

From the Pages of Tradition

RABBI JOSEPH CARLEBACH WUERZBURG AND JERUSALEM:

A Conversation between Rabbi Seligmann Baer Bamberger and Rabbi Shmuel Salant

Rabbi Seligmann Baer Bamberger (1807-1878), popularly referred to as the Wuerzburger Rav, was one of the last great geonim of German Jewry.¹ Together with Rabbis Jacob Ettlinger (d. 1871), Samson Raphael Hirsch (d. 1888), and Azriel Hildesheimer (d. 1899), he led the struggle against Reform and helped found the educational institutions that resuscitated Orthodoxy and enabled it to confront modernity. Author of numerous halakhic works, and translator into German of classical Jewish texts, he is also remembered for a bitter controversy with Samson Raphael Hirsch over whether or not it was appropriate for the Hirsch community to secede from the general Jewish community in Frankfurt.² Bamberger, who was not an inveterate opponent of secession, did not feel that the situation in Frankfurt warranted secession from the general Jewish community. The passage presented here in translation underscores Bamberger's commitment to Jewish communal unity, and suggests just how far he was willing to go in order to prevent factionalism from gaining a foothold within the community.

Rabbi Shmuel Salant (1816-1909), born near Bialystok, studied in Lithuanian yeshivot and then emigrated to the land of Israel in 1841. Master talmudist and poseq, he served as Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem's Ashkenazic community and, as such, was in charge of administering the Kollel Ashkenazim and its concomitant hallukah system. In 1860, he journeyed from Jerusalem to Wuerzburg, where he met with Rabbi Seligmann Baer Bamberger in order to discuss the status of the various Kollelim in Jerusalem.³

Rabbi Joseph Carlebach (1883-1942), distinguished rabbi, educator, scholar, and author founded a Jewish high school in Kovno, Lithuania, and later was appointed headmaster of the Talmud Torah high school in Hamburg. He also served as rabbi of Luebeck (1919-22), Altona (1927-35), and Hamburg (1936-1942). He perished in the Holocaust.⁴

In 1905, the young and precocious Carlebach accepted an appointment to the Laemel School in Jerusalem.⁵ The Laemel school, one of the first schools in Jerusalem to include secular study in its curriculum, hired Carlebach to teach mathematics and the natural sciences. During his three-year stay in Jerusalem, he was befriended by the Chief Rabbi, R. Shmuel Salant. "Reb Shmuel" left an indelible impression on Carlebach.⁶ On one occasion, Reb Shmuel reminisced about the Shabbat he spent in Wuerzburg in 1860. The account remained embedded in Carlebach's memory and was often repeated by him with great relish.⁷ Ultimately, in 1928, he published it for posterity.⁸ Apparently, the published account was misunderstood by some as licensing the construction of synagogues in a non-halakhic manner. Carlebach immediately issued a clarification which was no less interesting than the original account.⁹ In the

clarification, he alludes to an offer that had come his way in the 1920's to serve as Chief Rabbi of Berlin. The largely Reform dominated Jewish community (which had spawned a well-organized separatist Orthodox community) was prepared to erect an Orthodox synagogue which would serve as the official synagogue of the new Chief Rabbi. But the community officials insisted that even in the Chief Rabbi's synagogue, the *almemar*¹⁰ would have to be placed directly in front of the Holy Ark. Carlebach's principled response probably cost him what could have been the most prestigious Orthodox rabbinical position in modern Germany.¹¹ Both the original account ("Rabbi Seligmann Baer Bamberger and Reb Shmuel Salant") and the clarification ("The *Almemar*") appear below in translation.¹²

1. RABBI SELIGMANN BAER BAMBERGER AND REB SHMUEL SALANT

Ever since I can remember, the exemplary personality of the Gaon R. Seligmann Baer Bamberger, in all its glory, used to flash before my eyes. Whenever my father, of blessed memory, would speak of his teachers who during the stormy period of Reform had never ceased to teach and live by the ways of Torah, he would cite the name of the Wuerzburger Rav above all others. When I think about the first teacher who taught me Torah, Reb Gumpel¹³—a disciple of the great Rabbi Jacob Ettlinger of Altona—I am always reminded of how deeply impressed I was when I learned that Rabbi Ettlinger had submitted his first scholarly work, *Bikkurei Yaakov*,¹⁴ to none other than the Wuerzburger Rav for a critical evaluation.¹⁵ Indeed, appended to that work is a summary of the highly interesting exchange of opinion that took place between those two princes of Torah teaching.

When I later came to Jerusalem and paid one of my visits to Reb Shmuel Salant, the ninety year old Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem who was a man of extraordinary scholarship and piety, he happened to mention Rabbi Seligmann Baer Bamberger's name. It was obvious that there had been a special bond between these two men. Bamberger had been in charge of the collection of all monies in Germany on behalf of the charities in the land of Israel. The German-Dutch Palestine Fund Committee had decided to distribute these funds primarily to needy Jews in Palestine who were of German origin. In other words, the committee acted in line with the concept of the so-called "Kollelim," which divided the *Yishuv* in Palestine into separate communities according to national origin. Salant opposed this method of distribution. He felt that funds should not be apportioned according to differences resulting from a mere accident of birth and native homeland, but rather according to one's stature in Torah scholarship and piety in Jerusalem. When Salant's letters to responsible authorities failed to resolve the issue, he decided to undertake his only trip to Europe and personally visit Wuerzburg in order to discuss the matter with the man who was in charge of the Kollel.¹⁶

Salant gave the following account of his meeting with Bamberger. "When I entered the synagogue, I saw Rabbi Seligmann Baer standing there in Christian-like clerical vestments. I further noticed that, contrary to halakhic requirements, the *almemar* stood directly in front of the Holy Ark instead of in middle of the synagogue. I was astonished, but said to myself that if a *zaddiq* such as Rabbi Seligmann Baer prays here, surely it is inappropriate for me to raise any questions. I was called up for an *alivah* to the Torah and I went up, again saying to myself that if a *zaddiq*

such as Rabbi Seligmann Baer allows himself to be called up to the Torah in this synagogue, surely I can do likewise. As we left the synagogue, the Wuerzburger Rav said to me, 'I am certain that there must be questions you wish to raise about my synagogue practices.' Heaven forbid,' I replied, 'when you approve of a particular practice, it is inappropriate for me to raise any questions.' "Nevertheless,' countered Rabbi Seligmann Baer, 'I know that you were surprised to see me officiating in a clerical robe, and in a synagogue where the *almemar* was not positioned properly. Let me assure you that I did not do so of my own free will. The dissension caused by the innovators in our community threatened either to render it asunder or to lead it entirely into the Reform camp. I concluded that without concessions I would not be able to save Torah Judaism in Wuerzburg. At the very least, I would have to make concessions in non-essential issues. I consulted with the elderly Gaon, Rabbi Abraham Bing, who gave his consent.¹⁷ Then I spent three consecutive days in fasting and prayer, struggling with my conscience. When I was firmly convinced that concessions were absolutely necessary in order to save my community from far more serious infractions of Jewish law, I too approved. Indeed, due to these relatively small sacrifices, I was able to stem the Reform tide.' Salant then said to Bamberger: "There is no need for you to justify your behavior. I knew from the start that it is inappropriate to raise questions about anything you do!"

Rabbi Salant went on to say that upon his return to Jerusalem, his rabbinic colleagues in Jerusalem were about to issue a ban against all synagogues that did not have the *almemor* positioned in the center of the prayer hall. As soon as heard about it, he strenuously voiced his opposition to such a ban, stating before a conference of rabbis as follows: "I have seen one of the greatest *zaddiqim* of our generation, Rabbi Seligmann Baer Bamberger, pray in such a synagogue. I myself prayed in his synagogue, and even allowed myself to be called up for an *aliyah* to the Torah there. Clearly, it would be impudent for anyone to ban what he permitted."

2. THE ALMEMAR

I deeply regret that the anecdote which I published in your journal about the late Wuerzburger Rav, Rabbi Seligmann Baer Bamberger, has given rise to some misunderstanding. Several readers have erroneously concluded from my account that Bamberger regarded the change in position of the *almemar* an unimportant detail. It is my intention here in a few brief paragraphs to shed light on the topic and set matters straight.

The Rambam as well as the *Shulhan Arukh* make it quite clear that the *bimah* must be situated in the center of the synagogue.¹⁸ This is of great symbolic significance; it reminds us that the words of the Torah must sound forth from the "midst of the people." From its heavenly origin (symbolized by the elevated Holy Ark and the curtain which veils it), the Torah descends into the "midst" of the Jewish people in order to be proclaimed to the nation as its most precious treasure, as the soul of our souls. It is only Christianity that constantly emphasizes the other-worldly nature of the Word of God. We Jews say regarding our Torah, "It is not in Heaven,"¹⁹ Reform Judaism denied its own origin when it imitated the Church and removed the *almemar* from its central position in the synagogue.

Rabbi Seligmann Baer Bamberger would have been the last person to ignore the unique nature of our synagogue. He was so completely steeped in the spirit of

the Torah—forgive the expression, but he was a Stoic governed by the rules of the *Shulhan Arukh*—that he never would have voluntarily given up even the most minor requirement of Jewish law. What led him to make his decision was the fact that he was faced with a most difficult dilemma. He had only two alternatives; either to see his community divided into two camps, or else to save its unity by means of minor concession. Unity was more precious to him than anything else. If you like, it is situations like this one that call forth the rule: It is time to act for Lord, It has become necessary to violate a commandment of the Torah.²⁰

In this connection, I can only repeat here what I told the members of the Board of Directors of the Jewish community of Berlin when I insisted that any synagogue in which I would officiate would have to comply in every detail with the strict requirements of Jewish law. At that time, they too cited the example of the Wuerzburg synagogue and the position of its *almemar* which supposedly had taken place with the full sanction and approval of Rabbi Bamberger.²¹ I replied, "You are wrong in citing the decision of Rabbi Seligmann Baer Bamberger in your support. The Reform movement has constructed sumptuous synagogues, and has been provided with every opportunity to flourish and develop. Basic fairness requires that Orthodoxy be rendered that which justly belongs to it. Would that you were willing to abolish the organs and to retain the traditional prayer book, and to have one united Jewish community that is completely loyal to tradition with only the one exception that the *almemar* be situated in front of the congregation rather than in its midst! Then, I would be the first to preach from the pulpit in the Oranienburgerstrasse synagogue.²² And when the time comes, I would confess before God that indeed I have violated one of the precepts in the *Shulhan Arukh* but, by so doing, I have united all the brethren of the Jewish people under one banner of Torah tradition and kept them from being divided into two branches of Judaism. This is precisely what Bamberger achieved as a result of his concession, and the official Jewish community of Wuerzburg has remained Orthodox to this very day.²³ But regarding those who have destroyed Jewish unity by the introduction of outright reforms in worship, they have acted contrary to the spirit of Rabbi Bamberger. They add insult to injury in their dealings with Orthodoxy by denying in its own houses of worship that which it regards as sacred principle and tradition."²⁴

NOTES

1. Regarding R. Seligmann Baer Bamberger, see Nathan Bamberger, *Rabbiner Seligmann Baer Bamberger dessen Leben und Wirken*, Wuerzburg, 1897; M.L. Bamberger, "Seligmann Baer Bamberger," in L. Jung, ed., *Jewish Leaders*, Jerusalem, 1964, pp. 181-195; and Benjamin S. Hamburger, "Nesi' ha-Leviyim," in Zevi Bamberger, ed., *Kitvei Rabbenu Yizhak Dov ha-Levi mi-Wuerzburg*, Bnei Braq, 1982, pp. 495-574.
2. For the Bamberger-Hirsch exchange, see *Collected Writings of Samson Raphael Hirsch*, New York, 1990, vol. 6, pp. 153-317. Cf. Judith Bleich, "The Frankfurt Secession Controversy," *Jewish Action* 52(1991-92), n. 1, pp. 22-27, 51-52.
3. On R. Shmuel Salant, see D.N. Brinker, *Ozar ha-Hesed Qeren Shmuel*, Jerusalem, 1940, pp. 5-29; Y. Gellis, *Seventy Years in Jerusalem: A Biography of the Gaon Rabbi Samuel Salant* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1960; and Y. Rimmon and Z. Wasserman, *Shmuel be-Doro*, Tel-Aviv, 1961. For the year he visited Wuerzburg, see A. Yaari, *Sheluhei Erez Yisrael*, Jerusalem, 1951, pp. 789-791. For a photographic reproduction of a handwritten note from R. Shmuel Salant to R. Seligmann Baer Bamberger, see *The Bamberger Family*, second edition, Jerusalem, 1979, Hebrew section, p. 43.

4. For a collection of Carlebach's more important publications, see J. Carlebach, *Ausgewaehite Schriften*, 2 vols., Hidesheim, 1982. For other writings by, and for biographical studies of, Carlebach, see Naphtali Carlebach, *Joseph Carlebach and his Generation*, New York, 1959 (and the Hebrew summary in *Elleh Ezkerah*, New York, 1956, vol. 1, pp. 203-220); Miriam Gillis-Carlebach, *Education and Faith* (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv, 1979; and *idem*, ed., *Juedischer Alltag als humaner Widerstand*, Hamburg, 1990.
5. On the Laemel school, see the references cited in *Tradition* 26(1992), n. 4, p. 104, note 2.
6. See, e.g., J. Carlebach, "Der Issur gegen die Schulen in Palestine," *juedische Presse* 38(1907)370-372, 385-386, 401-402, 425-426, 432-433, 447-448; cf. Miriam Gillis-Carlebach's translation of a later *juedische Presse* essay by Carlebach on Salant in *Sinai* 104 (1989), pp. 178-185.
7. See William Stern, "Der Wuerzburger Raw s.A.: zum 100. Jahrzeitstag," *Udim* 7-8(1977-78), p. 186.
8. There is much confusion in the secondary literature as to where this essay, entitled "Rabbi Seligmann Baer Bamberger und Reb Schmueel Salant," was published. Miriam Gillis-Carlebach, in the comprehensive bibliography of Carlebach's writings appended to her *Education and Faith* (above, note 4), makes no mention of the essay. An early report in Y. Oppenheimer, "Al Tilboshet he-Hazzan," *Bet ha-Knesset* 3(1948), p. 198, states that the essay appeared in *juedische Presse* in Berlin in 1928. But no periodical under that name was published in Berlin in 1928. Naphtali Carlebach, in his *Joseph Carlebach and his Generation* (above, note 4), p. 225, states that the essay was published in the *Journal of the Jewish Community of Berlin*, 1928. No such journal is known. If he meant the *Gemeindeblatt der juedischen Gemeinde zu Berlin*, no essay by Carlebach appeared in it in 1928. Simhah Bamberger, *Zekher Yad*, Kiryat Muzkin (near Haifa), 1957, p. 8, identifies *Israelitisches Wochenblatt* as the journal where the essay appeared, but no journal by that name was still being published in Berlin (or anywhere else in Germany) in 1928. This last suggestion is mistakenly repeated in Benjamin S. Hamburger's "Nesi' ha-Leviyim" (above, note 1), p. 536, n. 10. In fact, the essay appeared in *Juedisches Wochenblatt* 5 (1928), n. 38, [September 28, 1928], p. 319, in Frankfurt. In its early years, *Juedisches Wochenblatt* was published in Berlin and in 1929 it resumed publication in Berlin. This may account for the erroneous ascription of Carlebach's essay to a Berlin journal.
9. The clarification appeared under the title "Der Almemor" in *Juedisches Wochenblatt* 5(1928), n. 39, [October 12, 1928], p. 238.
10. "Almemar," from the Arabic *al-minbar* meaning "platform," refers to the raised platform in the center of the synagogue from which the Torah is read. Today it is more commonly referred to as the *bimah*. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, New York, 1971, vol. 4, columns 1002-1006. In the German original of Carlebach's essay, it is always spelled *almemor*.
11. For more details about this incident, see Naphtali Carlebach, *op. cit.* (above, note 4), pp. 129-133.
12. See the translation in Naphtali Carlebach, *op. cit.* (above, note 4), pp. 225-230. I have revised Carlebach's translation in order to provide a more accurate rendering of the German original and a more felicitous English translation.
13. R. Mordecai Gumpel (d. 1911) was the first teacher of all twelve children of Joseph Carlebach's father, R. Salomon Carlebach of Luebeck. See S. Carlebach, *Rabbi Gumpel s.A.*, Luebeck, 1912.
14. *Bikkurei Yaakov*, Altona, 1836, was a treatise on the laws of *sukkah* and *lulav*.
15. The feeling was mutual. Bamberger often advised inquirers to consult Ettlinger for a second opinion in halakhic matters. See, e.g., S.B. Bamberger, *She'elot u-Teshuvot Yad ha-Levi*, Jerusalem, 1972, vol. 2, responsum 73, pp. 45-46; and cf. S.B. Bamberger, *She'elot u-Teshuvot Neti'ah Shel Simhah*, Jerusalem, 1972, responsum 6, pp. 3-5.
16. Actually, this was not Salant's only trip to Europe, although it was his first and only visit to Wuerzburg. See A. Yaari, *op. cit.* (above, note 3), pp. 789-791, and cf. D.N. Brinker, *op. cit.* (above, note 3), pp. 12-15.
17. On R. Abraham Bing (d. 1841), Bamberger's predecessor as Chief Rabbi of Wuerzburg, see S. Bamberger, ed., *Zikhron Avraham*, Pressburg, 1892, pp. 7-12.
18. *Mishneh Torah, sefer ahavah, Hilkhoh Tefillah* 11:3; *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 150:5.
19. Deuteronomy 30:12; cf. b. Baba Metzia 59b.
20. Psalm 119:126; cf. M. Berakhot 9:5, end.
21. That Bamberger's approval was after the fact, and even then was made with great reluctance, is evident from his responsum banning any change in the traditional positioning of the *almemar*. See Simhah Bamberger, *Zekher Simhah*, Frankfurt, 1925, responsum 18, pp. 16-17.
22. This magnificent Reform temple in Berlin, whose main sanctuary could seat over three thousand people, was the largest synagogue in the world when its construction was completed in 1866.

Needless to say, its *almemar* was positioned in front of the synagogue, next to the Holy Ark. See Carol H. Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe*, New York, 1985, pp. 265-270.

23. Interestingly, the Wuerzburg Jewish community rectified its misplaced *almemar* by repositioning it in the center of the synagogue. This would happen after Bamberger's death, and surely is a tribute to his ultimate influence on the community. See B.S. Hamburger, *op. cit.* (above, note 1), p. 537.
24. I wish to thank Professor Mordechai Breuer of Bar Ilan University for calling my attention to the pamphlet entitled *Zekher Yad* (see above, note 8); and to express my gratitude to Rabbi Dr. I. Nathan Bamberger of the Kingsbridge Heights Jewish Center, Bronx, N.Y., for providing me with a copy of it.