

## **Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part)**

### **The Influence of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in America I**

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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 and the article to appear next month in this column 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**<sup>1</sup>. Rabbi Drachman's life story is an interesting one and is told in his autobiography **The Unfailing Light: Memoirs of an American Rabbi**.<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup>

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. Frankfort-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 convincedly 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 Frankfort. 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 Frankfort 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup> **The Unfailing Light**, pages 123 – 125.

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