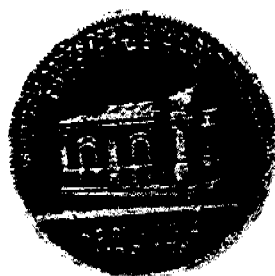


A Note on the Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Spektor Medallion

By Sid Z. Leiman



A recent issue of *Shekel*¹ describes a medallion issued in honor of Isaac Elhanan Spektor (d. 1896), Chief Rabbi of Kovno, Lithuania.² In describing the historical setting of the medallion, the text --drawn mostly from Peter Wiernik's entry on Spektor in Funk and Wagnall's *Jewish Encyclopedia*³ - reads:

In 1889 Spektor was elected an honorary member of the Society for the Promotion of Culture Among the Jews of Russia and in the same year he declared himself emphatically opposed to the proposed celebration of his rabbinic jubilee.⁴ The illustrated medal was struck to commemorate this event. The Rabbi's portrait appears on the obverse and his Synagogue at Kovno on the reverse.

The reader may get the impression that the medallion was struck in 1889 and that it commemorated Spektor's rabbinical jubilee. In fact, the medallion was issued posthumously, i.e. after Spektor's death in 1896. This is obvious from the legend that appears on the medallion. The Rabbi's portrait appears on the obverse, and the Hebrew text surrounding it reads: "The Rabbi and Gaon Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Spektor." The structure on the reverse is not "his synagogue,"⁵ but rather the ohel constructed over his grave,⁶ portions of which are still standing to this very day in the old Jewish cemetery of Kovno.⁷ The Hebrew text above the ohel reads: "Portrait of the grave of the Rabbi and Gaon Isaac Elhanan Spektor, born in the year 5577 [= 1817]." The Hebrew text below the ohel reads: "He died on 21 Adar 5656 [= 1896]"⁸

At least two different sized medallions were struck. One is 22 millimeters in diameter and somewhat thin, about the size of a dime. The other is 28 millimeters in diameter and thicker, about the size of a quarter. Both medallions are equipped with eyelets. Apparently, the medallion was intended as an ornament to be worn on a necklace or bracelet.⁹

It is exceedingly rare for the likeness of a traditional rabbi to appear on a medallion struck during, or immediately after, his lifetime.¹⁰ The Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Spektor medallion is the only such medallion ever issued for a Lithuanian rabbi.¹¹

NOTES

- 1 The Shekel 36:6 (2003), pp. 43-44.
- 2 On Rabbi Spektor, see Ephraim Shimoff, *Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor*, New York, 1959, especially the bibliography on pp. 159-160.
- 3 The Jewish Encyclopedia. New York, 1905, vol. 12, pp. 503-504. Cf. the entry in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem, 1971, vol. 15, columns 259-261.
- 4 Spektor assumed the Kovno rabbinate in 1864. "Rabbinical jubilee" here refers to the 25th anniversary of his assumption of the Kovno rabbinate.
- 5 In fact, Spektor frequented the "old Bet Midrash" of Kovno, a synagogue that bore no resemblance to the structure depicted on the medallion. For a portrait of the "old Bet Midrash," see P. V. Biciunas, *Kaunas, Kaunas*, 1930, p. 41.
- 6 An ohel is an honorific structure --in the form of a miniature house --over the grave of a distinguished personage. Often, one can enter the structure and pray over the grave of the deceased, who is always buried underground. An ohel is not to be confused with a mausoleum, which usually contains an above-ground interment.
- 7 The graves of Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Spektor and of his son and successor Rabbi Zevi Hirsch Rabinowitz (d. 1910) have been moved from the old Jewish cemetery of Kovno to the new Jewish cemetery in Aleksot. A new ohel has been constructed over their graves.
- 8 March 6, 1896.
- 9 A sample of each of two different sized medallions is preserved in my Judaica collection.
- 10 One of the rare exceptions was the medal struck in 1735 in honor of Rabbi Eleazar b. Samuel (d. 1741), Chief Ashkenazic Rabbi of Amsterdam. See Daniel M. Friedenberg, *Jewish Medals*, New York, 1970, pp. 61-64; cf. R. Eliezer Katzman's introduction to *The Collected Works of R. Eleazar Roke'ah* (Hebrew), Bnei Brak, 1983, vol. 1, pp. 30-31. For a sample of a medal (better: metal plaque) of a Lithuanian rabbi --the Gaon of Vilna (d. 1797) --done in the 20th century, see Daniel M. Friedenberg, ed., *Great Jewish Portraits in Metal*, New York, 1963, pp. 36-37.
- 11 The medallion is listed in the entry "Medals" in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, New York, 1905, vol. 8, p. 404. See the discussion in Isaac Rivkind, *A Dissertation on R. Isaac Elhanan* (Hebrew), New York, 1962, p. 5, which includes a photograph of the medallion. Rivkind's discussion first appeared in *Ha-Do'ar* 41 (1962), number 24, p. 395 (without the photograph).

I am indebted to Zalman Alpert for directing me to the Shekel essay, and to Rabbi Joshua Hoffman for calling my attention to, and providing me with a copy of, Rivkind's discussion of the medallion.