

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part)

The Influence of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in America II

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In last month's column we outlined how Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman (1861-1945), who was one of foremost spokesmen for Orthodoxy in America during his lifetime, was influenced by the writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, ZT'L. In this article we discuss two other rabbinical personalities who were influenced by Rav Hirsch.

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.¹

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."²

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?³

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.⁴

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.

¹ **Reb Shraga Feivel, the Architect of Torah in America** by Yonoson Rosenblum, Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 2001, page 38.

² **Reb Shraga Feivel, the Architect of Torah in America** by Yonoson Rosenblum, Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 2001, pages 34 – 35.

³ *Ibid.*, page 25.

⁴ **Rav Breuer, His Life and His Legacy** pages 227 – 228.