Żyd Jego Książącej Wysokości

Z profesor
Nancy Sinkoff*
rozmawia Paweł Smoleński


Paweł Smoleński: Opowiada pani studentom o znajomości, a może nawet przyjaźni, księciu Adama Kazimierza Czartoryskiego (1734-1823), publicysty, polityka, a przede wszystkim polskiego arystokrata, z wybitnym przedstawicielem haskali, czyli żydowskiego oświecenia, Menachem Mendem Lefinem mieszkającym w Mikołajowie na Podolu we włościach książęta. Czy w ich relacji było coś niezwykłego?

Prof. Nancy Sinkoff: Czartoryski to również człowiek oświecenia, a więc rzeczownik jego wartości, prawie wszystkim wzięto, że ludzie robią się równe. Nic więc dziwnego, że wspomagał naukę, popierał nowe prady intelektualne i stał się protektorem kogoś takiego jak Lefin. Niczym roniś, że wziął do studiów oświecenia, a przynajmniej w jednym wypadku wyżej, więc ukończył nauczeckim własnym syna. Ich związak nie powstawał przecież w społecznej i historycznej próżni, owszem, szlachtę łączyły silne relacje z Żydami, ale nie były łącznie instrumentologiczne. W tej relacji nie chodziło jednak tylko o to, że jeden był katolikom i arystokratą, drugi – wyznawcą judaizmu. Obaj byli ludźmi niezwykłymi, a biorąc pod uwagę polski kontekst, Lefin nawet wtedy nie był bynajmniej nieżywny. Tak znamy ten przedstawiciel haskali w Polsce sąsiadów z Żydami, a to po raz pierwszy. Czy relacja między Lefinem a książęcym Pipiią wydawała się zgodna z generalnymi tendencjami?

Pani opowiada jednak o jaśniejszej stronie oświecenia: Czartoryskim i Lefinem. Zaczynamy od tego, że każdy z nich stawiał sobie inne cele. Czartoryski chciał politycznej i ekonomicznej reformy Polski, Lefin podsumowywał swoje posłyszenia dotyczącze praw i miejsca Żydów w Rzeczypospolitej. Przed wszystkim jednak prowadził walkę z chasydzem. Można się domyślić na przykład, że w swej relacji z żydowskim szlachcicem, a przynajmniej z pistonem, który miał być ważnym elementem polityki wyższego rzędu, jeśli chodzi o relacje między Żydami a arianami lub ówczesnej opozycji.

Pani Sinkoff: Historia teologii, absolwentka Harvardu i Columbia University, wykłada na Harvard, a także na Uniwersytecie Rutgers w Nowym Jorku. Odpowiednie wyznanie obejmuje zarówno teologię, jak i historię. Znana jest z studiów na temat relacji między żydowskim i chrześcijańskim światem. W swoich publikacjach skupia się na temacie oświecenia i jego wpływu na kształtowanie się społeczeństwa polskiego.

*Profil Nancy Sinkoff: historyk i teolog, absolwentka Harvardu i Columbia University, wykłada na Harvard, a także na Uniwersytecie Rutgers w Nowym Jorku. Odpowiednie wyznanie obejmuje zarówno teologię, jak i historię. Znana jest z studiów na temat relacji między żydowskim i chrześcijańskim światem. W swoich publikacjach skupia się na temacie oświecenia i jego wpływu na kształtowanie się społeczeństwa polskiego.
The Jew of His Royal Highness

Professor Nancy Sinkoff talks to Paweł Smoleński, Gazeta Wyborcza, August 24, 2015

One of the most important aristocrats of the Republic, the Prince Adam Czartoryski made the Jew Mendel Lefin his son’s tutor. He built him a home, financed his studies, assured him work, and supported him until the end of his life. Thanks to his patronage, Lefin published political writings and anti-hasidic satires.

PS: You tell students about the acquaintance, even of the friendship, between Prince Adam Czartoryski (1734–1823), publicist, politician, and above all, a Polish noble, with an outstanding representative of the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, Menachem Mendel Lefin, living in Mikołajow in Podolia in the estates owned by the Prince. Was their relationship something unusual?

NS: Czartoryski was a man of the Enlightenment, hence an advocate of its values, especially the idea that people are born equal [ed. a bit overstated]. No wonder that he supported education, promoted new intellectual trends, and became the patron of someone like Lefin. Incredibly, however, is that he considered the Jew on par with his Polish charges, and at least in one case, made [him] his own son’s tutor. But, their relationship did not arise in a social and historical vacuum. The nobility had strong relations with Jews, but [these were], as a rule, instrumental and principally economic. In this relationship, it was not only about the fact that one was a Catholic and a noble, and the second a follower of Judaism. Both were quite unusual individuals, and taking into account the Polish context, Lefin was perhaps even more unusual. There were prominent representatives of the Haskalah in Poland, since the Jewish enlightenment had emerged and developed mainly in Eastern Europe.

PS: The Haskalah was a very important intellectual movement at the turn of the 18th and in the 19th centuries.

NS: It started in Berlin and moved eastward. Maskilim, as those involved with the Haskalah were called in Hebrew, stressed modernity and secular education. They wrote in Hebrew and in the vernacular languages, they were oriented toward partial assimilation, emancipation and exit from the Jewish “ghetto.” Lefin, who studied in Berlin, but returned to Poland, was the link between the German center of Jewish enlightenment and the east[ern center], in Galicia and Podolia. The next generation of maskilim relied on
Lefin’s thought, although his ideas in Poland were neglected [by traditional Jews] because the main [ideological] movement among Polish Jewry turned out to be Hasidism. Mendel [Lefin] understood its strength, and although he opposed it, he knew that the Haskalah had to be different in Poland [than it had been in Berlin]; it had to take into account local conditions.

PS: Can the relationship between Lefin and Czartoryski be called a friendship, or is it just a myth?

NS: The story of their first meeting is probably apocryphal. Czartoryski entered the shop run by Lefin’s wife and saw a book on the counter by the German philosopher Christian Wolff, which caught his attention. Afterwards, he supported him for his whole life, built him a home, and financed his studies and work. Thanks to his patronage, Mendel published political [and cultural writings] and anti-Hasidic satires. Was this, however, a friendship? I cannot imagine a Prince who is a friend with anyone. Princes probably never had friends at all in today’s sense of the word; on the other hand, friendships then probably took a different form. The same refers to the greatest friendship of the period of the Haskalah, or the relationship between Lefin and Moses Mendelssohn, the [Berlin] writer and philosopher, whom maskilim regarded as the “third Moses” after the biblical Moses and Moses Maimonides, the 12th century philosopher, an expert in Aristotle and a personal physician to the sultan Saladin.

Certainly, Lefin had an extraordinary rapport with Czartoryski, but he was Jewish after all, and this nation was not always considered a part of the Republic.

PS: What was the situation of the Jewish minority in the period of Lefin and Czartoryski?

NS: Roman and Greek Catholics, Orthodox [Christians], Protestants, some Moslems—although the Jews were the largest religious minority—lived in the Republic, among a Christian majority. However, in many small towns in the East they constituted the majority or 35-40 percent of the town dwellers. It was Judaism that made Jews different—they lived differently, dressed differently, ate different food, and kept different holidays. But they also knew they were numerically large. There was no part of Poland without Jews. In all of western Europe there were not as many Jews as there were here. They had been expelled from Great Britain, Spain and Portugal, and there were only clusters in Prussia, and in the northern port cities of Europe and in Italy and France. Jewish civilization flourished in the Republic, but certainly a majority of Poles, Lithuanians and Ruthenians [later, Ukrainians] perceived Jews with a certain degree of hostility.
However, one cannot describe these relationships in twenty-first-century categories, and look at them through the prism of today’s relations between nationalities and religions. At that time Christian residents of the Republic had extensive contacts with Jews. They went to Jewish taverns, drank vodka distilled by Jews, and peasants were subject to Jewish administrators on the nobility’s estates; therefore, they lived together and at the same time, separately. These were pragmatic relationships that did not create daily problems. But they were immersed in a specific context—in old churches I have seen paintings representing the Last Judgment. The Jews were portrayed as damned, dressed in different clothes than the rest of the sinners, sometimes with devil’s horns. I pictured how this must have appeared for eighteenth-century Ukrainian, Polish, and Lithuanian peasants. You can imagine how the peasant, burgher, or nobleman assessed the influence of the Jews. It must have created a lot of tension, but that does not change the fact that Jews lived in relative safety in the then-Republic. There were, of course, outbursts of hatred, [so-called] pogroms, but I think the hostility between the nobility and the populace was greater than that of Christians to the Jews.

PS: The Polish enlightenment brings not only a liberal and worldly Czartoryski but also a Stanisław Staszic, a man deserving to be considered a precursor of anti-Semitism, into the world. Staszic proclaimed that all of the Republic’s adversity was due to the presence of the Jews.

NS: Because on the one hand, the Enlightenment inaugurated modernity, and on the other it birthed nationalism and chauvinism. Voltaire, the great French Enlightenment thinker, delivered antisemitic tirades. Most members of the National Assembly, convened in the end in the spirit of liberty, equality, and brotherhood, were hostile to the Jews. The historical polemic between Christianity and Judaism made an impression on the most important enlightened figures, even those who rejected religion. Many simply thought that Jews were immoral, unfit for Europe, could not serve in the army, and were treacherous strangers. These ideas existed for centuries throughout the continent, and neither Staszic nor Voltaire was so isolated from European culture [as to be inured to these views]. The Enlightenment was born in precisely this context. We used to treat it as [solely] the period of the power of reason and the beginning of modern liberalism, and it’s not quite the whole truth.

The United States, where the ideals of Enlightenment—including the one that all people are created equal—were put into practice, was created on the backs of the black slaves and this country knew how to justify it. Progress does not obliterate tradition; ghosts of past centuries have followed even the most brilliant minds. Therefore, why would the
Christian aversion toward Jews vanish just all of the sudden with the Enlightenment? Quite the opposite, it was expressed honestly with belief and concern, from the depths of the mind and heart, just as Staszic did.

PS: But you are speaking about the brighter side of the Enlightenment—between Czartoryski and Lefin.

NS: With the proviso that each of them was committed to his own aims. Czartoryski wanted political and economic reform in Poland. Lefin suggested ideas for solutions regarding the rights and the place of Jews in the Republic. Above all, however, he led the fight against the Hasidim. He advocated, for example, the “exit” of the Jews from their isolation, a return to the Hebrew language, making changes in their perception of religion and improving Jewish local government, the kahal. However, he did not desire the assimilation of the Jews, and knew it was impractical. This did not interest Czartoryski at all.