

**The Amsterdam Folk-Rebbe: Steadfastness and Faith, Leadership during the German Occupation**

by

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**Abstract**

This article examines the life and leadership of Rabbi Dr. Meyer (sometimes spelled Meijer) de Hond, (1882-1943) the Amsterdam folk-rebbe who fought to strengthen Jewish identity and religious observance, especially among the poor and disenfranchised of Amsterdam. He even suggested changes in the liturgy in order to draw the uneducated Jews of the inner city, although this ran counter to Orthodox opinion. During the German occupation, De Hond remained with his chosen community of the Amsterdam slums, and continued to minister to his followers even when already in the Dutch concentration camp of Westerbork. During the Holocaust the use of the term "Kiddush Hachaim" (attributed to the Religious-Zionist leader, Rabbi Isaac Nissebaum of Warsaw), relates to the spontaneous and the premeditated acts of Jewish resistance to the Nazis and their collaborators. The actions of Rabbi Dr. Meir de Hond exemplify this "Jewish resistance", against the Nazi's goal to exterminate the Jews and Judaism.

The conclusions of this paper were that De Hond was a unique, but tragic figure, who did not desert his followers in the face of disaster and crises, even at the cost of his life. By accepting his role as spiritual leader of the poor, and acting in response to the intra-communal injustices of the great discrepancies between rich and poor Jews as well as the Catholic and Protestant inter-communal othering of the Jews, De Hond's life illustrates a steadfastness of faith and leadership.

**Keywords:** Meyer de Hond; Rabbi; Amsterdam; Shoah; Leadership.

## **Introduction**

The origins of the Jewish community in Amsterdam are traced to the immigration of Portuguese and Spanish Jews following the Expulsion of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The Ashkenazi Jews of Amsterdam arrived from Eastern Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century following the Chmielnicki pogroms of 1648–49 and the Swedish invasion. The Jewish immigration to Amsterdam from central Europe resulted from the thirty-year war (1618-1648). The Jewish community in Holland was characterized by heterogeneity and by its desire to assimilate in the Dutch community. Many were drawn to the liberal and socialist political ideologies, and only a small portion showed an interest in Zionism.<sup>1</sup>

During Rabbi Dr. Meyer de Hond's lifetime, the Jewish population of the Netherlands grew from 110,000 to 140,000.<sup>2</sup> Born in Amsterdam in 1882, he grew up in the shadow of the Dreyfus Affair, the First Zionist Congress and a proletarianization process of the Amsterdam Jewish community.<sup>3</sup> He came of age during a time of rising anti-Semitism which culminated in Fascism, WWII and the Shoah, and was murdered in Sobibor in 1943. With him were his wife, his three children, and many of the inner-city poor he had taught and ministered to for decades. The elderly poor, chronically ill, and handicapped of Amsterdam, for whom he had labored to establish a worthy home, had already been murdered earlier that year.<sup>4</sup>

When dealing with those Jews murdered by the Nazis, the victims' pre- Shoah contributions to society, vitality, and circumstance are too often pushed aside in the light of their tragedy. Indeed, as Herzberg wrote,<sup>5</sup> one Jew was murdered six million times,<sup>6</sup> a notion which turns the martyred Jews into amorphous victims, somehow. This paper, therefore, rather than focusing only on the way De Hond died has looked

at the way he lived, in order to understand what motivated and shaped him, and how he shaped the world of those who listened to him.

De Hond, good son, intellectual, teacher, preacher, writer, and rabbi, knew exactly where he had come from: G-d<sup>7</sup> fearing parents in the poor ghetto of Amsterdam. He remained loyal to this neighborhood where the most destitute poor lived, ministering to them, teaching their children, laboring to offer them a carefree old age, entertaining them with his writings, and finally, dying with them in the whirlpool that was the Shoah. He knew where he was going throughout his life, teaching Judaism in the only way he understood it: as a glorious way to experience life to the full.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, he literally knew where he was going when he was rounded up together with his wife and children, yet did not try to save himself or his family, but chose to share the fate of the poor who lived in a Jewish sub-culture in several Amsterdam neighborhoods, and did not have many options of saving themselves from death.<sup>9</sup> Looking at De Hond's life, it appears that his actions were never motivated by need for personal gain or greed, while his eyes were open to the needs of others, as will be demonstrated in the final section of this paper. The verse from the Ethics, then, sums up De Hond's way of life.

On the one hand, De Hond remained an outsider because he espoused opinions that ran counter to that of mainstream Jewish power brokers and the accepted Ashkenazi leadership's traditions of Amsterdam. On the other, he also embraced mainstream views, such as the notion that Zionism and socialism were bad ideas, as they negated his religious views,<sup>10</sup> and like most other Jewish leaders at the time, he saw no future for the Jews outside the Diaspora. As a born and bred Amsterdammer, De Hond believed that the Jews could find a respectable place within the ethnic *pillarization*-segmentation of The Netherlands.<sup>11</sup> Rejecting socialism and Zionism may seem like a contradiction for an original thinker such as De Hond, but in the framework of his

world, both can be explained. Socialists did not like the royal family, whereas Jews traditionally took pride in their royals, especially the poor – because of a tradition of alignment with the House of Orange since the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, when this family was favorable towards the Jews. Socialism and religion were mutually exclusive in his eyes, and while many Jews were no longer strictly observant, they observed tradition.<sup>12</sup> As to Zionism, it was all so new in the early years of the twentieth century, and because of its assimilationist views, De Hond, like most religious leaders did not see its advantages. In one of the question and answer columns of *Libanon*, the magazine founded by him, he even answered a question about this, and explained that there was no special blessing on Jews who went to live in “*Palestina*” as this blessing could only be bestowed when the Holy Land was returned to the Jews by “*a higher power*”, meaning G-d and the Mashiah.<sup>13</sup> This was the traditional, Jewish standpoint at the time, even though there was a Mizrachi movement in Holland: Rabbi Dünner was actually pro-Zionist. De Hond’s stand on Zionism was in line with the teachings of Samson Raphael Hirsch.<sup>14</sup>

This article is a monograph of Rabbi Dr. Meyer de Hond, and asks the following questions:

1. What was the rate of assimilation in the Netherlands during De Hond’s life time, and how did De Hond deal with this problem?
2. How did Catholicism and Protestantism view the Jews, and what was the level of anti-Semitism in the Netherlands?
3. What happened to the Jewish religious leadership during the Shoah?

### **Jews within the Christian Netherlands**

In order to offer a fitting monograph and examine De Hond’s life and actions, such as his choices at various crossroads of his life, his leadership under crisis, and his demeanor and behavior at Westerbork on the eve of his deportation East where he,

his entire family and much of his congregation were murdered, the rabbi's choices cannot be taken out of context and examined anachronistically. Instead they need to be analyzed as part of the bigger picture of the Jews within Dutch society as a whole during the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Therefore, the inter-ethnic conditions, as well as the intra-communal ones must be examined.

When De Hond was born, the emancipation of the Dutch Jews was a legal fact.<sup>15</sup> Theoretically at least, Jews were free to choose their lifestyle and level of observance, field of study and occupation, as well as place to live, as the debate concerning their political rights had ended positively. However, social integration was slow to come. First of all, their small numbers meant, in essence, that outside the capital, most Dutchmen never actually saw a Jew, and besides, in order to avail themselves of the services offered by a Jewish community, such as synagogue, kosher food, and education, they lived in insular, tight-knit communities both in Amsterdam and throughout the provinces.<sup>16</sup> Dutch Jews referred to the capital and the outlying areas as *Mokum* and *Mediene* respectively.<sup>17</sup> *Mokum*, of course, means "place" and it referred to Amsterdam as a small Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup> *Mediene*, another Yiddish/Hebrew derivative, means province/state, and covered any Jewish settlement outside Amsterdam. In 1941 About 60% (more than 80,000) of the 140,000 Dutch Jews lived in *Mokum*, with the rest scattered throughout the *Mediene*. In spite of the widespread poverty of city Jews, there was a feeling that Jews had never had it this good because they had political rights. And so, while the political place of the Jews had been settled officially, in many circles the debate continued concerning the role of the Jews within the fabric of Dutch society, as well as their spiritual merit.<sup>19</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the Netherlands had a strong Protestant population, divided into several denominations, as well as a very large

Catholic minority of perhaps 35% of the population.<sup>20</sup> Its social fabric was founded on principles known as *verzuiling*, pillarization, or segmentation. This kind of coexistence denotes a society built on pillars of religion and philosophy. There were four such pillars: Protestant-Christian, Roman Catholic, Social Democratic, and the Liberal or general pillar.<sup>21</sup> Each had their educational system, newspaper, sport organizations and health care. They also had their own political parties, and because the Jews constituted perhaps 1% of the population, they never had enough political power to establish a party of their own, and traditionally voted with the liberal and leftist parties, and only Amsterdam had a large enough Jewish community to establish a Jewish educational system.

While there was also rivalry between Protestants and Catholics, both groups were more interested in defining themselves vis-à-vis the Jews, and to show that their own way of life was not only preferable, but on a higher spiritual plane. In fact, the bottom line of this discourse was that Jews were a loose group of people, no longer a nation-- as emancipation had ended that separate status-- who had no claim on either this world or the coming one, and had lost their chance for redemption when they refused to accept the teachings of Christianity. While the different factions disagreed on the way Jews could ameliorate this situation, or how they should be treated until they did so, all saw them as outsiders, having no true claim on the coexistence shared by Christian factions, and at times, subjected them to missionary intervention.<sup>22</sup> The result was that the *de jure* Jewish equality was not translated into *de facto* acceptance and integration.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps more damaging was the fact that in the religious polemic, Jews were generally seen as a theoretical construct rather than living, breathing creatures who lived in the next street, and this attitude eventually allowed the majority of Dutchmen to disregard the deportation of the Jews during the war.<sup>24</sup> In other words, Jews were outsiders, more or less despised in their present

state. With over half of Amsterdam's Jews dependent on financial support,<sup>25</sup> most poor Jews remained in abject poverty.

### **The organization “*Touroh Our*”, The “*Libanon*” Magazine and the Rabbinate**

It was in this socio-political climate that Meyer de Hond came of age. He was the child of a poor family and attended Jewish schools. Like other gifted young men from that background, he received funds from the community which allowed him to attend the rabbinical seminary in Amsterdam, a school which existed until the outbreak of WWII.<sup>26</sup> As soon as De Hond finished his ‘candidate’ exams, more or less equivalent to a B.A., he was offered a post of *magid* and Hebrew school teacher. Haas van Amerongen reported that his acceptance as a teacher was unusual, considering his age (he was only 23), but apparently, De Hond was already known for his brilliance.<sup>27</sup> This fact may have become a problem when he became less of an acceptable figure for the religious, orthodox establishment.

De Hond's first sermon was attended by the Jewish press and reported in the *NIW*, the only Jewish paper with a national readership. The dateline read May 25, 1905, and the headline announced ‘*The Installation of Mr. de Hond*’.<sup>28</sup> The event was well attended, and in order to allow De Hond the greatest influence possible as teacher and preacher, the organization *Touroh Our* (The Torah is the light) was established. It gave him a platform to reach many more Jews. This was especially true after he founded the organization's monthly magazine, *Libanon*, three years later.

At his inauguration as teacher and preacher, De Hond was formally asked to serve the congregation, while they promised to be his pupils.<sup>29</sup> The establishment had high expectations of him, including Rabbi Dünner, the Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam and the province North Holland, and rector of the Rabbinical Seminary, whose protégé he was. In his first official sermon to *Touroh Our*, De Hond compared himself to the fire

that kindles the light of Judaism among the congregants, and makes them proud to be Jews. The silence in the hall, wrote the journalist, was ‘*proof that De Hond’s words had fallen on fertile soil*’.<sup>30</sup> The evening ended with refreshments and De Hond had started his career while still working to finish his studies.

With the establishment, in 1908, of *Libanon*, the written mouthpiece of *Touroh Our*, De Hond now had a much wider audience, because the magazine was distributed free to all its members throughout *Mokum* and *Mediene* as one.<sup>31</sup> One of his objectives was to show the Jews that things were changing for the better. Already in the first year of its existence, three months after *Libanon* first appeared, in August, 1908, De Hond, who was both the main contributor and the editor of the magazine, published an article written by A.I. Querido, a well-known writer at the time, about the positive differences between the 19<sup>th</sup> century just ended, and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Querido wrote that in the past, Jews gave charity without knowing where the money would go, and bought subscriptions to magazines and membership in organizations whose purpose was unclear. The reason, he wrote, was the high level of religious observance and charitable character of the Jews who left the running of the various institutions to the steering committees.<sup>32</sup> The criticism may have been subtle, but there is a certain feeling that Querido did not like this particular way of running the community. De Hond, as the editor, approved the article, and must have stood behind its content. However, more interesting was Querido’s, and by implication De Hond’s, attitude toward women. ‘*In those days*’, he wrote, it was unknown to have a woman, although she too belonged to the organization, enjoy any rights. A man might be kept in the dark concerning the organization he supported, [unless he fulfilled an official function] but the woman was denied any power at all. Slowly, one has come to the understanding that a men-only society has no room in our [modern] coexistence. And yet, even today, there are many who espouse strange ideas concerning [the role



of] women as members of society.... Moreover, the rights of women are discussed throughout society and the world as a whole, and it is too serious a question to postpone finding an equitable solution.<sup>33</sup>

This was written in 1908, by an orthodox Jew, supported by a man who was studying to be a rabbi. Querido offered simple guidelines about how to bring women into the center of Jewish affairs, and the article ended with a call to action on the part of the “*ladies and gentleman*” of the *Touroh Our* organization, which, in Querido’s eyes would grow only if both women and men voted with their feet if women were not accepted to play their part in public life. All this was written eleven years before Dutch women were allowed to vote.

It took De Hond only three volumes of his newly established magazine to run afoul of the powers-that-be. In the August edition of *Libanon* he attacked the Amsterdam rich for not observing the spirit of Jewish law in an article entitled ‘*Merry Mourning*’. The occasion was the period of the nine days before the fast of the ninth of Av, the commemoration of the destruction of the Temple. During those nine days, observant Jews refrain from eating meat and/or rejoicing. ‘*In Jerusalem*’, De Hond wrote, the memory of the destruction remains fresh in the mind because Jews from all over congregate at the Wailing Wall.<sup>34</sup> However, as most Jews live outside that city, care should be taken to observe the mourning suitably.<sup>35</sup> In Amsterdam Jews fast, he wrote, and come to shul to say the prescribed lamentations. However, there is no true mourning. Moreover, there is no questioning of the causes that brought about the destruction of the Temple and the loss of the Promised Land.<sup>36</sup> De Hond attacked the many ways in which Jews had managed to observe the written precepts, yet had done nothing to try and better themselves, so as to be allowed to rebuild the “*third Temple*”.<sup>37</sup> It was De Hond’s conviction that the Jews of Amsterdam were not yet worthy to do any rebuilding, as they had not changed their ways and bickered

among themselves about unimportant topics. He offered clear guidelines how to change the spiritual wellbeing of the Jews. To begin with, he wrote, '*give the money wasted on expensive mourning meals (expensive fish, etc.) to charity instead*', and choose to feel '*hunger brought on by mourning*'. Instead of overspending and over indulgence, he admonished the Jews to '*focus on justice, modesty, and a sense of worthiness*'.<sup>38</sup> De Hond begged his readership to live '*in the true faith and swear to think of the City of Peace seriously and every day*'. Then, he promised, '*brothers and sisters, you may wear your new white linen and rejoice*'.<sup>39</sup>

Emphasizing Judaism as the true faith seems like a reactionary statement, and a response to the Christian view of Judaism: as a non-religion or even an abomination of ancient beliefs which had been eclipsed by Christianity,<sup>40</sup> while the reference to future rejoicing might have come in answer to the Zionist call to return to the Holy Land, which De Hond believed could only happen when the Mashiah came. Finally, his article also struck at the heart of the lack of equality within the Jewish community of Amsterdam, where the rich could eat expensive foods while the poor were starving.

There were over three hundred letters to the editor in response to the above article. De Hond related to them in the September issue of *Libanon*, as letters of both support and criticism, but did not offer any retraction. However, when public pressure mounted against what was seen as his audacity to criticize the rich and powerful, he published a letter of apology in the *NIW*, affirming his allegiance to strict orthodoxy and the 13 articles of faith a few days later. De Hond pledged never to sway from these beliefs till death, and to speak to the people in His spirit.<sup>41</sup>

And yet, in the very next issue of *Libanon*, De Hond tackled another controversial issue and once again, sought to support the illiterate poor, and show that the way Judaism was lived was contrary to its ability to bolster the morale of all Jews. This

article, entitled '*Het Gebed (Prayer)*'- opened with a quote from the Psalms concerning G-d's acceptance of all prayer. Fearing a swift decrease in what De Hond called "*interest in burning questions of faith*", he attacked the way Amsterdam, referred to as '*little Jerusalem*' in this article, adorned itself in the external trappings of Judaism, such as large synagogues, while making no attempt to reach to overwhelming majority of Jews who no longer attended services. In his words, the six major synagogues could seat 36.000 yet only six hundred attended services on Shabbath, and even fewer during the morning prayers.<sup>42</sup> The problem, according to De Hond lay in the fact that prayer in its present manifestation remained inaccessible to most Jews, because of the language barrier. He took care to translate all his own Hebrew terminology into Dutch, so that his readers would understand what he was writing.<sup>43</sup> Focusing on the three pillars of Judaism: the study of the Holy Scriptures, the prayer services, and the love of one's neighbor,<sup>44</sup> he pointed an accusing finger at the middle aspect of what he called "*our great Faith*" (his capital), by calling the format of the prayer service a wormy apple which threatened the other two core cells. Prayer, *avodah*, was the Jew's way of serving G-d, but if there were to be this "*contact between G-d and man*", the soul must play a role, and in De Hond's view, this could not happen since prayer was too bound up in formality. Basing himself on the Scriptures, Psalms and the Talmud, De Hond pointed out that prayer should not be limited by time and ritual, but must also be an event independent of such constraints.<sup>45</sup>

His proposal to make prayer an event outside the appointed times of organized services, to empower Jews to turn to prayer in Dutch whenever they felt a need, and to include prayer in that language also in synagogue would make Judaism more accessible, the service more comprehensible, and finally would prevent the terrible "*mutilation*" of the Hebrew prayer.<sup>46</sup> De Hond pleaded that children be taught prayer

in Dutch, rather than forcing them to mumble in incomprehensible Hebrew. The article ended with a caveat: Better to have a child understand the connection between G-d, faith and prayer, than to express pride in the way a child could read Hebrew, although he understood nothing.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Backlash**

This time, the establishment responded viciously. The Friday after De Hond's article, *NIW* printed several responses. Dateline, September 5, 1908, under the rubric local news, the following announcement appeared: '*At the Joachimstal Publishers,*<sup>48</sup> *the following open letter entitled 'open letter to my friend De Hond' by Justus Tal.*<sup>49</sup> *Price, 5 cent*'. The newspaper explained the occasion of the letter as a response to De Hond's article 'Prayer' in the *Libanon* of September 1. In this letter, Tal accused De Hond of playing into the hands of Reform Judaism.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, he denigrated De Hond's erudition as '*pseudo learning*'. The newspaper editor applauded Tal's initiative and called it '*written in a friendly tone, by a friend and fellow student*'. This proved, the *NIW* concluded, that some students at the Rabbinical Seminary did have the right spirit, and were still '*truly Jewish... [and] still knew the difference between right and wrong*' (unlike De Hond, apparently).<sup>51</sup> The general mood was clear. De Hond did not find support among the establishment or his colleagues. Perhaps, this was not surprising, as the rabbis and their institutions were greatly dependent on the munificence of the rich industrialists and merchants.<sup>52</sup> In fact, many rabbinical students enjoyed funding by the rich- De Hond among them.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the editor of *NIW*, Philip Elte, had taken a dislike to De Hond, opposed him at every opportunity and was happy to publish articles and opinions which showed the latter in a negative light.<sup>54</sup> Elte's involvement may have weighed heavily in turning the tide against De Hond.

There were several instances of further censure by way of letters to the editor of the

*NIW*, including one by Querido who had just a short while before published an article in *Libanon*.<sup>55</sup> By the time the furor subsided, Querido and others had publicly withdrawn their support of *Touroh Our*, and the organization was quickly excluded from using the premises of the Main Synagogue. The claim was that De Hond misused his pulpit, and had turned the premises into a battlefield, which would detract from the ‘holiness of G-d’s building’.<sup>56</sup> On the same page where *Touroh Our*’s banishment was reported, there was a long article about the activities of another, and apparently more palatable, Jewish organization. The article mentioned several prominent Jews, including Justus Tal who addressed the audience.<sup>57</sup> Tal, of course, was the “friend” who had written De Hond the open letter.

While *Libanon* continued to appear, and *Touroh Our* continued to exist for another eight years, De Hond had fallen from favor, was ignored at the Rabbinical seminary, demoted at work, and generally treated as an outcast, and finally, he was fired and failed his final exams so that he could not be ordained.<sup>58</sup> There has been much discussion whether his failure was orchestrated by Dünner, but in any case, De Hond’s career was over before it even started. The fact that the *Touroh Our* collected money for him, so he could continue his education abroad, showed the popular support of De Hond.<sup>59</sup>

Haas van Amerongen discussed this episode in great detail, citing the minutes from the meetings of *Touroh Our* and reports issued by its presidents. From these minutes it emerges that De Hond had found a true ally in the members of his organization. In fact, the decision to finish his studies in Germany was initiated by the organization as a kind of protest against the Rabbinical slighting of their teacher.<sup>60</sup> When De Hond managed to circumvent the German rabbis’ request for a letter of Jewish observance and proper religiosity, the president of *Touroh Our* reported proudly that their “teacher won with flying colors, even without the proper certificate of behavior”,

and was accepted as a rabbinical student at a Berlin Seminary.<sup>61</sup> The above illustrates that to the men and women of the *Touroh Our* organization De Hond was a leader who had the right message, and they wished to see him succeed, perhaps as far as becoming Chief Rabbi. When this option seemed to be closed, they felt threatened as well, and did everything in their power to see De Hond ordained. It is also possible that the dedicated help he received from *Touroh Our* laid the foundations for De Hond's actions during the war, where he stood by the side of the organization's membership.

### **Kiekjes (Snapshots) and the stories behind the words**

De Hond was described as a man who saw Judaism as the true faith, and worked to impart this knowledge to the Jews of Amsterdam and the *Mediene*, as well as a man who championed the poor and saw them as a shining example of that true faith. De Hond's short stories, called *Kiekjes – Snapshots* – about the men, women and children in the poorest hovels of Amsterdam bear out this notion. There are three bundles of these stories available in book form, two published during his lifetime and one anthology which include some of these snapshots of the Jewish neighborhood. In addition, between the years 1908 and 1914, the stories were published in the *Libanon* magazine, and reached children and adults throughout the country.

In *Bloemlezing*, a short anthology of De Hond's *Kiekjes* and other writings collected by Meijer (1951), the story entitled "Klaasie", focused on the power of Judaism and the threat of hunger, as did many other *Kiekjes*.<sup>62</sup> The situation concerned a poor peddler named Ansel and his wife Sientje. He sold items commonly for sale in the Netherlands around December 5, when Dutchmen celebrate a gift-giving festival called Sinterklaas, and she cleaned house for a wealthy Christian family. Sinterklaas is not a religious holiday, but the trappings involve a figure decked out like a bishop, St. Nicholas, the patron saint of the children, as well as gift giving, traditional sweets,

and seasonal songs. Sientje's employer appealed to her for the services of her husband to dress up like Sinterklaas (in the robes and miter) and offered him more money than he could make in many days of struggling to push his heavy cart over the draw bridges of the city. Sientje, persuasive and insistent, got her husband to promise he would come and put on the robe and miter, even though he felt a Jew should not wear those clothes. Thoroughly ashamed and confused, Ansel presented himself at the household, and went upstairs to dress up. Downstairs, the children waited for the good Saint, as it was already getting dark outside. Finally their father went upstairs so check what was keeping the Jew so long, and found a figure, decked out in Roman Catholic robes, and carrying a staff, who would not say anything aside from "uh, uh", and make movements with his hands that meant "wait, wait". On top of the red robes he wore a prayer shawl: Ansel was saying his evening prayers.

Incomprehensible to the Christians around him, the Jew, poor as he was, managed to cut a royal figure. The irony of the Jew in the robes of a prince of the church praying to the G-d of Israel said more about conviction and lack of attraction of the Christian way of life than any words could have. The Christian celebrants of the Sinterklaas holiday looked on in silence. De Hond took away their speech, arguments, and persuasiveness by putting a simple man with a simple faith to face them. Moreover, the Jewish attributes literally covered up the bishop's robes, thus metaphorically obliterating them.

In another story, entitled Waterlooplein (Waterloo Square), De Hond played with words: the question of Waterloo, the defeat of Napoleon, and the irony that the Jewish funeral home was at the square, so that all Jewish dead 'met their Waterloo' and from there were carried to the cemetery at Muiderberg, just outside the city. And after all, De Hond maintained, the square was indeed a battlefield, alluding to the battle for livelihood among the- mostly Jewish- peddlers, and the battle with poverty

that could not be won. Nevertheless, the carts arrived each day, laden with merchandise, and the Jewish peddlers continued to fight their good fight. Standing outside in all weather, they succumbed slowly to starvation and the cold, but nevertheless, stood their ground. As De Hond would have it, their Judaism sustained them and lifted them above the squalor of their lives, as they could wrap themselves in their prayer shawls and say their daily prayers. In the end, that is how they would be carried to their graves, wrapped in their prayer shawls and held high, on the shoulders of others. The comrades of these heroes of Waterloo stood and saluted, so to speak, even as they shivered in the cold wind, and called out that their dead comrade was the best of Waterlooplein. De Hond's romantic view of the Jews showed how close he felt to these poor men and how he saw them as an integral part of the fabric of the city, and perhaps its best feature.

For eight years De Hond continued to publish these snapshots of the men, women and children of Amsterdam, romanticizing their poverty and disease and doing his best to alleviate some of that. The stories carried an undertone of criticism of a world that would allow people to live in such abject poverty, but in the *Kiekjes* De Hond never said so directly.

Still holding on to the belief that Judaism had the right idea, and that Jews knew all about serving G-d and living a moral and meaningful life, De Hond departed for Germany with money provided by *Touroh Our* and enrolled in university to complete his doctorate and become an ordained rabbi. Haas van Amerongen reported that De Hond had asked for a leave of absence which was denied.<sup>63</sup> Meijer, in his preface, ignored the background leading up to De Hond's departure,<sup>64</sup> while *Pinkas Holland* related only to De Hond's foreign ordination and his exclusion from functioning as a rabbi in the Netherlands based on that.<sup>65</sup> His loss of livelihood in Amsterdam, his failure at the final Dutch ordination examinations, and the subsequent denial of his



German accreditation by the rabbinical establishment may suggest that De Hond was feared for his oratorical powers and leadership, and had to be kept outside the sphere of influence in order not to threaten any possible candidate for chief rabbi supported by the establishment.

De Hond's departure does fit in with his belief that he should be a rabbi for the sake of leading his adherents into a meaningful relationship with G-d, the commandments, and Judaism. His writings from that period seem to support his view of Judaism as the preferred way of life: In 1912 he published an article in *Libanon* where he compared the Jewish way of life to that of the mundane students at Heidelberg.<sup>66</sup> Entitled: A Scholar at Heidelberg, De Hond denigrated the Gentile students' hedonism, self-mutilation, and mundane and bohemian lifestyle, and compared them to the rabbinical students who spent their evenings studying Torah. The meaningless dueling scars of the Gentile scholars fell far short of the holy covenant Jews inscribed upon their flesh, the circumcision, and while the former pranced about town in robes, Jews enveloped themselves in the much more meaningful prayer shawls. De Hond made a clear case for the superior lifestyle offered by Orthodox Judaism. However, he also glorified those who were less observant, but who by virtue of their suffering and tradition, still glorified G-d's name, in his viewpoint.<sup>67</sup>

The penultimate piece of evidence concerning De Hond's actions and way of life is his doctoral dissertation. Written in Germany, published in Leiden, and written in Hebrew, Arabic and German, among others, De Hond took a close look at a central Sura of the Koran, where he compared *Al-Khidr*, the green ghost, to the figure of Eliezer, Abraham's servant.<sup>68</sup> While the dissertation is presented as a close examination of Sura 18, it dealt in greater detail with Jewish sources and exegesis. This writing is the most direct declaration of the De Hond's claim that Judaism is the

true faith, based on the originality of the Jewish revelation and adherence to monotheism. By claiming *Al-Khidr* as a mirror figure of Eliezer from the Books of Moses, De Hond made an undeniable statement concerning the truth of Judaism. Worthy of imitation, it must be worthy to begin with. Not only that, but his claim of imitation also deflates the Koran's claim as a new revelation. The Sura mentions Moses as a companion to the mysterious *Al-Khidr*, but De Hond saw the latter's attributes and characteristics as echoing those of Eliezer, Abraham's servant, who set out to find a wife for Isaac. Focused on the mysterious, blurred features of Eliezer, which perhaps were similar to those of Abraham, De Hond showed that the Green Man in Sura 18 was just as mysterious, and also on a similar holy quest for his master. His doctoral dissertation suggests that rather than locking horns with Christianity directly, De Hond used Islam to strengthen his stand concerning Judaism as offering the only true path by weakening the originality of the Koran, and perhaps setting the stage for doing the same concerning the Christian Bible at a later date. Possibly, it was too risky to write against Christianity openly, just as today, his dissertation might not have been published. In an interesting aside, this dissertation was published by the academically renowned Brill press which still publishes comparative religious studies today.

### **Epilogue**

The unique personality of Rabbi Dr. Meyer de Hond is evident during the years in which he led Amsterdam's poor community. His unrelenting activity against anti-Semitism and strengthening the faith of his followers defined his work before the Nazi occupation. When the community stood before extermination, De Hond continued to lead his community and strengthen their spirits and their faith. His actions during these times of crisis, reflects the attempts of many leaders and ordinary citizens to resist the Nazis.<sup>69</sup>

Jewish acts of courage in the face of the Nazis serve as an example of the steadfastness of the human spirit. Two case-studies exemplify the human spirit and the Jewish resistance: Janusz Korczak, the great educator, who refused to obey the murderers' orders and marched heroically alongside his orphans.<sup>70</sup>

The author and journalist Robert Weltsch, the editor of the "Jewish Review" *Jüdische Rundschau*, became famous in April 1933 after the publication of his article, "Tragt ihn mit Stolz, den gelben Fleck" (*Wear it with pride, the Yellow Badge*), calling against the Nazi boycott against Jewish businesses. The article heightened the spirits of the Jewish population.<sup>71</sup>

During the Holocaust, dozens of Rabbis, leaders of their communities, showed courage and outstanding leadership in strengthening the spirit and faith of their people, while resisting the Nazis and their collaborators. Their strength of spirit helped their communities to cope from day to day in the ghettos and in the camps, when the future was shrouded by fog.

The leadership of Rabbi Dr. Meyer de Hond is another piece of the *Kiddush Hachaim* manifest and "Jewish bravery" during the Holocaust. The uniqueness of Rabbi de Hond contributes to our understanding of Jewish leadership and courage during this period of darkness.<sup>72</sup>

The final link between De Hond's beliefs and way of life may be explained, tragically, by his leadership just before his death. Several of his classmates, and contemporaries from the seminary and the rabbinate survived the war, and several played a leading role in the post-Shoah Netherlands. It is possible that the difference between those who survived and those who did not was the divide of poverty. In his article about survival among the Jews of Amsterdam Flim claimed that it was indeed influenced by economic status.<sup>73</sup> Bauer also relates to this aspect of who survived and who didn't. According to the latter's research, about '40,000 Jewish workers lived in the

slum sections near the harbor'.<sup>74</sup> They, for the most part, did not survive the war. De Hond had come from humble beginnings, struggled throughout, and depended on donations for his very education. He did not easily achieve a permanent position as a teacher, and lived in the poor Jewish quarter all his life. His rabbinical title was recognized only when he turned 60, in 1942, and by then everything was just about over.<sup>75</sup> However, unlike the working poor who had little or no dealings with the world outside the ghetto, and if they did it was with poor Gentiles who may not have had the physical options to offer shelter, De Hond had studied at university, and was a man of great erudition. His studies must have brought him into contact with friends in the Gentile world. One of these might have been willing to assist, the way his classmate and contemporary, Justus Tal, was assisted by Cornelius van Genderen, his professor of Semitic languages at the university of Amsterdam.<sup>76</sup> From De Hond's actions, however, it is my belief that even if he could have found a way out for himself, he would have chosen to remain at his post as the beloved folk-rebbe, counseling and teaching the poor, and raising their spirits even when all seemed lost. The *Biographisch Woordenboek*<sup>77</sup> comes closest to saying this as well.

In 1943 De Hond was among the last Jews of Amsterdam, and had been witness to seeing much of his life's work disappear into death and ruin. This alone may have been why he decided to accompany into death those he had supported throughout their lives. As he witnessed the Jewish poor being rounded up, torn from their homes, and sent away, he also had to witness the deportation of the chronically handicapped, sick, and elderly citizens of his brainchild and the crowning achievement to his endeavors, *The Joodse Invalide*, established in 1911. This nursing home was raided by the German and Dutch police on March 1, 1943, just two months before De Hond himself was rounded up together with his family.

De Hond, then, never left his flock. Unable to save them from their horrible death, he stayed with them until the bitter end, dying as he had lived, and thus proving his leadership in the face of crisis, and his steadfast belief in his destiny as a Jew in the hands of G-d. Meijer described him at Westerbork from where trains left for the East every Tuesday. De Hond was seen strolling among the Jews, with a kind word here and there, and at times simply as an uplifting presence as their world was sinking into nothingness, and Hagedoorn reported this as follows:

de Hond and his family succumbed during WWII together with the majority of the poor ghetto Jews of Amsterdam. Till the end, even after he and his family had been taken to the camp at Westerbork, on June 21, 1943, he gave those who shared his fate hope and faith through his spiritual words. Completely in keeping with his belief system and personality, De Hond responded “*HINENT*”- here I am- when his name was called to report for deportation east, on July 20, 1943.<sup>78</sup>

“*Hineni*” is of course Abraham’s response when G-d calls upon him to sacrifice Isaac. De Hond likely knew what was waiting for him, yet he went willingly in order to comfort those weaker than himself. Knowing that those Jews he had dedicated his life to would not survive the war, he too chose to die with them, rather than making an attempt to save himself. In doing so, De Hond gave truth to the precept from the Ethics, to know where he was going, and to know that he would be judged. As Judaism was the only faith he could believe in, and as he had lived it based on the three precepts of Torah, prayer, and the love of others, he let his love of others weigh more heavily than his need for self-preservation. In my view, he did not sacrifice his life as much as sanctify it by offering succor to those who had looked toward him for spiritual encouragement. In their final moments, he did not leave them, and as such proved that in spite of the lack of recognition he enjoyed from the orthodox establishment, he lived and died as the shepherd a rabbi is meant to be.

In his eulogy of a beloved and admired teacher and rabbi, De Hond wrote that as long as we speak of a man he does not die. In this paper I have spoken of De Hond, so his memory will live on, and give it “*a long life*”,<sup>79</sup> but I have also done so in honor of the late Dr. Abraham de Lange, who wished to keep Rabbi Dr. Meyer de Hond’s legacy alive by writing about him, and brought his life to my attention. And so, by speaking of both, I hope that their memory will live on and remain connected to the chain of life.

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Endnotes:

1. D. Michman (ed.), *The Holocaust in Jewish History: Historiography, Consciousness and Interpretation*, Jerusalem, 2005, pp. 110, 233.
2. Y. Bauer, *A history of the holocaust*, rev. ed., New York 2001, p. 262.
3. For an overview of Dutch Jewry in general and Amsterdam Jewry in particular in the period 1870-1940 see D. Michman, 'Netherlands' and 'Amsterdam', *Encyclopedia Judaica*<sup>2</sup>, 1, pp. 900-901; J.C.H. Blom, R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld and I. Schoffer (eds.), *The History of the Jews in The Netherlands*, Oxford 2002; *About the first Zionist and the Dreyfus Affair* see:  
[http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Zionism/First\\_Cong\\_&\\_Basel\\_Program.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Zionism/First_Cong_&_Basel_Program.html)  
<http://stadsarchief.amsterdam.nl/archieven/archiefbank/overzicht/1213.nl.html>  
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/Dreyfus.html>
4. De Joodse Invalide, the home for the Jewish poor and handicapped, founded by de Hond in 1911, was emptied by the Germans on March 1, 1943, and all the residents were murdered. See also <http://www.jhm.nl/cultuur-en-geschiedenis/amsterdam/joodse-invalide>
5. Abel Herzberg, Dutch lawyer, writer and chronicler of the Shoah. See [http://www.nlpvf.nl/basic/auteur1.php?Author\\_ID=32](http://www.nlpvf.nl/basic/auteur1.php?Author_ID=32)
6. *NIW* (The Jewish Weekly), 17.12.1976 (quoted in I. Lipschits, *Tsedaka: een halve eeuw Joods maatschappelijk werk in Nederland*, Zutphen 1997, p. ii).
7. It is customary among Orthodox Jews to refrain from writing the name of the Devine explicitly. Out of respect for Rabbi De Hond, the writers adopted this practice throughout this paper.
8. S. Haas van Amerongen, 'Rabbijn Dr. Meyer de Hond (1882-1943) Reactionair of revolutionair', M.A. thesis, 2005.
9. Bauer (supra footnote 1), p. 262.
10. J. Hagedoorn, 'Hond, Meyer de (1882-1943)', *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland*, 2008. Retrieved <http://www.inghist.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/BWN/lemmata/bwn3/hond>
11. Bauer (supra footnote 1), p. 47.
12. K. Hofmeester, 'Image and Self-image of the Jewish workers in the Labour Movements in Amsterdam, 1880-1914' in Ch. Brasz and Y. Kaplan (eds.), *Dutch Jews as Perceived by Themselves and by Others*, Leiden 2001, pp. 190-191.
13. M. de Hond, 'Vragenbus (questions and answers)', *Libanon*, 7, 2 (1914), p. 16.
14. <http://seforim.traditiononline.org/index.cfm/2008/7/23/Meir-Hildesheimer--Historical-Perspectives-on-Rabbi-Samson-Raphael-Hirsch>.
15. J. Michman, 'Gotische Torens op een Corinthisch Gebouw, de doorvoering van de emancipatie van de joden in Nederland', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 89 (1976), pp. 493-517. See also J. Michman, *The history of Dutch Jewry during the Emancipation period, 1787-1815: Gothic turrets on a Corinthian building*, Amsterdam 1995.
16. Michman (ibid), pp. 75-84.
17. J.J.F.W. van Beem and H. Fuks, *Mokum en Mediene: de geschiedenis van de joden Nederland*, Amsterdam 1971, p. 1.
18. In the local Dutch dialect spoken in Amsterdam, the general population still refers to their city by that name.
19. The whole question of Jewish emancipation may be compared to the manumission of the American slaves, as in both cases, social acceptance was very slow in coming, while even political equality was suppressed and delayed because of continuing prejudice.
20. Th. Salemnik, 'Strangers in a strange country: Catholic Views of Jews in the Netherlands, 1918-1945', in Ch. Brasz and Y. Kaplan (eds.), *Dutch Jews as Perceived by Themselves and by Others*, Leiden 2001, p. 108.
21. Salemnik (ibid), p. 109.
22. Salemnik (supra footnote 18), p.115.
23. A.H. Huussen, 'De emancipatie van de Joden in Nederland. Een discussiebijdrage naar aanleiding van twee recente studies', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 94, 1 (1979), pp. 76. Retrieved from [http://bmgn.knhg.nl/H/Huussen\\_jr.\\_A.\\_H.\\_-\\_De\\_emancipatie\\_van\\_de\\_joden\\_in\\_Nederlan.pdf](http://bmgn.knhg.nl/H/Huussen_jr._A._H._-_De_emancipatie_van_de_joden_in_Nederlan.pdf); Michman (supra footnote 13), p.81.
24. Salemnik (supra footnote 18), p.115.
25. A left-over from the time when Jews were kept outside the Guilds, and prevented from plying certain trades.
26. J. Meijer, *Bloemlezing van De Hond*, Amsterdam 1951, preface.
27. See footnote 8, pg. 13.
28. 'De Installatie van meneer De Hond', *NIW*, 25.5.1905, p. 2; 'Maandschrift der Joodsche Vereeniging Touroh Our', *Libanon*, 3, 1 (1910), p. 5.
29. *NIW* (ibid), p.2.
30. Ibid.
31. The advertisements in the magazine show that it reached the outlying areas, while the fact that is what free is stated in the masthead.
32. M. de Hond, 'Vrolijke Rouw (Merry Mourning)', *Libanon*, 1, 3 (1908), p. 24.
33. Ibid, p. 7, footnote 28.
34. Ibid, p. 17, 18.
35. Ibid, p. 18.
36. Ibid, p. 20.
37. Ibid, p. 8, 20.



38. Ibid, p. 20.
39. Ibid, p. 21.
40. G. van Klinken, 'Dutch Jews as perceived by Dutch Protestants, 1860-1960', Ch. Brasz and Y. Kaplan (eds.), *Dutch Jews as Perceived by Themselves and by Others*, Leiden 2001, p.129.
41. *NIW*, 7.8.1908, p. 2.
42. M. De Hond (1908). 'Het Gebed (Prayer)', *Libanon*, 1, 4 (1908), p.25.
43. Even the **NIW** of the period, included much writing in Hebrew, rarely transliterated, and never translated. The assumption must have been that its readership was capable of reading and understanding the Hebrew, and so, this newspaper was aimed at the more financially successful members of the Jewish community.
44. Bavli, Yoma 9B עבודה- וגמילות חסדים
45. De Hond (supra footnote 40), p. 28.
46. see footnote 42, pp. 28-29.
47. Ibid, p. 30.
48. Perhaps the most important publishers of Jewish material at the time.
49. Justus Tal who survived the Shoah was De Hond's classmate, son of a chief rabbi, and eventually chief rabbi of Utecht in the 1930s and 1940s himself in the post-war period. See M de Hond, 'Open letter', *NIW*, 1908, side 1, p. 2.
50. J. Tal, *Open brief aan mijn vriend M. de Hond*, Amsterdam 1908, p. 4.
51. *NIW*, 5.9.1908.
52. K. Hofmeester, *Jewish Workers and the Labour Movement: A comparative study of Amsterdam London and Paris (1870-1914)*, trans. L Mitzman, Burlington 2004, p. 22.
53. Meijer (supra footnote 24), preface.
54. Hagedoorn (supra footnote 8).
55. *NIW*, 1.8.1908, p.1.
56. *NIW* (supra footnote 49), p. 1.
57. *NIW* (ibid), p. 1.
58. see footnote 23, p. 23-26.
59. Hagedoorn (supra footnote 8).
60. Ibid footnote 23 and 54, p. 24-25.
61. Ibid, p. 27.
62. M. de Hond, 'Klaassie', *Kiekjes*, 1, Joodenbreestraat-Waterlooplein 1926, pp. 1-3; M. de Hond, *Ghetto Kiekjes*, Amsterdam 1914, pp. 12-15.
63. Amerongen (supra footnote 25), p. 25.
64. Meijer (supra footnote 24), preface.
65. J. Michman, H. Beem and D. Michman (ed.), *Pinkas Hakehilot, Kereh Holland, Encyclopedia shel hyishuvim hayehudim lemen hivasdam Ve'ad le'ahar shoat milhemant haolam hesheniah*, p. 40.
66. M. de Hond, 'Een Geleerde te Heidelberg', *Libanon*, V2 (1912), pp. 13-15.
67. see footnote 59 and 25, p. 60-63.
68. M. de Hond, *Beiträge zur Erklärung der Elhidrlgende und von Koran, sure 18 59ff (der Koranisirte Elhidr)*, S.I. 1914.
69. I. Gutman (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, V, Tel-Aviv 1990, pp. 1068-1069.
70. Ibid, pp. 1085-1086.
71. Y. Arad, Y. Gutman and A. Margalio (eds.), *Document on the Holocaust*, Jerusalem 1978, pp. 47-48.
72. א. לוויין, אותיות של אם: עדויות מתקופת השואה בספרות ההלכתית, תל-אביב 2002
- This book compiles hundreds of stories of courage and leadership of Rabbis, a testimony to their faith and strengthening the spirit of their followers during the Holocaust; L. Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry 1932-1942*, II, Tel-Aviv 1987, pp. 726-732.
73. B.J. Flim, 'Bert Jan Flim Opportunities for Dutch Jews to Hide from the Nazis, 1942-1945', Ch. Brasz and Y. Kaplan (eds.), *Dutch Jews as Perceived by Themselves and by Others*, Leiden 2001, pp. 289-306.
74. Bauer (supra footnote 1), p. 262.
75. Hagedoorn (supra footnote 8); 'Dr. M. de Hond 60 jaar', *NIW*, 4.9.1942, Retrieved from <http://www.joodsmonument.nl/page/298683>
76. J. Haagedoorn, 'Tal, Justus (1881-1954)', *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland*. Retrieved from <http://www.historici.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/BWN/lemmata/bwn4/tal>
77. Hagedoorn (supra footnote 8).
78. Ibid footnote 69 and Meijer (supra footnote 24), preface.
79. M. de Hond, 'Bij de dood van Rabbi J.D. Wijnkoop', *Libanon*, 3, 6 (1910), pp. 45.