Marking a Milestone

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Background

On Sunday, the 18th of Kislev 5769 (December 14, 2008) the Rabbi Dr. Joseph Breuer Foundation with the participation of the descendents of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch held a Siyum/Dinner to mark the completion of the new English edition of the Hirsch Chumash. Some reading this may think “Very nice, but what does this have to do with me? I am not a follower of Rabbi Hirsch’s Torah Im Derech Eretz philosophy.” However, Rav Eliyahu Meir Klugman, a Rosh Yeshiva and Moreh Hora’ah in Jerusalem and the author of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch -- Architect of Torah Judaism for the Modern World, Artscroll, 1966, points out the following:

Clear knowledge and understanding of Rav Hirsch’s views, insights and formulations can help one respond intelligently to most issues in Orthodox Jewish life. From Bnei Brak and Lakewood to Teaneck and Woodmere, from FFB to Baal Teshuva, from Chazon Ish devotee to modern Orthodox Jew, Rav Hirsch's teachings form an integral part of the world-view of the Torah Jew in the modern world, regardless of whether one takes an active role in that world or not.1

Therefore, each and every one of us should be gratified to know that the new translation of Rav Hirsch’s commentary on the Chumash is now complete. As a result, it makes his insights accessible to all of us – scholar and layman.

It has taken twelve long years to complete this new translation.2

In 1995, the Rabbi Dr. Joseph Breuer Foundation undertook the publication of a new English version of the Hirsch Chumash. Rav Breuer ז"ל had urged that a new English edition of the Hirsch Chumash be prepared to accommodate modern English usage. It was felt that, despite the enormous contribution of the Levy edition to the world of Torah learning, the style of English used was a demanding one for current and future generations. As Dr. Levy wrote in his introduction, his work was intended as a literal translation of the German. Rav Hirsch’s style of writing presents a formidable challenge for translation into an English format that is easily read… In the current edition, the Foundation has sought to present to the English-speaking public a new work that is a faithful rendering of the Hirsch Chumash.3
The Event

This Siyum/Dinner was attended by more than 400 people. Most were descendents of Rav Hirsch’s ten children. I am sure that Rav Hirsch would have been most gratified to see that his descendents include Roshei Yeshiva, distinguished rabbonim, accomplished professionals and businessmen together with their wives and families. It was truly an impressive site to behold.

Dr. Elliott Bondi, a grandson of Rav Breuer, welcomed the participants. Rabbi Moshe Katzenstein then made some remarks on behalf of the descendents of Rav S. R. Hirsch. Shortly thereafter a DVD recording was shown in which the assembled received Divrei Brocha from Rav Yaakov Perlow, the Novominsk Rebbe. Rabbi Nosson Scherman, a founder of Artscroll publications, then introduced the keynote speaker, Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, MD. Dr. Twerski is a psychiatrist who is known world-wide for his expertise in treating substance abusers. He is also a prolific writer who has authored many books and whose columns appear in a number of publications, including the Hamodia.

Rabbi Twerski’s topic was “The Timeliness of Rav S. R. Hirsch.” He began by pointing out that despite the fact that his background is Chasidic (his mother was the sister of the third Bobover Rebbe, Grand Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam ל"ז) he considers himself a “Chosid” of Rav Hirsch. “Hardly a day goes by when I do not read from Rav Hirsch’s From the Wisdom of Mishle.” he said, holding up a well-worn copy of this sefer. “Hirsch changed the way I sayשמע.” he told us, and then he went on to summarize Rav Hirsch’s explanation ofשמע that he wrote on Devarim 6:4.

Dr. Twerski pointed out that Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was a man who knew how to confront and solve the very difficult problems faced by German Jewry during the 19th century. He told us that Rabbiner Hirsch had dealt with these complexities with brilliance and had saved German Orthodoxy. “We also face overwhelming problems today. Where is Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch today? We need him today also!”

The final speaker of the evening, Rabbi Yaakov Feldheim of Feldheim Publishers, had come from Eretz Yisroel to attend this event. “It is worthwhile to have come all the way from Eretz Yisroel just to witness this illustrious assemblage,” he said. He then pointed out that his father, Phillip Feldheim י"ת, enjoyed a close relationship with Rav Breuer and, at the suggestion of Rav Breuer, had begun publishing translations of the works of Rav Hirsch in the late forties.

My wife and I both felt privileged to have been invited to attend this momentous event. It was certainly a fitting way to mark the completion of a work that will, I am sure, be a valuable Torah resource to thousands upon thousands of Jews for many years to come. The completion of the publication of the new translation of Rav Hirsch’s commentary to the Chumash is indeed an important milestone for Jewry!
The first translation of Rav Hirsch’s commentary from the original German into English was done by Dr. Isaac Levy ז”ל of London, a grandson of Rav Hirsch. The first edition of this translation was published as individual volumes between 1956 and 1962.