

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch and America – an Historical View

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Introduction

Much has been written about Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's influence on German Jewry, and he is justifiably credited with having saved Orthodox Judaism in Germany. However, Rav Hirsch's influence was not confined to Germany Jewry and did not end with his passing in 1888. His legacy continues to this very day and is felt all over the world.

It is the intent of this article to sketch how Hirschian ideology has fostered the flourishing and thriving Torah life we see today in America by indicating how a number of rabbis utilized this ideology. Such a sketch cannot, of course, be comprehensive. Nonetheless, it does give one perspective on how far-reaching the influence of RSRH has been on the American scene.

Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman (1861 -1945)

In 1899 Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman published the first English translation of Rav Hirsch's **Nineteen Letters**¹. Rabbi Drachman's life story is an interesting one and is told in his autobiography **The Unfailing Light: Memoirs of an American Rabbi**.²

Raised in a non-Shomer Shabbos home, he went to public school in Jersey City, NJ and then Columbia College. While in high school and college, Rabbi Drachman also attended the (Reform) Temple Emanuel Hebrew Preparatory School of New York City for six years. In 1882 he graduated Columbia with honors and decided to study for the rabbinate. Temple Emanuel granted him a scholarship to pursue rabbinical studies with the idea that he would prepare for the Reform rabbinate. He went to Germany, studied at the University of Breslau and the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau, and earned his rabbinical degree. In addition, he matriculated at the University of Heidelberg and obtained the degree of Ph.D. Magna Cum Laude in 1885.

As a result of his studies in Germany, Dr. Drachman became completely committed to Orthodox Judaism. Temple Emanuel had sponsored his studies with the understanding that when he returned he would become its assistant rabbi. Given his commitment to Orthodoxy, Rabbi Drachman was forced to make it clear to the congregants of Temple Emanuel that he would only serve an Orthodox congregation. Despite the fact that Reform rabbis usually earned considerably more than Orthodox rabbis, he chose the less lucrative career of being an Orthodox rabbi. The result was that, "he speedily became known as an enthusiastic and energetic champion of Orthodox Judaism, one of the then

very few English-speaking representatives of the ancient faith in the America of that time.”³

During his summer vacation in 1883 Dr. Drachman visited Frankfurt-on-the-Main. His recollections of this visit show what a deep impression the community that Rav Hirsch had established made upon him.

In the latter place [Frankfurt] we [Rabbi Drachman and his cousin Solomon] not only saw a beautiful city but also a most wonderful Jewish community, the like of which was even then difficult to find anywhere else in the world. In size the city was not so very impressive, numbering not more than approximately twenty-five thousand souls, but in spiritual and cultural quality and importance to Judaism it was most exceptional and noteworthy. Frankfurt-on-the-Main was the city of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, inspired and inspiring leader in Israel, man of God if ever there was one. His soul glowed with profound love and loyalty to the ancient faith. From his lips poured streams of eloquence to convince the doubting, to strengthen the wavering, and to satisfy and delight the already convincingly devout. The impress of his mighty spirit was upon the whole Jewish life of the queenly city. The number of business establishments closed on Sabbaths and Jewish holy days, the large and beautiful synagogues and the throngs which entered them to worship, even on ordinary days of secular occupation, and a dozen other indications, all gave unmistakable testimony to the fact that here was a city of enthusiastically loyal Jews. The Orthodox Jews, however, were not the majority of the Jewry of Frankfurt. Rabbi Hirsch's congregation did not even belong to the official Jewish community. Legally and technically it was not even a congregation but only a private society, *Israelitische Religionsgesellschaft*, “Israelitish Society for Religion,” but in numbers it was not greatly inferior to the main community and in zeal and religious fervor it was so superior, that its impress upon the life of the city was far greater and more significant.

The Judaism which Rabbi Hirsch taught, and for which he had gained thousands of adherents, in Frankfurt and out, while unswervingly loyal to the Law and the traditions of Israel's past, was yet something different, something new. It was the religion of the ghetto without the mannerisms or the world-estrangement of the ghetto. It was indeed a wondrously perfect synthesis of the ancient and the modern, of the Oriental-Sinaitic-Talmudic precepts of faith and the life and the speech, the culture, and the demeanor of the modern time and the Occidental world. It was fittingly designated by understanding observers as Neo-Orthodoxy.

Solomon and I met a number of members of the Hirsch community and they all measured up to this standard. Among them were the brothers Jacob and Julius Strauss, who were relatives of Solomon, cousins of his mother, whose maiden name was Strauss. They were wealthy people, bankers doing business in a large way under the firm name of J. and J. Strauss. They were, however, more interested in Jewish religion and culture than in their business affairs.

As their guests on Friday evening, we met in the synagogue, which was filled with devout worshippers. After service we walked together to the Strauss residence, a fine and beautifully furnished apartment in one of the best streets of Frankfort. It was a memorable evening, a remarkable combination of fervent Jewishness and aristocratic demeanor, a perfect illustration of what the rabbis of the Talmud meant when they spoke of “Torah and greatness in one place.” Everything was in accordance with the rabbinical precept that the best which the Jew is and has shall be reserved for the Sabbath. Such was the Friday evening in the Strauss home. Herr Jacob Strauss chanted the Hebrew prayers with dignity and reverence, and Frau Strauss was a most gracious hostess. After the sumptuous repast was concluded, and thanks duly given to the Giver of all good, we passed an hour or so in pleasant, informal conversation. Many questions about America were asked of me, and my answers were received with great apparent interest.⁴

Dr. Drachman, who was in the forefront of everything Orthodox during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, was greatly influenced by RSRH’s TIDE ideology. In his short biographical sketch of Rav Hirsch that he added to his translation of the **Nineteen Letters**, he writes:

Samson Raphael Hirsch was, indeed, a “prince and a great man” in Israel; a rare and noble figure in the Judaism of the century now so rapidly nearing its end.

He possessed the faculty of thoroughly convincing and winning his followers, of inspiring them with the same enthusiasm which burnt within his breast. The future of Judaism, of the ages-old historical Judaism, is safe in Germany in the keeping of those reared under the influence of his spirit, for he gave them that which alone can secure the wellbeing of a religion, profound attachment to it as the one priceless treasure of their lives, and an unyielding consistency and fidelity which will render permanently impossible anything like profane or sacrilegious trifling with the precepts of their most sacred heritage.

Nor is the influence of his spirit confined to the immediate circle of his own congregation, splendid though this latter be; far beyond the confines of the queenly city of Frankfort-on-the-Main, where his chief life-work was done, throughout Germany, Austro-Hungary, and Russia, it has worked wonders upon the minds of Judah's children; and wherever Judaism is threatened, apparently in its very existence, and seems hopelessly delivered over to the twin destructive and disintegrating influences of modern anti-religionism and mediaeval superstition and unculture, an approach to the ideal set by Hirsch seems the only way out of the almost insuperable difficulty.⁵

Reb Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz (1886 – 1948)

The name of Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz is inextricably linked to Yeshiva Torah Vodaath and Torah Umesorah. Mr. Mendlowitz, as he insisted upon being called, was a pioneer educator who played a key role in laying the foundations of yeshiva education in

America. He came from a Chassidic background and studied in Hungarian yeshivas. Some may not realize that he was deeply influenced by the philosophy of Rav Hirsch.

Early in his life Reb Shraga Feivel decided that he would devote himself to strengthening Orthodoxy in the face of the onslaughts of those who would undermine Torah Judaism.

For the impending battle, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch became the model. Rabbi Hirsch's success in arresting the rush to Reform in Germany served as an example of what one man could do. Rabbi Hirsch's ability to speak the language of modern man — the product of the Enlightenment and the scientific worldview — while remaining entirely rooted in classic Jewish sources and thought, was something Reb Shraga Feivel explicitly sought to emulate. Rabbi Hirsch had not been intimidated by 19th-century thought or the rapid advance of science in his day, and neither would Reb Shraga Feivel shy away from the challenges of the 20th century. Having identified Rabbi Hirsch as one of the exemplars of what he hoped to achieve in life, Reb Shraga Feivel pored over his vast corpus of writings.⁶

On one occasion, while he was attending the shiurim of Rabbi Simcha Bunim Schreiber (1843 - 1907), a grandson of the Chasam Sofer and author of *Shevet Sofer*,

Reb Shraga Feivel found himself the object of criticism when he was seen studying Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's works. Because Rabbi Hirsch wrote in German vernacular, his works still occasioned suspicion within the deeply conservative Hungarian yeshiva world of the day. Reb Shraga Feivel was summoned to appear before the yeshivah administration. At his "trial" he enlisted the assistance of an old Jew living in Pressburg, who testified that thirty years earlier, when his first wife's mental disability forced him to seek permission from one hundred rabbis to take a second wife, the Divrei Chaim of Sanz had advised him to travel to Frankfurt-am-Main to obtain the signature for Rabbi Hirsch, telling him, "What I am to Galicia, he is to Germany."⁷

Reb Shraga Feivel often utilized ideas from RSRH in his classes.

He was alive to every facet of genuine Torah expression. "Some souls," he used to say, "drink from *Tanya*. Others from the *Ramchal*. Still others from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. I drink from all of them, though at any given time, I might drink from one in particular." He had the genius to draw from every strand of authentic Jewish thought, to place those various strands in relation to one another, and to see each of them as simply another path to knowledge and service of the Divine. Who else could have used the works of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch to explain a difficult passage in a classic chassidic work such as *Tanya*, or vice versa?⁸

Rabbi Dr. Yosef Breuer (1882 – 1980)

Rav Breuer was, of course, a foremost proponent of Hirschian ideology. He influenced thousands through his many years of leadership of Khal Adath Jeshurun, his classes, speeches and writings, and his bringing the Torah of Rav Hirsch to English speaking Jews by having the writings of RSRH translated into English. He built a model Kehilla, which others would do well to emulate. Anyone who came in close contact with members of KAJ could not help but be impressed by how the beautiful legacy of Rav Hirsch was steadfastly preserved and practiced.

One area in which Rav Breuer excelled was his insistence on consistency in all aspects of life. For him there was no dichotomy between religious observance and “mundane” activity. Let me illustrate this with an example.

The commentary of RSRH on the Chumash is more than just an explanation of the Torah. It is filled with gems that explain what Torah Judaism really is or, at least, should be. On verse 19:2 of Vayikra

Speak to the entire community of the Children of Israel and say to them: Be holy, for I, God, your God, am holy.

Rav Hirsch writes:

Self-mastery is the highest art a man can practice. Self-mastery does not mean neglecting, stunting, killing, or destroying any of one's powers or faculties. In and of themselves, the powers and faculties — from the most spiritual to the most sensual — that have been given to man are neither good nor bad. They all have been given to us for exalted purposes — that we may use them to do God's Will on earth. The Torah sets for each of them a positive purpose and negative limits. In the service of that purpose and within those limits, all is holy and good. But where a person strays from that purpose and exceeds those limits, coarseness and evil begin.

As in any other art, virtuosity in this, the highest moral art can be attained only through practice — training one's moral willpower to master the inclinations of the heart. But this training is not to be undertaken in the realm of the expressly forbidden, where any slip would result in wrongdoing. Rather, moral resolve must be tested and strengthened in the realm of the permitted. By learning to overcome inclinations that are permitted but related to the forbidden, one gains the power of self-mastery and thus makes all his powers and faculties subservient to the fulfillment of God's Will. Each person, according to his own unique qualities, should work on his inner self; and he should train *quietly*, in a manner *known only to himself*.

This selection is just one example of how relevant Rav Hirsch's writings are to our times. We live in a time where there is too much emphasis on externalities at the expense of commitment to the quiet, private practice of Judaism. Our society is obsessed with packaging at the expense of substance, and, sadly, some have been duped into thinking that this is also true when it comes to their Yiddishkeit. Rav Breuer elucidated this all too well when he wrote:

Genuine Chassidic Jewishness strives for Chassiduth which in itself is a lofty achievement on the ethical ladder which the Yehudi must attempt to climb. This is demonstrated for us by R. Pinchas ben Yair (Abodah Zarah 20b): Our highest duty is Torah and its study; this leads to carefulness which in turn leads to active striving; to guiltlessness; to purity; to holiness; to modesty; to the fear of sin; and finally, to Chassiduth. Accordingly, a Chassid is a Jew who gives himself in limitless love to the Divine Will and its realization and to whom the welfare of his fellowmen constitutes the highest source of satisfaction (see Hirsch, *Chorev*, Ch. 14). Thus, in the Talmudic era, the title "Chassid" was a mark of highest distinction and this is what it should be today.

The so-called Chassid who confines his Avodah to prayer does not deserve this title if this "Avodah of the heart" does not call him to the Avodah of life where he must practice and apply the precepts of Chassidus.

He does not deserve the title if he is particular regarding the Kashruth of his food but fails to apply the precepts of conscientiousness and honesty to his business dealings.

He does not deserve this title if his social life is not permeated by love and the deep interest in the welfare of his fellow men; if he does not shun quarreling, envy or even abominable lashon hora; if he does not earnestly strive to acquire those midoth for which Rav Hirsch (in his *Chorev*) calls so eloquently.

Certainly the mere exhibition of a certain type of clothing or the type of beard worn or even the adornment of long sideburns do not entitle the bearer to the title of honor - Chassid. These may be marks of distinction - but they must be earned to be deserved.⁹

Rav Breuer lived his life as a true Chassid, setting an example for thousands to follow. His uncompromising approach to *yashrus* in all his activities whether sacred or *chol* is something that every Jew should strive to emulate.

Rav Shimon Schwab (1908 – 1993)

There are those who will argue that TIDE has been accepted *de facto* by American Orthodoxy given that throughout the country there are yeshivas offering curricula that incorporate both *Limudei Kodesh* and *Limudei Chol*. However, in truth, these *mosdos* are not truly following the *derech* of Rav Hirsch. Most yeshivas simply append a secular

studies curriculum onto the religious subjects that are taught. Almost always what is taught and how it is taught is greatly influenced by what is presented in public schools with little or no thought to the interrelation between these two areas.

This should not to be confused with a genuine TIDE education in which *Limudei Kodesh* and *Limudei Chol* form one seamless entity. In a yeshiva giving such an education there would be no “separation” between religious subjects and secular subjects in that the secular subjects would be taught from a Torah perspective.

Rav Shimon Schwab addressed this issue when he wrote:

However, we are still very far removed from the ideal. And so are all other yeshivos and mesivtos which employ for their “English” department non-Jewish or irreligious Jewish teachers. If only the secular teacher would be endowed with a proper *hashkafah* and desire to be *mechanech* Jewish *neshamos* to become עובדי השם! Then he or she would not only manage to impart a masterful secular education with results which would impress the parents as well as the authorities, but every secular lesson could be turned into a genuine Jewish experience.

Rather than subjecting the students of a yeshivah to the schizophrenic jolt of switching over in the afternoon from *kodesh* to *chol*, and exposing them to the fascination of a foreign culture and non-Torah values, the ideal *Torah im Derech Eretz* teacher of the secular department would be capable of serving the whole menu of secular knowledge to the students as חולין על טהרת הקוש.

First of all, the secular teacher would impress his or her students with the concept that a first-class general education gives the student the wherewithal to make a *kiddush Hashem* in the outside world. Secondly, as a true *mechanech*, he or she would control the library, and all required reading of English literature would be discussed from a Torah viewpoint, clarifying where our Torah ideology differs from the philosophy of the author. The compositions written by the students should discuss the ideological Jewish interest contained in the literary masterpieces: what we can accept, and what we must reject.

The science teacher would point out, whenever there is an occasion, that all the universe is a grand revelation of the Creator. Fauna, flora, geography and the starry skies, the human and animal anatomy all are a veritable wonderland for the young mind to behold מה רבו מעשיך השם כולם בחכמה עשית. Whichever way science is exploring the universe, the teacher will show the students how all creatures reflect the limitless wisdom and glory of the בורא עולם, and how all the theories of evolution, etc., are mere theories, i.e., convenient ways to explain for a while the appearance of an inexplicable world to the unbelieving mind until a better answer presents itself.

History would be taught along with the description of the Jewish events which occurred in the particular period which happens to be the subject matter of the

studies. The teacher would not miss the opportunity to stress how the Supreme Being controls the great historic drama of mankind, which is enacted upon earth by temporary rulers and heroes enslaving the disenfranchised masses, all like figures on a chess board which are moved about according to the master plan of the מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא.

Social studies. What a wide field to teach all the required material against a framework of Jewish values and concepts! All in all, the students of the ideal *Torah im Derech Eretz* school would not only be trained to acquire a maximum of Torah knowledge, but they would also attain an exceptional degree of accomplishments in secular fields while enriching their hashkafah.

One reminiscence of my youth comes to mind. My saintly math teacher, עליו השלום, when he taught us how to describe $1/3$ in decimal points as $0.333\dots$, pointed out to us that, “Here we are face to face with Eternity, so we get a faint idea what the word לנצח really means.”

Of course, all this remains a dream unless we make a concerted effort to give a gifted *ben Torah* or *bas Torah*, who is endowed with pedagogical skills and a love for teaching, the opportunity to get the mandatory diploma in a teachers' seminary. Such a seminary would have separate divisions for men and women, and would offer courses by recognized *talmidei chachamim* in the art of utilizing *derech erez* in the spirit of Torah.

And another most important point remains. Once we are no longer dependent on Torah-less teachers of secular subjects, we will have to pay a dignified salary to our own breed of *limudei chol* instructors, commensurate with the vital role which they play in the lives of our youth.¹⁰

Imagine a Torah educational system throughout America modeled upon the TIDE ideas so eloquently enunciated above by Rav Schwab! Just think of the products that it would produce. Instead, what do we see today? An atmosphere in which some of our most committed youth have adopted the attitude that anything secular is a waste of time. Indeed, in some of the more right wing mesivthas there are boys who do not even earn a high school diploma! One can only wonder what will happen to these young men when they are faced with the challenge of supporting their families.

America desperately needs to develop and implement yeshiva curricula that will produce young people who while excelling in Torah knowledge will at the same time attain a solid secular education that is permeated with the hashkafah RSRH.

Conclusion

What has been written above is by no means exhaustive, but it does make one thing clear – the TIDE ideology of RSRH has contributed immeasurably to the vibrant Orthodox life that exists today in America. However, Torah life is never static - it either grows or,

Chas v'sholom, deteriorates. If American Orthodoxy wants to make sure that it remains vibrant, then it will do well to incorporate the ideology of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch in all its endeavors. Rav Hirsch laid out a time proven path for us. Let us continue to follow it!

¹ This book is available online through Google books at <http://tinyurl.com/6gclmr>.

² **The Unfailing Light: Memoirs of an American Rabbi** by Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman, the Rabbinical Council of America, New York, 1948.

³ **Memorial Journal** published by Congregation Zichron Ephraim, 3/31/1946. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/6c6w3d>

⁴ **The Unfailing Light**, pages 123 – 125.

⁵ <http://tinyurl.com/6gclmr> pages xi - xii

⁶ **Reb Shraga Feivel, the Architect of Torah in America** by Yonoson Rosenblum, Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 2001, page 38.

⁷ **Reb Shraga Feivel, the Architect of Torah in America** by Yonoson Rosenblum, Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 2001, pages 34 – 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, page 25.

⁹ **Rav Breuer, His Life and His Legacy** pages 227 – 228.

¹⁰ **The Fiftieth Anniversary of K'hal Adath Jeshurun**, Address delivered at 50th Anniversary celebration, June 5, 1988 (20 Sivan 5748) reprinted in **Selected Speeches, A Collection of Addresses and Essays on Hashkafah, Contemporary Issues and Jewish History**, pages 229 – 231.