

Historical Perspectives on Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

by Meir Hildesheimer

1. Introduction

200 years ago, on June 20th, 1808 Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was born. And this year, 2008 – is also the 120th anniversary of Rabbi Hirsch's death; he died on December 31st, 1888. Rabbi Hirsch was an outstanding personality who is known as one of the founders of Neo-orthodoxy and the *Torah Im Derekh Eretz* philosophy. In orthodox Jewish circles he is remembered above all as an intrepid fighter against Reform Judaism and as an exemplary educator. And theologians, Jewish and Christian, appreciate his creative Bible commentary.

In my lecture I want to deal neither with Rabbi Hirsch's philosophy nor with his exegesis of the Holy Scriptures, as these issues are well known and much has been written about them. I want to concentrate on his deeds and achievements from a historical point of view and to shed light on some aspects of his multi-faceted personality.

2. 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.^[1] 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."^[2] 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-Mitzva 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.

3. 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 "remoted" 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 counterpressures – 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 ...".^[3]

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.

4. 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 prayerbook, 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 prayerbook. 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.

5. Secession

Rabbi Hirsch's uncompromising stance toward Reform was also the reason for his struggle for the secession of his small orthodox community in Frankfurt called *Israelitische Religionsgesellschaft* from the main Jewish community.

Neither in Oldenburg and Emden nor in Moravia did Rabbi Hirsch propagate a schism in the Jewish community. On the contrary, when leaving Nikolsburg, he admonished the Jews of Moravia in his farewell letter to stay united. On the other side, he left the Moravian *Landesrabbinat* because he had received an "appeal from Frankfurt to go to the aid of a tiny group, whose very founding is, in my view, given the goals I had all my life, the most promising development that has occurred in Jewry within the last several decades. For now for the first time a Jewish community has been

several decades. For now, for the first time, a Jewish community has been formed, which is openly and proudly dedicated to a most holy principle, in an area which has been successfully conquered by the forces of confusion (i. e. Reform). What can I do! This holy cause is the very one to which I have consecrated my life."

The reason for his different behavior in different places is obvious: in places where Reform gains influence over the Jewish community and its rites, a God fearing Jew must strive to disassociate himself from these "wicked people" and erect his own, Torah true community; in places not endangered by religious innovators taking over Jews should stay united. For the same reason Rabbi Hirsch sided the secession from orthodox Jewry in Hungary in 1868, when the newly constituted Jewish congress was dominated by reformers.

When the Prussian government in 1875 passed a law that enabled the erection of additional Jewish communities at a certain place (called the *Austrittsgesetz*), and the *Israelitische Religionsgesellschaft (IRG)* was entitled to form an independent community. The Jewish community of Frankfurt, then dominated by the reformers, did not want a significant number of their members, i. e. taxpayers, leaving, especially not the richer ones like Baron Willy Rothschild who was associated with the *Religionsgesellschaft*. So the community agreed to provide for all the needs of its orthodox members – a thing it did not do in the past – and exempting them from funding the religious activities of the reformers. A disagreement arose among the *IRG* members about accepting this generous offer or to secede and form an independent community. The rabbi of the *IRG*, Rabbi Hirsch, propagated the last option; he even issued an halachic statement that obliged the members to secede. But a significant number of them did not consent and succeeded in getting the halachic support of one of the most prominent orthodox rabbis in Germany at this time, Rabbi Seligmann Bär Bamberger of Würzburg. Rabbi Bamberger's involvement led to a sharp literary argument between the two rabbis, resulting in lasting mutual bitterness and a severe blow for Rabbi Hirsch personally: most of the *IRG* members did not leave the old community.

What motivated Rabbi Hirsch's fierce struggle for secession? In Rabbi Hirsch's opinion Israel is a nation and became a nation only through and for the Torah. Every Jewish community is a microcosm of the people as a whole, and just as Torah is the sole unifying force of the Jewish people, so must it also be the bond which unites each community. Every Jewish individual is not only required to take an active role in the community, but only by being part of a community can the individual fulfill his role as a Jew and find his true meaning and purpose in life. The community exists for the sake of the Torah. A community that does not act according to the Torah forfeits its right to exist. Naturally, it is forbidden to be a part of such community.

At the same time, Rabbi Hirsch felt there was no halachic imperative for Jewish communities to join together in a wider framework. It is not clear whether his later activities for uniting orthodox Judaism in an organization called *Freie Vereinigung für die Interessen des orthodoxen Judentums (Orthodox Union)* reflexes a change in his beliefs or were only for practical reasons.

6. 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."^[4] 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.^[5] 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, were found in every home of religious Jews in Germany.

7. 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 an apostate did not prevent Rabbi Hirsch from reading it.

8. 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".^[6]

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 Halakha (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.

9. Political attitudes and activities: the struggle for emancipation

On December 10, 1810 Hamburg, Samson Raphael Hirsch's native town, was annexed by revolutionary France. In 1814 the French were thrown out of the city, but the revolutionary vision of liberty, equality and fraternity remained part of the city's intellectual fabric. Gabriel Riesser, the famous Jewish lawyer and politician, was one of the leading advocates of Jewish emancipation and very much admired by Jewish youths. Rabbi Hirsch was also deeply impressed, despite Riesser's decidedly non-religious attitude.

As other rabbis, Rabbi Hirsch, too, recognized the enormous spiritual threat posed by Emancipation. Nonetheless, he viewed it as both a challenge and an opportunity to demonstrate that the Torah is no less applicable to the new open society than it was in the Chatterbox – but of course only on condition that

open society than it was in the Ghetto – but of course only on condition that the Jewish people would still be bound to the Torah's laws.

In his Moravian time, Rabbi Hirsch had a first-hand experience of the negative side effects that came together with emancipation:

- a. religious indifference;
- b. the loosening of the bond between the individual Jew with the community which was expressed by refraining from paying community taxes – an act that brought the Jewish communities on the brink of bankruptcy; and
- c. a substantial increase in anti-Semitism.

Seemingly this was the reason that from the time he went to Frankfurt, he did not engage in any more public advocacy to advance the cause of civil equality for Jews. In reevaluating the battle for equal rights, he wondered whether the all-out drive for emancipation at any price had not been grounds for the further deepening of the exile, and if it had not engendered renewed persecution and increased restrictions on Jews.^[7]

10. Jewish Nationalism and the Colonization of Eretz Israel

Having heard about Rabbi Hirsch's attitude towards emancipation as well as about his embrace of contemporary German culture, we now want to deal with his attitude towards Jewish nationalism and the colonization of Eretz Israel.

Rabbi Hirsch's opinion is probably expressed best in his reply to Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer's attempts to persuade him to support his activities concerning the colonization of Eretz Israel. Rabbi Kalischer of Thorn, was a forerunner of Jewish nationalism and the settlement of Eretz Israel. His philosophy connects Jewish nationalism, philanthropic activities and the strive for ultimate redemption. In his book *Derishat Ziyyon*, he explained his idea of the return to Eretz Israel and stated his theory that redemption would come in two stages: the natural one through return to Eretz Israel and working on the land, and the supernatural one which would follow. Furthermore, he preached that the first stage should involve a healthy economic foundation for the yishuv, a foundation which could only come about through the development of agriculture on a large scale. Accordingly, he recommended the establishment of an agricultural school for the younger generation.

In his reply, Rabbi Hirsch presented a clear and concise statement of his position concerning settlement of Eretz Israel as a goal in itself in the present era. In his opinion, according to the Sages of the Mishna and the Talmud, Jew's obligation is only to be devout with all the strength he is granted, and to look forward to the redemption each day. Israel possessed land and statehood only as instruments for translating the Torah into living reality; neither is it a goal in itself, nor is it instrumental in bringing the redemption. Furthermore, Jewish statesmen like Disraeli and Cremieux cannot be viewed as harbingers of redemption, for it is impossible to imagine that G-d would choose people who reject the Torah as his agents. Finally, Rabbi Hirsch agreed that it was important to support those Jews who currently lived in Eretz Israel – he himself supported efforts to improve their conditions! – but he expressed concern that mass settlement activity would bring in its wake increased risk of Sabbath desecration and the transgression of the agricultural commandments unique to Eretz Israel. And when Rabbi Kalischer's attempts to persuade him did not cease, Rabbi Hirsch wrote: "In my lowly opinion, there will not emerge from this any benefit for put Torah and Jewish tradition, and it is not fitting for God-fearing people to associate with the Alliance Israelite Universelle, whose leaders lack all commitment to Torah and to God's covenant." And in his letter to Rabbi Lipschitz, the secretary of Rabbi Yitchak Elchanan Spector of Kovno, he wrote that all the efforts to

RABBI YITZHAK ELCHANAN SPECTOR OF KOVNO, HE WROTE THAT ALL THE EFFORTS TO bring the redemption in this way is a grave sin. Here again we have Rabbi Hirsch's resentment from cooperation with non-orthodox Jews!

And now, let us see if - and how – Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's legacy, 120 years after his death, is still relevant. In order to do this we have to relate to Jacob Katz's essay "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch – ha-meymin ve'ha-masme'il" (turning to the right and the to the left) published in 1987. Katz wrote that Rabbi Hirsch took a decisive right, i.e. conservative, position in issues concerning Judaism and its beliefs (see his fight against Reform), but may be called "left" concerning culture, science and the attitude towards modern society. As nobody after him succeeded to unite these juxtaposite positions, this apparent rift in Hirsch's philosophy led to a selected adoption of his by different group of peoples.

The "right" components were readily adopted by ever growing parts of ultra-orthodox society, that means an uncompromizing struggle against everything that seemed a deviation from traditional Judaism as well as the abhorrence of a cooperation with non-orthodox people or groups, even if the goals are common. These circles will cite from Hirsch's writings the passages useful for their purposes, but ignore other passages speaking, for example, of the need to learn a trade or gain secular knowledge. It also seems that the ideological opposition to Zionism of Orthodoxy has its roots in Rabbi Hirsch's philosophy (see above), that means many years before the the Munkatcher and the Satmarer Rebbes.

Other orthodox circles, especially Modern Orthodoxy, embraced Rabbi Hirsch's openness to secular culture and science, combining "Torah" (i.e. rabbinic studies) with "Derekh Eretz". But unlike their ultra-orthodox counterparts, they do not refrain from cooperating with non-religious Jews. This is especially right of Religious Zionism which is also – as its name implies – Zionist.

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.

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[1] Rabbi Hirsch's genealogy was researched by Eduard Duckesz and published in: *Jahrbuch der Jüdisch-Literarischen Gesellschaft* (also printed separately).

[2] Dedication to *Horeb* (Altona 1836).

[3] Transcript (free rendition) by E.M. Klugman in the possession of the late Prof. Mordechai Breuer.

[4] *Nineteen Letters*, Letter 19.

[5] For example: Armin Schnitzer from his time in Nikolsburg as cited in English in Klugman, p. 324.

[6] Commentary to [Leviticus](#) 18, 4-5

[7] See Collected Writings II, p. 26.