

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808 – 1888)

Talk given at Flatbush Ladies' Group on 8/22/09

Excellent Biography of RSRH - "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Architect of Torah Judaism for the Modern World" by Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Klugman.

From <http://seforim.blogspot.com/2009/08/meir-hildesheimer-historical.html>

On the recent occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), Dr. Meir Hildesheimer of The Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch Cathedral for the Research of the Torah im Derekh Eretz Movement (Bar-Ilan University), delivered a paper entitled "Historical Perspectives on Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch," at the Jüdisches Museum in Frankfurt (7 June 2008).

I. Biographical sketch

Let's start with a brief biographical sketch. Rabbi Hirsch was born on June 20, 1808 (27th Sivan 5568) in Hamburg as first child of Raphael and Gella Hirsch. His parents named him Samson. Later he used to join his father's name to his own ("Samson Raphael Hirsch"), thus following a widespread custom of the period. Samson Raphael Hirsch had a close relationship with his parents whom he described as "the guardians of his childhood, the guides of his youth, and the companions of his mature years." His grandfather, Mendel Frankfurter, a great Talmudic scholar and serving as Rosh Beit Din of Altona, had a profound influence on his grandson, as had the charismatic Rabbi (Chacham) Isaac Bernays (1792-1849) who was appointed Rabbi of Hamburg when young Samson reached Bar-Mitzvah age, and Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger (1798-1871) whose Yeshiva in Mannheim Rabbi Hirsch attended. Conscious of the new legal requirements from rabbis, the latter advised him to study at an university. Rabbi Hirsch went to the University of Bonn where he befriended the slightly younger Abraham Geiger, leaving after studying for a year without earning a degree. Consecutively Hirsch served as rabbi of Oldenburg (1830-1841), Emden (1841-1847) and as Landesrabbiner of Moravia (1847-1851) before he accepted the call of a tiny religious association in Frankfurt called "Israelitische Religionsgesellschaft". From 1851 until his death in 1888 he resided in Frankfurt.

II. Personality

Rabbi Hirsch was a puzzle for his contemporaries and has remained so for later scholars seeking to unravel the complex components of his personality. Various people described Hirsch as extremely introverted, some of them even as "remote" and "cold". His disciple in the Nikolsburg yeshiva Armin Schnitzer (later rabbi of Komorn), for example, wrote in his memoirs: "His demeanor was serious and introverted. He was not talkative." Rabbi Hirsch's following self-portrait, which he wrote as a young man, shows clearly that he was conscious to that perception:

"So it always goes with me when my inner soul is too full. Then it does not spill over the sides as is common in other people – no, inside there can be stormy, turbulent waves but on the outside, with pressures and counter pressures – only silence. I am like a clock whose inner components interact with each other constantly but whose hands are missing, so that on the outside it appears completely still. Superficial people hold a feather to the nose and proclaim it lifeless, but those whose comprehension is deeper sense from the ticking that there is indeed life inside. A wise man knows to attach the missing hands to the face, so that he can read the time ..."

In the eyes of his fellow people – except those of his family and intimate friends who praised his warm and sympathetic heart – he looked not only cold and distant, but also very self-confident. Rabbi Hirsch's tone was rarely conciliatory, whatever his intentions. He used to express himself in such confident terms that made him appear arrogant. His strong commitment to rabbinic Judaism turned him into an active polemicist in the Orthodox camp.

III. Fighter against Reform

Rabbi Hirsch's father had been a merchant. He intended his firstborn son to go into his footsteps. But when growing up, Samson chose for himself another profession – that of a rabbi. According to his own

words, the religious controversies waged in his native town Hamburg were of primary importance in the shaping of his career.

At the end of 1817, when Samson Raphael Hirsch was nine years old, a substantial group of Jews in his native town Hamburg joined together to offer an alternative public expression of Judaism and established the "New Israelite Temple Association in Hamburg" and in 1818 erected a house of prayer which they named "Temple". The "Temple" was the first Jewish house of worship in German to use an organ on the Sabbath and a mixed choir in the services. The Temple Association also published a new prayer book, in which many prayers were in German, and various sections added and deleted at will. The Hamburg rabbinate as well as some of the leading rabbinic personalities issued a prohibition against praying in the Temple or using its prayer book. The Hirsch home was the venue of meetings and strategy sessions called to combat the threat posed to Torah Judaism by the Temple. Young Samson was apparently deeply affected by the gatherings in his parents' home, and in his later years recalled that it was this struggle which first gave him the impetus to pursue his calling in life.

Rabbi Hirsch's first writings, *The Nineteen Letters* and *Horeb* already represented the beginning of his active struggle against the Reformers. At this early stage, Hirsch tried to address the reformers and young people attracted by reform in conciliatory terms, offering a positive alternative to the Reformer's approach. The rebuff he received from the Reformers drove Rabbi Hirsch on to more open opposition. His literary energy in the years immediately following was mostly spent as an active polemicist in the Orthodox camp and emerged gradually its most uncompromising and militant defender.

IV. The orator and writer

Rabbi Hirsch used two main means for disseminating his ideas: the spoken and the written word. Once he said of himself: "All my life I have engaged in thinking more than in speaking, and in speaking more than in writing." But in truth his abilities in all these fields were really masterful. As an orator of rare talent he was seemingly influenced by his rabbi and teacher Isaac Bernays who was one of the most famous Jewish preachers of his time – that means, in the German language. Once asked by his uncle, why he preferred delivering his sermons in

German and not in Hebrew, he replied that law in East Friesland required him and the other rabbis to preach in the vernacular, and furthermore the Jewish masses were not proficient in the Holy language. In order to reach them one would have to speak their tongue. His first experience as an orator he had as a student at the University of Bonn, where he and Abraham Geiger established an "association for the cultivation of speech", intended for future rabbis in order to train them to deliver popular sermons.

Besides of speaking in German, a number of additional factors contributed to the profound impression Hirsch made on his audience: the carefully chosen expressions, the fast tempo, originality of thought and cogency of argument. He spoke without a text, occasionally keeping a small Bible in front of him. In his early years he would commit his speeches to writing before he delivered them. By the way, he spoke only in public settings, never at festive meals and private celebrations. His gifts as a speaker do much explain the great influence he had on his contemporaries. In Frankfurt, Rabbi Hirsch's weekly Sabbath addresses was the bond which unified the members of the IRG and left his listeners inspired to put the ideals of the Torah into practice. A visitor to his synagogue commented: "I do not understand one word that was said, but one had the impression that nothing less than the prophet Isaiah was standing up there."

Yet the influence of his writings were even greater for they reached a much greater audience and had also a significant impact on future generations until this very day. Rabbi Hirsch's gifted pen produced a rich and varied output: Halacha, commentaries on the Pentateuch, the Psalms and the Jewish prayer book, articles on philosophy, Jewish weltanschauung and education, polemics, letters and responses. All his writings, including his letters and halachic responses, were stamped with his unique style and characterized by a warmth of feeling and a sense of closeness to God. His skill at capturing the sanctity and sublime beauty of Jewish life remains unparalleled. His style is characterized by long sentences quite typical for this period. It shows his perfect command of German language and literature. Rabbi Hirsch employed his mastery of German prose and modern literary techniques in the cause of classic Judaism. In these times the literary sophistication of this Orthodox rabbi took everyone by surprise. (His Hebrew writings – mostly responses – are written in a very special style too.)

His writings had a particular influence on the younger generation, and continued to affect German Jewry in the decades after his passing. His commentary on the Pentateuch, for example, was found in every home of religious Jews in Germany.

V. Rabbi Hirsch's attitude to German culture

Rabbi Hirsch's attitude toward German was not the same as that of the other traditionalists of his time who were conversant in that language. To the latter, it was a language they knew and employed, but nevertheless a non-Jewish language. Rabbi Hirsch, on the other hand, had a deep emotional feeling for German and a strong attachment to German culture that also went far beyond the modest requirements set down by the conservative Maskilim who advocated practical subjects as necessitated by social and economic considerations. Rabbi Hirsch had been educated in a gymnasium focusing on humanistic studies. Influenced by the atmosphere in his family who encouraged secular studies, he appreciated the humanistic spirit which permeated the German cultural climate as well as the aesthetics. In the first of the Nineteen Letters, Rabbi Hirsch makes his imaginary protagonist remark: "How can anyone who is able to enjoy the beauties of a Virgil, a Tasso, a Shakespeare, who can follow the logical conclusions of a Leibnitz and Kant--how can such a one find pleasure in the Old Testament, so deficient in form and taste, and in the senseless writings of the Talmud?" Before Rabbi Hirsch, no Orthodox Jew had ever expressed such sentiments, even as a prelude to their rebuttal.

Rabbi Hirsch was especially influenced by Hegel and Schiller. In a speech given in his school he founded on the centenary of the birth of the latter, he claimed that the universal principles of Western culture embodied in Schiller's writings are Jewish values originating in the Torah.

Despite Rabbi Hirsch's liberalism in matters of culture and education, he was critical of literature that he considered offensive from a religious or moral standpoint. Thus, while reading "Der Salon" by Heine, he grew so highly incensed by its blasphemous expressions that he wanted to burn the book and compensate the library for its destruction.

Nevertheless, the fact that "Der Salon" was written by apostate did not prevent Rabbi Hirsch from reading it.

VII. Torah Im Derekh Eretz

But with all his love for German language and culture, Rabbi Hirsch was well aware of the danger of scientific knowledge leading one away from religion. He, therefore, strongly opposed the tendency to simply put Torah and Derekh Eretz side by side for this would implement that both are of equal value. According to Rabbi Hirsch, however, there is a higher and a lower sphere: The Torah is the essential, the standard by which all education is measured, while secular knowledge is secondary or supplementary to Torah. Or in Rabbi Hirsch's own words: "We are confident that there is only one truth and only one body of knowledge that can serve as the standard... Compared to it, all the other sciences are valid only provisionally".

The totality of Rabbi Hirsch's thinking and teaching has always been regarded as comprehended in the single phrase, Torah im Derekh Eretz. What does it stand for?

The concept of Torah im Derekh Eretz – universal and timeless – in the doctrine of Rabbi Hirsch has been defined as a synthesis of Judaism and modern culture, embracing art and literature to the extent compatible with Halacha (i.e. religious Jewish law). However, this synthesis is to be understood in a Hegelian sense: two contradictory forces contending with each other are reconciled and renewed on a higher level. In other words: Torah and life, Judaism and culture, do not just complement each other, but achieve complete identity. In his old age, Rabbi Hirsch devoted most of his teaching activity in his school to a subject which he called "The Spirit of the Jewish Theory of Laws". In those lessons he strove to implant in the hearts of his students a love of Torah and to inspire them with the consciousness of Torah im Derekh Eretz as the unifying principle of all the religious commandments, molding them into a uniform context of a harmonious Weltanschauung and life-pattern.

VIII. Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz (1886 – 1948) – Tenach, RSRH, Tanya

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.

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.”

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?

IX. The K’sav Sofer’s Assessment of RSRH

From page 102 of “Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Architect of Torah Judaism for the Modern World” by Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Klugman.

We also have the assessment of the K’sav Sofer, Rabbi Avrohom Shmuel Binyamin Sofer, Rabbi of Pressburg and leader of Hungarian Jewry. The K’sav Sofer first met Rabbi Hirsch in Vienna, not long after the latter assumed his post in Nikolsburg. On the first Shabbos after his return to Pressburg, a large crowd came to his home for Shalosh Seudos in order to hear his observations about the new Chief Rabbi. Their curiosity was understandable, since, as followers of the Chasam Sofer, the K’sav Sofer’s father, they harbored deep suspicions of anyone versed in secular studies, which they considered a potent danger to the Jewish people. The K’sav Sofer described his meeting with Rabbi Hirsch in the following terms:

“We spoke at length on Torah subjects with the new ‘Rosh Medinah’ and whatever topic we discussed, his reply showed that he had Shas and poskim on his fingertips. We, the rabbonim of Hungary, have to consider ourselves very fortunate that he holds us to be his superiors as

scholars, for if he were only aware of the extent of his own scholarship, we would have no rest from him.” [22]

[22] Philipp Fischer, In Seinen Spuren (Satoraljaujhely, 1922), p. 23, quoting an eyewitness. The last comment is a reference to Rabbi Hirsch's attitude towards secular studies. This story also appears in Jubiläumnummer, p. 45.

X. Meeting of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter and Rabbi S. R. Hirsch

An historic meeting between Rav Yisroel Salanter and Rav Shamshon Rafoel Hirsch took place in 1876 in Berlin. The meeting was arranged by Dr. H. Ehrmann, who was later rabbi in Baden, Switzerland. This meeting was described in 1906 in the *Israelit* by Rabbi Ehrmann. An English translation of this description appears in *The Nineteen Letters*, newly translated with a comprehensive commentary by Rabbi Joseph Elias, Feldheim Publishers, second edition, 1996.

Editor's Note: In the *Israelit*, on March 22, 1906, Rabbi Naftali Hertz Ehrmann published an account of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter's stay in Berlin about thirty years earlier and of his desire to meet Rabbi S. R. Hirsch. This account, quoted in *Tenuas Ha-Musar* (I, pp. 199-200), appeared in English in *The Light*, on 14 Nisan 5738, and is reprinted here by permission.

At about this time, Rav Shamshon (ben R'foel) Hirsch arrived in Berlin. He often came to Berlin at the beginning of the 1870's in order to prepare the way for the "Austrittsgesetz,"* which was finally passed in 1876. Three years older than Rav Yisroel, he was always under great strain and beset with many different types of work which made great demands on him at all hours of the day and night throughout his stays in Berlin. He sought out ministers, ministerial advisers, and influential representatives in every area and, through personal representation of the case, tried to win over the authoritative factions in favor of the law. In the evenings, his correspondence and writing awaited him, and this often kept him occupied until well into the night. Rav Yisroel had a great longing to become acquainted with Rav Hirsch and to hear his views on the measures for consolidation of traditional Jewry in Russia. He had great respect for the regenerator of German Jewry, and no one else was more deeply convinced of the

desperate need of Russian Jewry for such a personality. Questions of etiquette—regarding which of the two was to visit the other first—did not exist for Rav Yisroel. He asked me (as I was taking care of a few small duties for Rav Hirsch during his stay) to ask Rav Hirsch when would be the most convenient time to visit him.... When I saw how the time of this great man was so completely taken, up, I hardly had the courage to mention Rav Yisroel's wish, for I knew that its fulfillment would cost him more precious time... I therefore ventured to remark that the matter was not so urgent and the visit could easily be postponed for a few days. However, Rav Hirsch refused to hear of it, and asked me to ask Rav Yisroel to honor him with his visit the very next evening...

THE MEETING

More than 30 years have passed since the memorable evening. But the overwhelming impression of the meeting between these two great personalities has remained with me until this day. Their similarities and their differences; the overflowing wisdom of their thoughts, and the restrained modesty of their spoken words. The expression in Rav Hirsch's eyes from which his great, noble soul seemed to pour forth, and the flashing sparks which shot out from the gaze of Rav Yisroel and blazed around his great learned brow. All that and so much more—all of it remains in my memory as vividly as if it had just happened yesterday. How different were the two great men in speech and bearing, and in various other external aspects which draw the attention; and yet how similar and related were they in their thoughts and their spiritual life—in short, in everything which makes a man a Jew. Never have I sensed the binding and brotherly strength of the Torah l'tzoref es hab'riyos more deeply than in the moment when the two men reached out their hands to each other.

Rav Yisroel who, even in general conversation, never let a word leave his lips which had not been carefully considered from all sides, and who knew in addition how precious Rav Hirsch's time was—particularly then—came straight to the matter which lay on his heart more than on anyone else's. He explained the dangers which he believed threatened the future of Russian Jewry and asked Ray Hirsch for his views on how best to combat them. Rav Hirsch, in his modesty, thought that he was not familiar enough with Jewish life in Russia to be able to express an

authoritative opinion. Rav Yisroel however, he reasoned, must surely have thought about the problem a great deal himself, and he therefore asked him to first state his opinion. Rav Yisroel pointed out that the best means of preserving the younger generation for Jewry—to win back their respect—was through literature in the Russian language permeated with the true Jewish spirit. The exceedingly salutary results which would ensue from writings of this nature were to him quite indisputable.

The tragedy was, however, that those Russian Jews who were permeated with the truth of Judaism could not write Russian, and those who had acquired a secular education and had mastered the Russian language had broken with traditional Judaism. So that the production of such writings seemed unimaginable, Rav Hirsch suggested that if this was the case, then perhaps it might be proper to translate into Russian works written in the German language for this purpose. The translation, if necessary, could even be done by a non-Jew. This idea met with Rav Yisroel's full approval, and he asked Rav Hirsch to specify a few suitable works for this purpose. Rav Hirsch suggested the works of Salomon Plessner.

At this point, I allowed myself to enquire whether the writings of Rav Hirsch, himself, would not be especially qualified, particularly such a work as *The 19 Letters*. Rav Hirsch replied that it would naturally please him greatly if, through a translation of his writings, this great undertaking could be accomplished. Neither was fundamentally opposed to a Hebrew translation. I later heard this from their own mouths. But they believed that the great benefits which they hoped would result from the propagation of the spirit of these writings could be effected more easily and more permanently if the remedy was given in the same form as the disease had been transmitted. On the way home, Rav Yisroel asked me to procure for him that very evening a copy of *The 19 Letters* and to read through it with him so that he might be able to form an opinion for himself. That was, however, easier said than done. At that time, Rav Yisroel had hardly begun to read German, and so we read until deep into the night and for still another few days after that, until we finished the first letter. Another few weeks passed before we finally completed the book. Rav Yisroel summed up his opinion of it, “The book must not only be translated into Russian, but also into *loshon ha-kodesh*.”

XI. Death on 12/31/1888

XII. Conclusion

Rabbi Hirsch stood in the focus of the dramatic intellectual and spiritual transformations that characterized German Jewry in the 19th century. His personality as well as his many-sided and varied activities on the fields of Bible exegesis, philosophy and leadership shaped the face of Neo-orthodoxy to a very high degree and their influence was felt not only in his own generation but also later on until to this very day.

XIII. New translation of RSRH's commentary on the Chumash.