tevel Katzenelenbogen (1850-1930) strongly protested. He warned that in case women were included into the choir he would not be able attend the service. The invitation was canceled, though as a consequence, fewer seats were sold, and the community sustained financial damage.<sup>20</sup>

In October 1922 the Yiddish Moscow Communist paper *Der Emes* published an article (in a form of a letter) from Petrograd.<sup>21</sup> Its author, the Communist historian and a worker of the Petrograd Jewish Commissariat, Israel Sosis (1878-1967), suggested a reform of religion. It related mainly to the Russian Orthodox religion<sup>22</sup>. However, in the second part of his article, Sosis touched upon matters of reform in the Great Choral synagogue. Though the author did not name a specific reform implemented there (except for something unclear about the mixed choir), the very mention of these matters by the *Der Emes* indicate that such discussions took place either among the community leaders or among the authorities or both. From the letter of Sosis one has the impression, that though NEP-men and former Jewish public activists in the board of the

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<sup>20</sup> Beizer, thesis- pp. 205-206.

<sup>21</sup> י. טאָסיס, "אין דער קלעניקאלער וועלט", *דער עמעס*, 8.10.1922.

<sup>22</sup> Let us remind the reader that the Russian church was undergoing persecution in 1922. At the beginning of the year the authorities conducted large-scale confiscation of gold, silver and other valuables belonging to the Church. In connection with this "expropriation," a number of leading Russian priests were put on trial and sentenced to severe punishment, some even executed. Then a split in the church was initiated and the so-called *zhivaia tserkov`* (living church) was established. The authorities viewed *zhivaia tserkov`* as an instrument for the secularization of the Russian people. In this contents one should understand Sosis` call for reform of the church, which included changing the language of the service from the old Slavic language into modern Russian.

synagogue were inclined to some sort of reform, it was not of the kind the Bolsheviks wanted them to introduce.

In the middle of the 1920s a severe conflict developed between the communal leadership and the Habad (Lubavich) Hasidim, led by their rebbe Yosef-Yitshak Shneerson (1880-1950) who resided in Leningrad between 1924 and 1927. The community called the Leningrad Jewish Religious Community (LERO in Russian), was registered at the Great Choral synagogue, though in fact it was an umbrella-organization for almost all Leningrad synagogues. The board of the community included mainly Orthodox *mitnagdim* united with secular or semi-secular public figures with a Zionist orientation.<sup>23</sup> Independent political activity was then banned. This, of course, included Zionist activity. Similar to what happened after the failure of the revolution of 1905-1907, unemployed public and political activists turned to Jewish culture and communal building. In our case the remaining Zionist leadership in the city turned to the synagogue, viewing it as the last stronghold of legal Jewish national life. The chairman of the board of LERO was Lev Borisovich Gurevich, a lawyer, who (since 1924) was also the chairman of the underground Central Bureau of the Zionist Organization of Russia.<sup>24</sup>

Hasidim were the most recent new-comers in this traditionally *mitnaged* community. They fought for the dominance in the religious life in the city. In the course of their struggle the Hasidim accused the LERO leadership of an attempt to reform Judaism. They claimed that the Educational Commission under the Zionist Nahum Shakhnovich was going to open new prayer houses where new revised prayer-books would be used. Rumors circulated among Hasidim that the commission was even planning to introduce the New Testament (!) in the curriculum for children. One of the board-members allegedly suggested to make the Jewish religion more attractive to the young members of *Komsomol*.<sup>25</sup> The Rebbe told his followers that the activity of LERO was encouraged by the *Evseksia* (the Jewish section of the Communist party), with which the communal leadership was allegedly collaborating. It was aimed, as the Rebbe said, at splitting the community and establishing a “*zhivaia sinagoga*” (living

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<sup>23</sup> For the whole story see: Beizer, thesis, pp. 213-234; M. Beizer, “The Leningrad Jewish Community: From the NEP through its Liquidation,” *Jews in Eastern Europe* 3(28) (1995), pp. 16-42.

<sup>24</sup> In 1929 he was arrested together with a number of LERO board members. He died in 1943 in internal exile in Siberia.

<sup>25</sup> Compare it with suggestions of Haim Tarnopol (above) who wanted to make the synagogue more capable of attracting the new enlightened generation.

synagogue) - a kind of semi-religious stream in Judaism, similar to “*zhivaia tserkov*”<sup>26</sup> which split the Russian Orthodox church.

One could probably dismiss those allegation of Habad, considering their attitude toward Zionism and mitnagdim, and the fact that LERO competed with Habad for receiving its share (and even for the control) of financial support for Jewish religious activity in the Soviet Union coming then from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. It was the Lubavicher who actually distributed those AJJDC funds among the communities. So the real ground for his accusations against LERO could be a struggle for money. In addition, we know that the Rabbi of the Leningrad community, David Tevel Katzenelenbogen, who sided with the board, was strictly orthodox, a renowned talmudic scholar, and a follow of Israel Salanter.<sup>27</sup> One could hardly suspect him of backing reform in Judaism. One would conclude, that Habad made false accusations of reformism in order to discredit the LERO leaders in the eyes of the believers.<sup>28</sup>

This interpretation would be credible, were it not for the finding made by the author of this article on his recent visit to the Choral synagogue. The finding was an old rotten organ standing up in the top balcony, where a choir once had sung<sup>29</sup>. It was apparently installed in spite of Katzenelenbogen’s resistance, and probably played for a while on Sabbaths and holidays. The finding of the organ allows one to view the old Habad-LERO conflict in a different light and suggest that the Habad’s accusations of reform hurled at the LERO leaders were not totally groundless.

The Lubavich Rebbe thought the reform was planned in cooperation with the authorities and intended to establish “a living synagogue.” In fact, we know that the idea of “a living synagogue” did not bear fruit. There were only a handful of rabbis in the whole USSR who attempted to introduce reforms to the taste of the authorities. Such was a certain Rabbi from Slepianka (Belorussia), who had become an enthusiastic supporter of the Bolsheviks since 1923. He condemned the Minsk Rabbinate in the Yiddish Communist press. The press in its turn presented his activity as a

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<sup>26</sup> See Note. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Israel Salanter (1810-1883) was the founder of the ethical *musar* movement in Judaism

<sup>28</sup> In his letter to the AJJDC’s Shneerson spread a rumor that Gurevich had been a secret police agent (Beizer, “The Leningrad Jewish Community...,” p. 35).

<sup>29</sup> It does not play any more, but one can still read on its keyboard that it is “cathedral” and made in Chicago, USA.

split in Judaism.<sup>30</sup> But he was an exception. Another exception was Rabbi Haim Peisakhovich (1877-1957), “the red rabbi”. He was also active in Belorussia in the 1920s. He traveled from town to town and preached adaptation to the new regime. Concerning religion he would say: “People must believe in something”. In Minsk Peisakhovich headed a “red community”.<sup>31</sup>

Avraham Greenbaum justly wrote, that “the `living synagogue` was sporadic, short lived and altogether on the ludicrous side”.<sup>32</sup> Neither publications (except those of Habad<sup>33</sup>), or archival material with which the author of the article is familiar, mentioned LERO in connection with the `living synagogue`. On the other hand the authorities at that time supposedly preferred to deal with educated, clean shaven, European looking communal leaders, rather than with Hasidim, who were always viewed as fanatics. This may explain why the Lubavich Rebbe, Shneerson, was arrested first (in 1927) and Gurevich, the chairman of the community, only two years later.

The LERO leaders were very self-confident. They viewed themselves as a community of the capital (in spite of the fact that the capital had been transferred to Moscow), and as an example for others. They struggled for all-Russian leadership. They were also preparing an all-Russian congress for Jewish religious leaders, where they intended to discuss the establishment of a new religious seminary. Such a leadership had both the self-confidence and the capability to introduce innovations, but certainly not such as were to the taste of the authorities. They aimed to save the synagogue through moderate reform, not to bury it by turning it into *zhivaia sinagoga*.

Rabbi Shneerson opposed the idea of the Jewish religious congress. As a result of his counter-propaganda most large communities spoke out against it. It is pertinent, that the community with both Zionist and reform traditions, the community of Odessa, led by the Zionist (Mizrachi) Rabbi Shimon Yakov Gliksberg (1870-195) backed LERO's initiative.

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<sup>30</sup> אברהם גרינבוים, *רבני ברית המועצות בין מלחמות העולם*, 1917-1939, *חומר ללקסיקון בן-ביבליוגרפי*, ירושלים, תשנ"ד (1994), עמ. 42. (hereafter - Greenbaum, *Lexicon*).  
<sup>31</sup> אברהם גרשוני, *יהדות ברוסיה הסובייטית*, לקורות רדיפות הדת, ירושלים, תשכ"א, עמ. 110. ד.תדהר, *אנציקלופדיה לחלוצי הישוב ובניו*, תל-אביב, כרך 4 עמ. 1875, וכרך 7. עמ. 2971.

<sup>32</sup> Idem., “Judaism in Soviet Russia,” *Minority Problem in Eastern Europe between the World Wars*, Jerusalem, 1988, p. 134.

<sup>33</sup> *תולדות חב"ד ברוסיה הסובייטית בשנים תרע"ח-תש"י*, לוקט ונערך על ידי ש. ד. לוין, ניר-יורק, תשמ"ט (1988).



When studying reform in Judaism in Russia, one should ask himself if those innovations were a reform of Orthodox Judaism, or maybe only signs of a certain process of modernization, which did not contradict Jewish Halachah. For instance, such renovations as a) weddings in the synagogue rather than in the court, b) canceling of payments for *aliyot* and introducing cards with numbers for those who are called to the Torah, c) sermons in the vernacular, d) male choir - do not contradict the Halachah. Such things as the use of loudspeakers - can be considered by liberal Orthodox rabbis as borderline. Other innovations such as a) a mixed choir, b) the use of an organ c) riding to the synagogue on Sabbath, d) major changes in the prayer-book, e) abolition of certain basic commandments, like circumcision or *kashrut* - are unacceptable from the Orthodox point of view.

In St. Petersburg-Leningrad community one can distinguish the first two kinds of changes, as well attempt to introduce major changes.

Signs of innovation in the prayer service could be seen in Leningrad decades later, after WW2, when microphones were installed on the *bamah* (pulpit) of the main hall, and a loudspeaker at the staircase of the building. It was intended to transmit holiday services to those who could not enter the main hall with capacity of 1,200 seats. The loudspeaker was installed, supposedly, soon after the war, at a time when Abraham Lubanov (1888-1973), a graduate of the Lubavich yeshiva, served as rabbi there. Under the circumstances, when it was the only synagogue in the whole city with 170,000 Jews, he allowed this innovation.<sup>34</sup> In 1951 in Minsk the community leaders wanted to install loudspeakers for similar reason, but were not allowed to do so by the Soviet authorities.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

When we speak about reform in Judaism, we first think of Germany and the USA. However, reform spread to Eastern Europe as well, albeit in a moderate form, like Neologism in Hungary. Russian maskilim called for the reform of Judaism already in the middle of the 19th century. Some innovations were introduced in certain communities in large cities. The driving forces of reform in Russia were the new Jewish intelligentsia and well-to-do merchants, who considered the problem from the rational point

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<sup>34</sup> The loudspeaker can be seen still there.

<sup>35</sup> See: Leonid Smilovitsky, "Jewish Religious Life in Minsk, 1944-1953," *Jews in Eastern Europe* 2(30) (1996), p. 14.

of view. The intelligentsia saw in reform a remedy for Jewish isolation, an entrance ticket to the Gentile society, rather than an answer to their own spiritual needs. As the idea to renovate Judaism came mainly from outside the synagogue, its success was limited.<sup>36</sup>

The czarist government at the beginning of the 20th century was not interested in any reform of Judaism. It preferred not to antagonize the Rabbinate, in which it saw a natural ally in the struggle against the spread of revolutionary ideas among Jewish youth.

Viewing the history of Jewish religious life after the October revolution one may suggest, at first glance, that it was quickly suppressed, while what remained could not develop and was stagnating. In fact, the process was more complex. In the period of NEP, certain reforms in Judaism were suggested, at least in Leningrad. This trend was rooted in the pre-revolutionary development among Russian Jewry. The community leadership also realized that in Soviet reality an orthodox Jew was doomed to live on the margin of the society, at best. In order to prevent either marginalization of Jews or their alienation from the synagogue, the leaders were looking for a third way - adjusting the synagogue to reality. At a certain stage the Bolshevik authorities also favored reform of religion (including Judaism), but they aimed to the full secularization of the church and the synagogue, rather than survival of the religion. One can only guess where all that could have led, if the liquidation of NEP at the end of the 1920s had not taken place.

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<sup>36</sup> Tsinberg, "Reforma v iudaizme..." col. 465.