

THE ADVENTURE OF THE TWO RABBIS WHO LOOKED ALMOST EXACTLY ALIKE: A STUDY IN JEWISH ICONOGRAPHY

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I. The Problem

Several years ago, I was urged to examine a copy of *Maajan-Die Quelle: Zeitschrift für Jüdische Familienforschung*, a genealogical periodical out of Zürich that I must admit — את חטאי אני מזכיר היום — I do not ordinarily read.¹ It was the latest issue of the periodical,² and on display in the periodical section of the Mendel Gottesman Library at Yeshiva University. On its cover appeared a handsome portrait of a rabbi (see fig. 1) that, even from a distance, I recognized at once as Abraham Sutro (1784–1869), Chief Rabbi of Münster, Dortmund, and Paderborn in Westphalia, Germany. Sutro, one of the first Orthodox rabbis to preach in German, was well known for his four-volume polemical work entitled *Milhamot ha-Shem*, a critique of incipient Reform Judaism.³

Much to my surprise, as I examined more closely the cover page of the periodical, I saw that the rabbi in the portrait was identified as “Abraham Ries, Rabbiner im Surbtal 1813 bis 1834.” Inside the cover was a two-page essay on “Rabbis in Switzerland,” listing the names of the earliest rabbis to

* **Author’s note:** For Daniel Sperber, distinguished mentor and colleague, whose contribution to Jewish scholarship has been as profound as it has been prolific, leaving us all in his debt. It is an honor to be able to offer even a token of appreciation.

1 I am deeply grateful to Zalman Alpert, reference librarian at the Mendel Gottesman Library of Yeshiva University, who — aware of my interest in rabbinic portraiture — brought the *Maajan* periodical to my attention.

2 *Maajan-Die Quelle* 82, no. 1 (2007).

3 On Sutro, see M. Brocke and J. Carlebach, *Biographisches Handbuch der Rabbiner* (Munich: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), vol. 1, part 2, pp. 846–848.



Fig. 1

serve in various Swiss communities, including Abraham Ries (1763-1834). A photograph of his tombstone was included in the essay, together with a translation of its epitaph from Hebrew into German, but almost nothing was written about him.⁴ In fact, Ries was an accomplished talmudist who corresponded with the

4 R. M. Jung, "Rabbiner in der Schweiz," *Maajan-Die Quelle* 82, no. 1 (2007): 2887–2888. In the editor's summary of Jung's essay (on p. 2939 of the same issue), it is stated: "Raymond

leading rabbinic authorities of his time.⁵ Suffice to note that in a responsum from R. Moses Sofer — the *gadol ha-dor* (the generation's regnant halakhic authority) — to Ries, Sofer addresses Ries with many flattering rabbinic superlatives.⁶

שלום וכל טוב לה"ה הרב המאור הגדול, בן של קדושים, מופלא באנשים,
כש"ת מו"ה אברהם נ"י, אב"ד דמקהלות ישראל במדינת שווייטץ.

That the portrait depicted Sutro, and not Ries, was obvious to me for the following reason. Sutro, who lived before and after the invention of the camera, is one of the few rabbis whose likeness was preserved before (in a portrait) and after (in a photograph). The portrait (see fig. 2), a lithograph, is undated, but it clearly identifies the rabbi as Abraham Sutro.⁷ Judging from his appearance, he looks to be about sixty-years-old at the time. This would date the lithograph to the 1840s. Under the portrait are listed the names of the artist, lithographer, and company that produced it. The artist was Samson Israel, about whom I could discover nothing. The lithographer, Franz Heister (d. 1873), worked for Friedrich Carl Vogel (d. 1865), who served as head of a lithographic company in Frankfurt am Main between 1830 and 1850 — and thus we have additional evidence for the approximate date of the portrait.⁸ Much later, a photograph of Sutro was taken (see fig. 3).⁹ It too is undated, but it clearly depicts an older Sutro, either in his late

M. Jung starts a new series about “Rabbis in Switzerland.” The first rabbi we can present a portrait of, is Rabbi Abraham Ries, who served as rabbi in the “Surbtal” 1813–1834.”

- 5 On Ries, see M. Brocke and J. Carlebach, *Biographisches Handbuch der Rabbiner*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 742–743. The name “Ries” is often spelled “Ris,” as in the entry in Brocke and Carlebach. In this essay, for the sake of consistency, we have retained the spelling “Ries” throughout.
- 6 Resp. Ḥatam Sofer (Vienna, 1864), 6:39. Cf., M.A. Kunstlicher, *Ha-Ḥatam Sofer u-bnei dorו: Ishim be-teshuvot Ḥatam Sofer* (Bnei Brak: Makhon le-Hoza’at Sefarim Bnei Mosheh, 1993), 32.
- 7 The copy of the Sutro portrait, item PNT G 1506 from the print collection of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, is published here courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Special thanks to Sharon Liberman Mintz, Curator of Jewish Art at the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, for her help in locating difficult to find materials. As is her practice, she extended courtesies even beyond the call of duty.
- 8 On Vogel, see R. Doetsch, “Vogel’s ‘Panorama des Rheins’ und die Originalvorlagen von Dielmann und Becker,” *Beiträge zur Rheinkunde* 54 (2002): 62–65.
- 9 The copy of the Sutro photograph, item PNT G 1505 from the print collection of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, is published here courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Other reproductions (not as full as the copy published here) appear

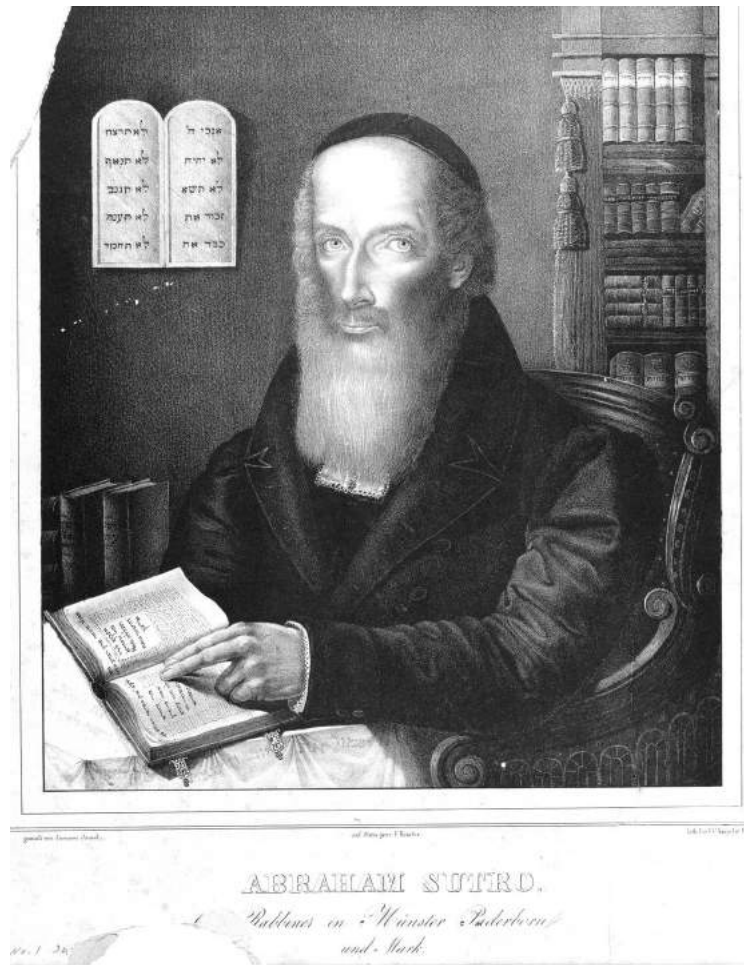


Fig. 2

seventies or early eighties. This would date the photograph to the 1860s. We also know that in 1861, the King of Prussia awarded Sutro a decoration signifying membership in the Order of the Red Eagle, fourth class.¹⁰ In the photograph, Sutro proudly wears the decoration, providing us with additional evidence for its

in J. Wiesen's print, entitled "Galerie berühmter Männer in Israel," (Frankfurt, 1883), and in G. Dethlefs, ed., *Jüdische Porträts* (Hamm: Artcolor Verlag, 1993), 60–61.

¹⁰ See L. Grossman, "Isaac Leeser's Mentor: Rabbi Abraham Sutro, 1784–1869," in L. Landman, ed., *Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein Memorial Volume* (New York: Ktav, 1980), 156.

approximate date. When one compares the photograph to the portrait, it is clear that they depict the same person. Aside from sharing the same name, they share the same contoured nose, high cheekbones, broad forehead, and balding pate, capped with a large (but not deep) yarmulke.



Fig. 3

I was sufficiently troubled by the look-alike portraits of the rabbis that I decided to send a note, accompanied by copies of the Sutro portrait and photograph, to the editor of *Maajan-Die Quelle*, Mr. Daniel Teichman. Dated May 10, 2007, it read:

Dear Redaktor:

I noticed the handsome title page of *Zeitschrift für Jüdische Familienforschung*, Heft 82. The rabbi is identified as Abraham Ries, Rabbiner in Surbtal 1813–1834. The essay about him includes a photograph of his tombstone. His father's name was Raphael, and he died and was buried in Surbtal in 1834.

But see the attached portrait of R. Abraham Sutro (1784–1869). Since Sutro lived before and after the camera was invented, there is an extant photograph of him as well. Sutro's father's name was Samuel Abraham. Sutro was a distinguished German rabbi who never served in Switzerland, and died and was buried in Münster in 1869. It would appear that the portrait of Rabbi Abraham Ries is misidentified.

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Mr. Teichman's swift and courteous personal response expressed surprise with the content of my note. He assured me that the lithograph of Rabbi Abraham Ries came from members of the Ries family, but offered no immediate solution to the riddle of the look-alike rabbis. That would come later, in the September 2007 issue of *Maajan-Die Quelle*.¹¹ In that issue, Mr. Teichman, after publishing my note to him, offered a solution to the riddle. Written and published in German, we present a summary of his solution in English.

II. The Solution

Mr. Teichman posited, quite correctly, that there are certain common artistic conventions that are often shared by different portraits. In order to illustrate the matter, Teichman reproduced five rabbinic portraits on one page. These

¹¹ Daniel Teichman, "Abraham Ris oder Abraham Sutro? Welchen Abraham zeigt das Titelblatt von Maajan Nr. 82?", *Maajan-Die Quelle* 84:3 (2007): 2992–2993.



Rabbiner Abraham Sutro (1784-1869)



Rabbiner Abraham Ris (1763-1834)

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Fig. 4

included, aside from the look-alike portraits of Ries and Sutro, portraits of R. Zvi Ashkenazi (d. 1718), R. David Nieto (d. 1728), and R. Emmanuel Deutz (d. 1842) (see fig. 4). Teichman cited Jacques Picard, a professor of Swiss-Jewish history at the University of Basel, who suggested that the depiction of Ries pointing to a text was an artistic convention borrowed from the portrait of R. Zvi Ashkenazi, who is also pointing to a text. Similarly, added Teichman, the

portraits of Nieto and Deutz each depict a rabbi sitting on an armchair, at a desk with an open book, with a scholar's bookcase in the background — precisely the artistic conventions that characterize the Ries and Sutro portraits.

Teichman noticed that the Ries and Sutro portraits, while look-alike, were not exactly alike. There are some slight differences. Teichman singled out the differences relating to the cheekbones, noses, and beards of the two rabbis. Furthermore, the fact that the Ries portrait was done by a Zürich lithographer (see below), while the Sutro portrait was done by a Frankfurt lithographer would seem to suggest that both are authentic portraits of the rabbis they depict. The reason they look alike, Teichman explained, is because they share artistic conventions, perhaps borrowed from an earlier common source, which was often the case regarding rabbinic portraits, as mentioned above.

III. The Problem with the Solution

Alas, I doubt that many will be persuaded by Teichman's solution. Artistic conventions (perhaps a better term would be "templates") abound in portraiture, and no one can dispute the matter. However, despite all the artistic conventions shared by the Ashkenazi, Nieto, and Deutz portraits, no one would mistake the one rabbi for another. The faces and characters of each rabbi remain unique; they are clearly not copied one from another. But the Ries and Sutro portraits are unmistakably one and the same. Even regarding the shared artistic conventions of the Nieto and Deutz portraits (they both have armchairs, desks, and bookcases), for example, notice that each has a different armchair, desk, book, and bookcase (just to list a few of the many differences). But the Ries and Sutro portraits share the exact same armchair, table (not a desk), book with clasps, bookcase, number of books on each shelf of the bookcase, twisted cords decorating the bookcase, Ten Commandments plaque on the wall, two pointed fingers, and more. To posit that their facial features and characters are drawn from yet a third portrait is to compound the problem (three look-alike rabbis!), not to resolve it. Regarding the Ries and Sutro portraits, I am afraid that the ineluctable conclusion is that one portrait was copied from the other. Both portraits depict either Ries or Sutro. Only two issues remain to be solved:

Who is depicted in the two portraits? Why were the names of two different rabbis attached to the same portrait?

IV. The Ries Portrait

Mr. Teichman indicated that the Ries portrait came from members of the Ries family (see above). Thus, its authenticity was beyond dispute. But noticeably absent from the various reproductions of the Ries portrait by Teichman (and others) was a copy with Ries' name printed under the portrait.¹² To solve this puzzlement, it was crucial that a copy of the original lithograph be located and examined. Through the kind efforts of Dr. Susanne Bennewitz, an expert in the history of the nineteenth-century Jewish communities in Switzerland, a copy of the original lithograph (one of two known copies in Switzerland) was located. Alas, it had been trimmed so as to fit into an oval frame and much of the original inscription underneath the portrait was lost. The portion of the inscription that was preserved, however, displayed the name of R. Abraham Ries' father, Raphael: "מהור"ר רפאל". Thus, it was clear that there was a rabbinic portrait, separate and distinct from the Sutro portrait, that had Rabbi Ries' name printed under it. Fortunately, a copy of the original Ries lithograph is preserved at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (see fig. 5).¹³ Somewhat worn and torn at the edges, it provides (almost) the full text of the inscription underneath the portrait, which identifies the portrait as a depiction of R. Abraham the son of R. Raphael, [Rabbi] of Lengnau in Switzerland:

12 The Ries portrait is reproduced (aside from its appearances in *Maajan-Die Quelle: Zeitschrift für Jüdische Familienforschung*) in A. Weldler-Steinberg, *Geschichte der Juden in der Schweiz* (Zürich: Schweizerischen Israelitischen Gemeindebund, 1966), opposite p. 159; W. Guggenheim, ed., *Juden in der Schweiz* (Zürich: Kürz, 1982), 30; A. Kamis-Müller et al., *Vie juive en Suisse* (Lausanne: Editions du Grand-Pont, 1992), 54; and M. Bosch, ed., *Alemannisches Judentum* (Eggingen: Edition Klaus Isele, 2001), 68. I am indebted to Dr. Moshe Rosenfeld of London for bringing the Weldler-Steinberg volume to my attention.

13 The copy of the Ries portrait, item PNT G 1325 from the print collection of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, is published here courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.



Fig. 5

[צור]ת הרב הגאון מהור"ר אברהם בן הרב הגאון המפורסם בדורו מהור"ר
רפאל זצ"ל דק"ק
לענגנזי¹⁴ במדינת ש[ווייץ]
ABRAHAM RIS

14 The Hebrew should be corrected to read: לענגנזי.

Most importantly, it records (in the lower right hand corner) the name of the lithographer: C. Studer. Almost nothing seems to be known about him, other than the fact that he lived in the first half of the nineteenth century in Zürich, Switzerland, and that he belonged to a well-known family of artists and lithographers named Studer.¹⁵ What is important for our purposes is the fact that the Ries and Sutro portraits were done by two different lithographers.

V. The Identity of the Rabbi on the Look-Alike Portraits

As indicated in my note to Teichman, I was persuaded early on that both portraits depicted R. Abraham Sutro. The fact that the photograph of Sutro bears a striking resemblance to the likeness that appears on the two portraits was sufficient evidence for me. It could be argued, however, that no photograph of Ries (who died in 1834) exists (or, is even likely to exist, given the rather primitive state of photography in 1834). Thus, we cannot be certain that the likeness on the two portraits is not that of Ries. Moreover, since Ries was some twenty years older than Sutro, it was more likely that Sutro borrowed Ries' portrait, than the other way around. To quell whatever doubts remain in the minds of some, we turn to an analysis of the two portraits.

So alike are the two portraits that all the Hebrew words — there are well over 60 such words in each portrait — are exactly alike. Thus, for example, with the help of a magnifying glass one can easily read the spines of the five books on the top shelf of the bookcase — from right to left — *בראשית, שמות, ויקרא, במדבר, דברים* (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). The shelf immediately below the top shelf also holds several books (from right to left): *פאה, ביצה, יומא, תמיד, רמב"ם* (Maimonides, Tamid, Yoma, Bezah, Peah). Similarly, the Sabbath table at which the rabbi is seated is bedecked with an embroidered table cloth. The decorative Hebrew letters on the side of the tablecloth read: *שמור את יום השבת לקדשו* (Observe the Sabbath day to sanctify it). We now turn to the open book that either Rabbi Ries or Rabbi Sutro has his

¹⁵ Special thanks to Joelle Gotlib, Contractual Lecturer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, for tracking down the biographies of the artists and lithographers mentioned underneath the Ries and Sutro portraits.

hand on. Teichman and Picard were quite right in noticing the parallel between the R. Zvi Ashkenazi portrait and our two portraits. In each case, the rabbi is pointing to a text. But apparently Teichman and Picard missed the significance of the pointing. The purpose is to underscore the very essence of the teaching or identity of the rabbi. Thus, both in the case R. Zvi Ashkenazi and that of Ries or Sutro, the rabbi points to a passage that captures the essence of his teaching or identity.¹⁶

Here, we need to digress momentarily. Rabbi Abraham Sutro always spelled his Hebrew surname זוטרא (pronounced “zutra”). As every amateur talmudist knows, the word זוטרא in Aramaic means “small.” It also formed part of the name of a famous Babylonian Amora, Mar Zutra. Indeed, in his published Hebrew writings, Rabbi Sutro referred to himself, self-deprecatingly, as “Zutra,”¹⁷ which could be rendered as “Mr. Small One” or “Mr. Insignificant.” Similarly, in a self-deprecating manner, he sometimes referred to his own book as ספר זוטרא, which could be rendered as “the small, insignificant book.”¹⁸

When one examines the open book that either Rabbi Ries or Rabbi Sutro was pointing to, it turns out to be a tractate of the Talmud. More importantly, one can easily read the texts of two folios and identify the name of the tractate they are drawn from. One would think that the two folios are adjacent pages from a particular tractate, as is usually the case with printed tractates of the Talmud. In such cases, the page on the right is always the reverse side of the previous folio, whereas the page on the left is always the obverse side of the following folio. Lo and behold, in both the Ries and Sutro portraits, the page on the right is the obverse side of the folio, whereas the page on the left is the reverse side of the folio! Even more interesting is the fact that the pages come from two unrelated tractates of the Talmud! Clearly, the pages were deliberately selected and spliced together — perhaps at the behest of the artist, but more likely at the behest of the rabbi in the portrait — in order to make a point. Reading from right to left, the first page is from tractate *Berakhot* 29a and the

16 In the case of R. Zvi Ashkenazi, the rabbi points to the words ה' אחד (The Lord is one [NJPS]) dangling rather conspicuously from the book he holds under his arm. For the possible significance of this depiction, see R. I. Cohen, *Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 115.

17 *Millhamot ha-Shem* (Frankfurt, 1862), 2:21. The text reads: וכי תאמר מי זה האיש זוטרא, הזוטרא בישראל, מי שמך להוכיח עלינו?

18 *Millhamot ha-Shem* (Hannover, 1836), 1:3.

second page is from tractate *Ketubot* 63b. The format of each page mimics, as it were, the layout of the Babylonian Talmud's printed page, but only records one excerpt from the fuller talmudic page. We present the texts as they appear in the portraits, adding only an English translation of the talmudic excerpts:

<p>אף על פי פרק חמישי סג:</p> <p>מר זוטרא אמר כייפינן לה הוה עובדא ואכפה מר זוטרא</p> <p>Mar SUTRO said: "We pressure her." A case occurred and Mar Sutro pressured her.</p>	<p>תפלת השחר פרק רביעי כט•</p> <p>מתקיף לה מר זוטרא ונכללה מכלל ודשננו בנאות ארצך</p> <p>Mar SUTRO asked: "Let him include it by reciting: Fatten us in the pastures of Your land."</p>
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In effect, the texts themselves shout at the reader: "I'm Sutro!" These two texts appear in the Sutro *and Ries portraits*; **however, in the latter they are entirely meaningless!** The evidence, I'm afraid, will allow for only one conclusion: both portraits are depictions of Sutro, and the one is almost an exact copy of the other. We can only speculate on how the Ries identification came about. It is indeed possible that the two rabbis were similar in appearance. Descendants of Ries, perhaps troubled by the fact that no portrait of their illustrious ancestor existed, chanced upon a copy of the Sutro portrait (with no name attached to it, or perhaps with the words "Rabbi Abraham" attached to it) and decided it was none other than their illustrious ancestor. They (or perhaps the forger who duped them) may have engaged a lithographer who introduced some slight modification,¹⁹ so that it could more readily pass as a portrait of Ries, unaware

19 The most obvious difference between the two portraits (not mentioned by Teichman) is that in the Sutro portrait the rabbi wears collar bands (i.e., canonicals), whereas in the Ries portrait he does not. If I had to hazard a guess, I would suggest that Sutro wore canonicals; hence the original portrait shows him with collar bands. When the Ries copy was made, the collar bands had to be removed, since it was common knowledge that Ries did not wear canonicals. The process of removing the collar bands led to some slight modification of the beard in the Ries portrait. But I am not aware of any hard evidence that proves that the one rabbi wore

that the Hebrew text would in any event expose their error or fraud, as the case may be. They then had copies made with Ries' name below the portrait and distributed them to members of the Ries family.

In sum, the rabbi in the two portraits is most assuredly Sutro, not Ries. If some sort of artistic borrowing took place, it was the Ries family that borrowed the Sutro portrait and modified it slightly. Sutro borrowed nothing from Ries.

canonicals and the other did not. Thus, the presence or absence of the collar bands cannot be cited as definitive proof of the rabbi's identity or of which portrait was the original one. On the widespread rabbinic use of canonicals in nineteenth-century Germany, see S.Z. Leiman, "Rabbinic Responses to Modernity," *Judaic Studies* 5 (Fall 2007): 42–43, n56.