

England's Most Versatile Rabbi

Joseph Shapotsbnick—Author, Scientist, Medico, Psychologist

A Discoverer of the Therapeutic Value of Music

By Gabriel Costa

PROBABLY the most picturesque, assuredly the most discussed Anglo-Jewish cleric to-day is Rabbi Joseph Shapotsbnick, who officially describes himself as Chief Rabbi and Founder of the Rabbinical Association "Mafitze Torah," an organisation for disseminating knowledge of the Torah and Rabbinical literature.

A compelling figure in the late fifties, arrayed in flowing *kaftan* of black satin, edged with velvet, a cap of elegant fur, fair beard turning grey, brown-eyed, soft-voiced, alert, Rabbi Shapotsbnick, both in his person and in his surroundings, imparts a touch of medievalism into his tiny study in London's Ghetto. Here he concerns himself with the spiritual, physical, mental needs of an adoring flock, granting occasional audience to co-religionists from farther afield, drawn thither by his astonishing reputation. His versatility is amazing—author, scientist, medico, psychologist and probably our greatest living authority on Talmudical lore.

My interest in the Rabbi dates back to the winter of 1928, at a time when King George the Fifth lay mortally ill, and the shadow of death hovered over the English throne. The Rabbi studied the case, noted the symptoms and the course of the King's illness, then turned to his ancient Hebrew tomes. Therein, after patient search, he discovered that which he sought—an ancient herbal remedy for external application, which he at once submitted to the King's physician, Lord Dawson of Penn. The great medico acknowledged the formula, the Rabbi was photographed in the act of reading the letter, but to this day one has never been told whether the ancient Hebrew M.S. was ever applied. The idea of the thing seems to have appealed to popular imagination—from the lowly Ghetto to the palace of the King. Thereafter the Rabbi was permitted to remain no longer in his chosen obscurity.

FROM time to time the name of Joseph Shapotsbnick has cropped up in matters concerning the communal weal. Now and again he is sharply criticised for describing himself as "Chief Rabbi," a designation which is the prerogative of Dr. Joseph Hertz. But Joseph of the Ghetto is untroubled by the authority of the Joseph, who presides as paramount Chief over the body Ecclesiastical. Or, Rabbi Shapotsbnick associates himself heart and soul with a scheme designed to break the kosher meat monopoly (a necessary move, this, with the community at the mercy of the kosher meat barons!). His many-sidedness is bewildering. If we are not treated to a new book on psychology, we are regaled with some amazing story of a cure effected in a case which the medical profession regarded as hopeless.

Now, however, the learned Rabbi is arousing fresh interest in circles far beyond the confines of the Ghetto, by reason of his discoveries as to the therapeutic value of rhythmic sounds. His novel cura-

tive theories have been propounded in full in a Hebrew volume entitled "Shas Hamishpia," in which he deals with a fascinating topic in all its surprising aspects. Briefly stated, he argues that there are four modes of expression which, expertly adapted to cases of mental disorder and cognate ailments, can minimise and ultimately cure these afflictions. These modes of expression he groups as follows:—

1. Expression by thought.
2. Expression by vocal chords (speech).
3. Expression by hylograph.
4. Expression by way of sound (music).

IN every rhythmic sound, he avers, lies distinct therapeutic value. Some sounds, he explains, are notably of value in the cure for melancholia. Others, again, are more suitable for the treatment of nervous diseases. But the most startling theory of all adduced by the Rabbi is that "even heart ailments can be cured by the music treatment method. There are," he insists, "rhythmic sounds that modify excessive exultation, and vice versa, and it is possible by means of rhythmical music to regulate the beat of the pulse."

Naturally, the learned Rabbi's theories, so richly amplified in his "Shas Hamishpia," have created the liveliest interest in academic circles and among the non-scientific public generally. There is, I was assured in the course of an illuminating talk with the Rabbi, whose audience chamber seems far removed from the mundane world that struggles its pitiful way almost within earshot, far more in music than the mere ability to engender pleasant sounds. "It is regrettable," he told me, "that music has been so much separated from life—regrettable that the lovely arts of rhythm and harmony are being converted into distinct pursuits instead of being regarded as an inseparable part of life."

The Rabbi's industry is amazing. Here are rows upon rows of books in his study, fruits of a lifetime of research, printed at his own expense at a cost of many thousands of pounds. Books on every conceivable subject, not merely marvels of erudition, but joyous examples of modern Hebrew typography. Here, indeed, is a paradise for the bibliophile, an unsuspected storehouse of ripe wisdom in the very heart of teeming East London. The list of his privately-printed volumes, far too large for reproduction here, and embracing almost every aspect of human activity, includes a Siddur—a Daily Prayer Book—of which he is particularly proud, for every page is rich in commentary footnotes, so artistically arranged that they never obtrude. The commentaries, indeed, are worthy of a volume of their very own.

HERE, Rabbi Shapotsbnick sits day after day in a tiny, overcrowded apartment, lit by a huge electric menorah. His tables are littered with letters, MSS., a microscope, printers proofs, stereos, and a huge assortment of correspondence from abroad, for his postbag is enormous. From every part of the world come letters from the most distinguished of "Gaonim," seeking his guidance on the most complicated of theological problems. In such correspondence he is invariably referred to as "Raben Shal Kol Benei Hagoliah."

There is, however, yet another phase of the Rabbi's activity, the importance of which he is apt to minimise. He has been enabled, with amazing success, to adapt ancient Hebrew remedies to everyday needs, and appears to have been instrumental in eclipsing modern medical science in the completeness of his cures. One could quote at length from his authenticated records—many of them make uncanny reading. Here, however, is a case typical of the many which come to the Rabbi from the far corners of Britain. It must tell its own story:—

"During synagogue prayers Mr. Silverstein, the father, called to see the Rabbi, stating that his child was dying and that he wished to be given a *talith* (prayer shawl) for the purpose of covering the body of the child. The learned Rabbi immediately ordered the application of certain remedies; the child began to breathe normally, and recovered. He now attends school and enjoys good health."

EVERY case is authenticated with names and addresses; and it should be added that Rabbi Shapotsbnick carefully disclaims unusual powers—it is just a matter of careful diagnosis, common sense, plus recourse to methods of treatment that, whilst as old as Judaism itself, have managed to surpass in efficacy "the very latest thing" in medical science.

He is an amazing blend of the old and the new, the ancient and the modern. Daily, hourly, he is proving to the world the aptness of the Solomonic theory that there is nothing new under the sun; that the problems of to-day are even as the problems of the days that are past, susceptible to identical treatment, yielding to methods that never change.

And so he clings to his title of Chief Rabbi of the little community, over whose temporal and spiritual weal he exerts so remarkable an influence. It is a title that fits him eminently—it harmonises with a striking personality; with literary achievements of a high order; with a philosophy of life so seldom encountered in these days of eternal "push" and self-seeking.

Publish Your Social
Announcements in the
"Zionist Record."