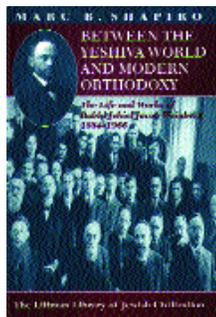


Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy

The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1884-1966

By Marc B. Shapiro



The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization
London, England, 1999

283 pages

Reviewed by Rabbi Berel Berkovits

This is a fascinating biography of an extraordinary man, who lived through, and left a remarkable imprint upon, tumultuous periods of Jewish history. Although I never met Rabbi Weinberg, I did learn something of him from my uncle, Rabbi Dr. Eliezer Berkovits, who was his *talmid muvhak* [close disciple]. And I well remember the powerful impact that his *Teshuvot Seridei Eish* [book of responsa] made upon me.

I was instantly captivated by its unusual brilliance and striking originality. Here was mastery of all rabbinic literature: Shas, Talmudic sources, Rambam, *Shulchan Aruch*, *poskim* responsa, and modern scholarly writings, distilled through traditionally penetrating Lithuanian analysis. The sources were meticulous, the presentation vibrant, the reasoning remorselessly logical, the style clear and vivid. The issues were real and relevant, reflecting the whole gamut of human experience. And above all,

Rabbi Berel Berkovits is a dayan of Great Britain's Federation of Synagogues.

they were discussed with a captivating freshness, as well as remarkable sensitivity and humanity.

Professor Shapiro gives us a complete and realistic biography. This is no popular hagiography, in which the subject is uniquely holy as a child, unusually precocious as a young man, and sublimely faithful and unblemished as an adult. Rabbi Weinberg is depicted as flesh and blood: a man who wrestled with the questions, uncertainties and dilemmas of mortal man.

The book takes us from Rabbi Weinberg's birth in 1884, through his early education and his years in the great Lithuanian *yeshivot* under the masters of learning and *Mussar*. It depicts an alleged early flirtation with *Haskalah* and modern Hebrew literature; a tragic and failed marriage; Rabbi Weinberg's rabbinate in Pilwiski, Lithuania; his move to Germany in 1914; and his early literary output.

Professor Shapiro describes Rabbi Weinberg's admission, at the age of 35, to the University of Berlin (armed with a recommendation by Albert Einstein), his studies, and simultaneous lectureship under Paul Kahle at the University of Giessen. From there we move to his appointment as lecturer, and subsequently rector, at the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin, whence he exercised a seminal influence over Talmudic and halachic studies in Germany.

We read of his naïvely optimistic attitude towards the Nazi regime; his stay in Warsaw at the beginning of the war; and his incarceration during the war in the Bavarian fortress of Wuelzburg. Professor Shapiro tells us of Rabbi Weinberg's liberation, and traumatic discovery of the extent of the Holocaust; his subsequent illness and depression; his retirement to Montreux, Switzerland, where he became one of the world's leading

poskim and the supreme halachic authority of Europe; and his post-war pessimism over the increasingly narrow direction of contemporary Orthodoxy.

All this information is set against a history of the intellectual trends of the time. There are fascinating glimpses of the Lithuanian yeshiva world, and the attraction of the *Haskalah* in its various manifestations. We read of the political and intellectual ferment of secular Zionism, the Mizrahi movement, and the establishment of Agudat Yisrael; the reduced status of the Lithuanian Rabbinate; and the clash between Eastern European and German Judaism.

Finally, Professor Shapiro contrasts the Hirschian synthesis of *Torah im Derech Eretz*, with its strongly separatist tendencies, against the broader Berlin school of Rabbis Eziel Hildesheimer and Dovid Hoffman (Weinberg's predecessors in the Seminary). In this context, he identifies various stages in Rabbi Weinberg's attitude towards the Hirschian philosophy: from initial opposition, to cautious understanding, and subsequent total endorsement.

This is, without doubt, an impressive book, reflecting meticulous study and careful research. There are, of course, the occasional careless lapses: Rabbi Weinberg, for example, could not have been "the oldest of five children"¹ if "it is known that [he] had at least two brothers and three sisters." Maimonides' Code (even as studied in the Lithuanian *yeshiva*) is not a "commentary on the Talmud."² There are also fanciful speculations as to possible "influences" upon Rabbi Weinberg.³

Somewhat disturbingly, Professor Shapiro seems very ready to cast doubts upon the accuracy of biographical information given by Rabbi Weinberg himself; or to suggest that he was "ambivalent" about "many of the issues" which he publicly defended.⁴ Likewise, he gra-

tuitously attributes personal motives to some of Rabbi Weinberg's negative assessments of others' scholarship,⁵ whilst making no mention of the generosity of spirit, and free praise, evidenced in many of his *teshuvot*.

But there is much information of considerable interest: for example, the discussions of the controversy at the turn of the century over the *Mussar* movement, the nature of the Jewish press, and religious life in Germany, as compared with Eastern Europe. And yet, I came away from the book with a distinct sense of unease. Some of the unease is due to specific reservations.

I am not sure, whatever the norms of secular society, that the Jewish public is entitled to read selective, and often incomplete, extracts of a great man's private correspondence. I, for one, had an uncomfortable feeling of unwarranted intrusion into the privacy of someone who is no longer here to speak for himself. And do we know the circumstances and context of such writings, so that we are in a position to judge whether they are accurate reflections of the writer's real viewpoints? In his introductory *Note on Sources*, Professor Shapiro admits that he has not had access to "some important collections, of letters written to leaders of the yeshiva world," but insists that they would not have led him to re-evaluate his conclusions. How can he be so sure? And is it fair, under these circumstances, to publish other collections of a different kind of correspondence? The book is also peppered with numerous uncomplimentary allegations about Rabbi Weinberg's personality, which conflict with everything else we know about him. This, too, prompts in the reader a feeling of unfairness.

But these criticisms are not the major cause of my unease. Principally, it is prompted by the feeling that despite its comprehensiveness, the book fails to depict the true Rabbi Weinberg. A biography of an *ish ha'eshkolot* such as Rabbi Weinberg must do more than give factual information; it must accurately assess and evaluate his personali-

ty, and his enduring contribution. And it is here that the book is both unconvincing and disappointing.

To some extent, these defects may be an inevitable result of the genre: an academic biography is, perhaps, not the appropriate medium in which to portray a *gadol ba'Torah*, and halachic greatness cannot be described by reference to historical-intellectual perspectives, or socio-economic trends.

More fundamentally, however, they seem to arise out of the inability of one who has not himself been totally immersed in the world of Torah learning to understand or appreciate that world, let alone to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. It is obvious that someone who has never studied physics, heard music, or read literature, cannot assess the importance of an Einstein, a Beethoven or a Shakespeare. So too, — indeed, more so, in view of the total human experience that Torah is to its adherents — anybody who has not experienced the joy of Torah study (so movingly described by Rabbi Weinberg⁷) cannot possibly understand the nature of a true Torah personality. He is looking — to borrow one of Professor Shapiro's own phrases — at "a self-sufficient world, which outsiders simply could not fathom."⁸ Professor Shapiro's failure to enter the experiential world that made Rabbi Weinberg who he was also accounts for his misplaced questioning of his status as "a critical scholar, in accordance with how this term is currently understood."⁹

Professor Shapiro's failure to depict the true Rabbi Weinberg breaks down, upon analysis, into three distinct areas. Firstly, there is the question of exactly who Rabbi Weinberg was: a harmonious whole, or a conflicted and convoluted personality; a man of spiritual nobility, or a petty and embittered figure. It is possible, of course, that these questions cannot be satisfied by simple answers. (Most people are complex, and great people are often greatly complex.)

To achieve a smooth synthesis of the disparate elements in Rabbi Weinberg's personality and background might be thought a well-nigh impossible task.

The impression one gets, however, from Professor Shapiro's book is that Rabbi Weinberg was essentially — and remained throughout his life — a split personality, pulled in conflicting directions and torn by dichotomies which he could never resolve. Hence, in Professor Shapiro's opinion, Rabbi Weinberg's decision to stay in Montreux instead of going to Israel was because he did not want to have to choose between "the academic world and the traditional yeshiva world,"¹⁰ to each of which he was attracted in equal measure. "Only in Montreux," says Professor Shapiro, "was [he] able to continue his commitment to *Torah im Derekh Eretz*, academic Jewish scholarship, and the rebuilding (sic) of the Land of Israel."

Professor Shapiro adduces scant evidence, however, for this somewhat unworthy suggestion. Certainly the brief quotations he cites from Rabbi Weinberg's correspondence¹¹ do not suffice to support his interpretation. As he himself notes, it is equally plausible that the decision was based on purely financial considerations. It may indeed be the case that Rabbi Weinberg had early periods of vacillation (as most people do) during his late teens or early twenties. But is there really sufficient evidence to suggest that he continued to agonize over his identity, or that he carried on suffering an existentialist crisis in his maturity, and indeed throughout his entire life, into old age?

Despite his undeniable breadth of vision and outlook, there is no doubt that Rabbi Weinberg saw himself, quintessentially, as a man of Torah, and that he is to be defined, primarily, as a *gaon* in learning, a *rosh yeshivah* and *posek*. The measure of the man is, perhaps, best gauged from the fact that he was still capable, shortly after the war, of writing a profound and comprehensive *teshuvah*, despite years of deprivation of all *seforim*.¹² We do not find a similar devotion to academic pursuits, nor indeed is there any evidence of such interests during his years in Montreux. He seemed to have dedicated his last

two decades almost exclusively to Torah and *halachah*, which as Professor Shapiro himself writes, “despite all other interests always remained the central focus of his life.”¹³

Secondly, there is the question of the nature of Rabbi Weinberg’s halachic output. With customary thoroughness, Professor Shapiro describes the context, and takes us through the contents of Rabbi Weinberg’s *teshuvot*. For example, he details how, following Hitler’s ban on *shechitah* in Germany, Rabbi Weinberg attempted to find a halachically acceptable method of stunning. Rabbi Weinberg’s monograph on this subject, reproduced in the first volume of *Seridei Eish* together with the replies of all the leading rabbinical figures of the time, provides a most fascinating insight into his halachic brilliance, as well as the stark dilemmas of that terrible period.

Professor Shapiro then surveys some of Rabbi Weinberg’s more original *teshuvot* (such as that on head-covering for married women), which demonstrate his unique blend of traditional halachic sources and general Semitic scholarship. Finally, he discusses Rabbi Weinberg’s attitude towards abortion, *agunot*, his approval of Bat Mitzvah celebrations, and condoning (under certain circumstances) of mixed youth groups and mixed singing of *zemirot*. Somewhat surprisingly, however, he relegates to a footnote what is probably Rabbi Weinberg’s most daring *teshuvah*, in which he suggests the theoretical possibility of effecting a *get* on behalf of a husband, without his express consent.¹⁴

Professor Shapiro, however, does more than merely describe the issues covered in Rabbi Weinberg’s *teshuvot*; he seeks to analyze and elucidate, through them, the nature and methodology of the halachic process itself. In so doing, however, he reaches conclusions which not only are unsupported by the evidence, but which radically misrepresent the halachic process as it ought to be, and which greatly demean — perhaps even defame — a man who was characterized by a passion for truth

(as noted by the Chazon Ish).

There are very few *poskim*, by way of example, who publicize a retraction of their own views because “the words of my friend are directed to the truth.”¹⁵ Not many, either, publish the words of their opponents, but “refrain from responding to them, out of concern of personal desire to win.”¹⁶

Despite this, however, Professor Shapiro feels free to state categorically, that, “Weinberg did not consider pros and cons objectively. Rather, he approached the discussion with a set goal, and went about finding halachic

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sources to justify it.”¹⁷ By way of example, he cites the issue of Bat Mitzvah celebrations. “It is clear,” he says, “that he did not give the issue an objective and detached treatment. He had made up his mind that the Bat Mitzvah ceremony was a positive manifestation, and he then set out to find the means of justifying it halachically.”¹⁸

“Clear,” one might ask, to whom?

To the objective and detached reader, or to academics who have made up their minds on the issue? What evidence does the professor have for these assertions, other than the simple observation that Rabbi Weinberg, at the end of a detailed halachic exposition, also refers to so-called “meta-halachic factors”?

That fact, alone, certainly does not support Professor Shapiro’s assertion that Rabbi Weinberg consciously adopted personal and subjective criteria, outside of *halachah* itself, to reach his conclusions. It merely shows that Rabbi Weinberg understood the nature of, and took seriously, the numerous facets of the problem with which he was dealing. The status and viewpoints of modern women, for example, are as much a part of the halachic factors to be considered as are the textual sources themselves. *Chazal* expressly allowed women to do *semichah* on their offerings, after all, “*kedei le’hafis da’atan shel nashim*” [in order to appease women’s sensitivities regarding this matter]. What is that if not a “meta-halachic” consideration?

Halachah, in its most profound sense, consists of the delicate balancing of different goals, varying strands of thought, and conflicting logical principles. There is almost no halachic decision, however minor, which does not require such a process (even though this may not always be apparent). What any *posek* worthy of the name does is to weigh up all the varying factors as honestly and objectively as possible, with a view to arriving at what he perceives to be the true halachic balance and conclusion.

It is, of course, true (as pointed out by no less a figure than the Ketzot Hachoshen in the introduction to his work) that *halachah* is, of necessity, distilled through the prism of the human intellect. Different *poskim* reach different conclusions on the same facts, and there is no doubt that their personality may play some part in the process. Exactly how the distillation passes through the prism is a subject that has long exercised writers on jurisprudence. In a certain sense, indeed, there is no such thing,

even in Torah, as “absolute” truth: the Rambam, after all, “ruled” against the view of the Almighty Himself (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tumat Tavnat* 2:9).

But that is very far indeed from saying that a *posek* can simply form a subjective opinion as to what is a desirable outcome, and then use halachic sources to justify his pre-determined conclusion. By no stretch of the imagination can it justify the view of Rabbi Emanuel Rackman — whom Professor Shapiro cites in this context — that “in the deepest strata of halachic thinking, logical judgement is preceded by value judgement, and intuitive insight gives impetus to the logic of argument.”¹⁹ To attribute such a view to Rabbi Weinberg is to ascribe to a man of truth a process which is essentially illegitimate; nor is it supported, upon proper analysis, by any of the other examples cited by the author.

Professor Shapiro is, of course, correct in saying (as I know from cases in my own experience) that a *posek* “devotes all his energy to finding a halachic way” to free an *agunah* or *mamzer*. But it certainly does not follow therefrom that he is “not objective” when dealing with such issues. If his lenient approach is based on making proper use of appropriate halachic rules which direct him to be lenient, he is certainly applying *halachah* objectively. If, however, his personal desire to help the unfortunate allows him to ignore or misapply relevant halachic criteria, he is misrepresenting and distorting the halachic procedure.

Professor Shapiro evidently believes, as indicated by the very title of his book and by its *Afterword*, that Rabbi Weinberg either bridged, or alternatively was ineluctably pulled between, the two worlds of the Lithuanian yeshivah and of Modern Orthodoxy. Once again, however, this conclusion is not supported by the evidence; at best, it remains a subjective and dubious proposition.

In the first place, Professor Shapiro does not make it entirely clear what he means by Modern Orthodoxy. If it means dedicating one’s life to a profound study of Torah, with a view to mastering it in its

breadth and depth, and applying it to contemporary issues, or the willingness of a *posek* to understand and address important issues of contemporary society then, yes, Rabbi Weinberg undoubtedly fits the definition. But so do, in their own ways, many other *poskim* (Rav Moshe Feinstein, for example, or Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach), whom one would certainly not describe as Modern Orthodox.

If it means a favorable appraisal of the State of Israel; openness to secular studies; and a positive approach towards emancipation of women, the question arises as to the degree to

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which Rabbi Weinberg identified with these criteria. Were they such significant elements in his outlook, to the exclusion of many others, that they aptly place him in the Modern Orthodox world?

Professor Shapiro, moreover, sees Rabbi Weinberg not simply as one who belongs to the Modern Orthodox “camp,” but as “a guiding light” of the

movement. This assertion is certainly questionable, if it is intended to define the rabbi’s *Weltanschauung*. It may indeed be that the Modern Orthodox movement looks to Rabbi Weinberg as a role model; but does that equate to Rabbi Weinberg seeing himself as a leader of the movement?

It seems to me, moreover, that there is a fundamental question mark over Professor Shapiro’s attempt to fit his subject into certain categories of thought, specific shades of Orthodoxy or conventional parameters. Great men, almost by definition, do not fit neatly; they do not easily wear religious or political labels. They are distinguished precisely because they transcend the usual boundaries. By seeking to fit them into a given mold, we reduce and diminish them.

A true assessment of the diverse and multi-faceted person who was Rabbi Weinberg requires a kind of suspension of disbelief. Here was, at one and the same time, a traditional Lithuanian *gaon*, with a German university education; a master of practical *halachah*, and yet a man who was familiar with scholarly examination of texts. He was a Hirschian thinker, who could also plumb the introspective depths of *Mussar*; a Westernized rabbi, who yet appreciated the warmth of Polish *Chassidut*.

He was essentially an intellectual, but had the turbulent soul of a poet; a sensitive and caring man, who could yet be highly critical of lesser mortals. Although fundamentally conservative, he was yet in many ways radical; uniquely eclectic, and yet highly respected by all the leading and traditional rabbis and halachic scholars. Like many *gedolim* of yesteryear, he could maintain friendships and correspondence with those who were far from his ideology. And without in any way compromising his burning love of Torah — perhaps precisely because of it — and because of his deep awareness of its essential essence, and his passion for its sense of social justice, he could express concern about aspects of *halachah* which appear to contradict its underlying humanism. This is a reflection of refinement of character,

rather than of doubts about the truth of *halachah*.

A person who is whole cannot abide moral contradictions, or tolerate conflicting standards of ethical norms. That there is nothing essentially new or radical in such a viewpoint is evidenced by the Rambam's trenchant comments on the undesirable consequences of unethical behavior towards non-Jews (*Peirush haMishnah, Keilim* 12:7). Similar considerations apply to Rabbi Weinberg's strong comments about undesirable Jewish traits, which Professor Shapiro interprets as "bitterness," "eternally suspicious," and even "almost anti-Semitic."²⁰ A truer reading would see them as expressions of distress by a spiritually sensitive person.

It is extremely doubtful, in short, whether one can properly define Rabbi Weinberg, a man who throughout his life retained independence in thought and outlook. We come back to where we started. Rabbi Weinberg was a fascinating individual, living in an era of great change. He was a man of unusual greatness of mind and spirit, who defies neat analysis or conventional categorization. A *gadol ba'Torah* in the classic mold, he was at the same time a person of many other facets.

Perhaps the greatest tribute we can pay him is to recognize and acknowledge that here was somebody from whom we can all learn, irrespective of where we stand in the Jewish religious kaleidoscope. He challenges us to reach for excellence, both as human beings and as Torah Jews, and I think he would have been content in the knowledge that that was his legacy.

Notes

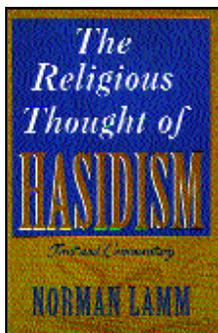
- ¹ p. 3
- ² p. 11
- ³ For example, G. K. Chesterton: pp.74-75; 207
- ⁴ p. 37
- ⁵ n. 17 on p. 20; n. 50 on p. 183
- ⁶ *Seridei Eish* 3:94
- ⁷ cited at pp. 8-10 and 27-30
- ⁸ p. 30
- ⁹ p. 145.
- ¹⁰ p. 175
- ¹¹ n. 16 on p. 176
- ¹² *Seridei Eish* 2:31

- ¹³ p. 173
- ¹⁴ n. 69 on p.188
- ¹⁵ *Seridei Eish* 2, p.361
- ¹⁶ *ibid*, 2, p.191
- ¹⁷ p. 215
- ¹⁸ p. 212
- ¹⁹ p. 212
- ²⁰ n.51 on p. 183

The Religious Thought of Hasidism

Text and Commentary

By Norman Lamm



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711 pages

Reviewed by Professor Yebuda Gellman

This is a monumental work for the study of Hasidism. It is written by Rabbi Norman Lamm, whose scholarly accomplishments are well known, with the assistance of Alan Brill, an outstanding scholar of Hasidism, and Shalom Carmy, one of Orthodoxy's most prominent thinkers. The work presents us with a detailed review of Hasidic thought, with its major focus on early Hasidism.

Here we have close to 400 English translations of selections, most of them substantial, from the writings of the great Hasidic teachers. The translations consist of 18 chapters, covering a wide panoply of topics, including: God, the soul, faith, love and fear,

Dr. Gellman is Professor of Philosophy at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Beer Sheva, Israel.

deveikut, worship and service of God, the *tzaddik*, repentance, joy and dejection, evil and suffering, exile and redemption, and women. Each section in turn reveals a richness of sub-topics. Chapters come with an introduction, extensive explanatory notes, and often with additional notes at the end. Some chapters include a brief Hasidic story that brings home the existential mood behind the sometimes abstract, soaring theological tone of the selections. The book also includes short biographies of the selected authors, a select bibliography of primary and secondary sources, a glossary, and detailed indices. A general introduction sets the academic tone of the work, with a learned discussion of recent academic scholarship in Hasidism. The explanatory notes show an impressive erudition with regard to recent scholarship, making this work an important contribution to the academic study of Hasidism.

The Hasidim tell a story that once the Baal-Shem Tov *davened Minchah* outdoors close to some sacks of grain. As the Baal-Shem Tov prayed, the grain in the sacks began to jump and dance in rhythm with his prayers. From this story, I learn three lessons: the first is that if we are to understand Hasidism, we must be willing to get up close to it. The second is that when we get up close, we must be willing to listen to it intently. Thirdly, if we are to really understand Hasidism, we must be prepared to "dance" with it. I propose to assess this work by how well it does in these three categories.

This book comes up close to Hasidism as no anthology has ever done (in any language). It is hard to over-estimate the importance of this work for the study of Hasidism. Hasidism as a spiritual teaching has been in vogue in recent decades among non-Orthodox Jews possessed of a spiritual bent, as well as by spiritual non-Jews. In addition, its teachings have gained ascendancy in some non-Hasidic Orthodox circles, especially among the younger folk. Unfortunately, the interest in Hasidism

is too often disengaged from serious, broad textual study. Orthodox neo-Hasidic groupings tend to focus narrowly on a small group of “in” books, such as the *Sefer haTanya* the writings of Reb Tzadok Hakohen; the Sfat Emet; and Reb Nachman of Breslav. The rich historical development of Hasidism, including the writings of some of its greatest teachers, including the Baal-Shem Tov himself, the Maggid of Mezeritch, and the Hozeh of Lublin, are ignored or given only a passing nod. The result tends to reinforce a skewed, partial, and somewhat superficial understanding of what Hasidism really was and is.

Add to this the lamentable distortion of Hasidism for a wide English-speaking audience. The detailed nuances of Hasidic thinking and its continuity with the past are almost totally ignored in popularizations, for the sake of a watered-down religious orientation that shades off into religious anarchy. The greatest popularizing influence on English-speaking culture has been Martin Buber, who for 50 years or so wrote about Hasidism in essays, stories and collections of aphorisms. In his writings, Buber reduced Hasidism to a dogma-less, general orientation of a person to the world and to God in an “I-Thou” relation. Buber played lightly with Hasidic texts, tending to make them over in the “dialogical” I-Thou philosophy he espoused.¹ He has also been accused of doctoring Hasidic stories to fit them to his preconceived picture.² Thus, the English-speaking world has been presented with a version of Hasidism lacking in the rich differences between Masters, devoid of the theological depths of its thinkers, and effectively censored from its traditional Jewish piety. Gone from Buber’s portrayal of the Hasidim is their prominent adherence to *halachah* and their continuity with the past. Not surprisingly, Buber’s rendition of Hasidism had a strong influence on liberal Protestant Christian thinkers and has served as a religious inspiration for some Jews not committed to tradition.

In light of this background, we should appreciate the importance of this collection of English translations (with introductions and commentary) of selections from the works of the greatest of the Hasidic teachers. Here we have a compendious presentation of what the Hasidim actually thought, including the details of their views on a wide-range of theological and religious topics. The work stands as a much-needed corrective to what has been available until now. At times, the work

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makes this explicit by citing Buber’s views, juxtaposing them with translated texts. I refer the reader especially to the section on *deveikut*. A reader with no background in Hasidism can find in this anthology a strong survey of Hasidic thought as it was.

As for willingness to listen closely to the Hasidim, when up close, this book gets high marks. The general introduction declares that, “For Jewish thought to become alive to us, it is necessary to think ourselves back into contemporaneity with the past Sages.” That “thinking ourselves back” is well executed in this work. The general

introduction canvasses the historical roots of Hasidism, and the introduction, notes, and endnotes display an investment of effort revealing many years of close, patient listening by its author and contributors.

Together with this high praise, I must say that I found the section on women to be particularly unsuccessful. First, there is little justification for including a chapter on women in a compendium of Hasidic thought. Generally, the Hasidim did not expend much energy on this topic. Neither did they have much to say that was unique or emanating out of a specifically Hasidic ethos. Coming as the last section of the book, the section on women comes across as tacked on (following directly upon the sections, “Life and Death,” and “Exile and Redemption”), an ad-hoc addition to a work surveying the grand topics about which the Hasidim had much to say. Undoubtedly, the commendable motivation for this was to acknowledge the importance of the topic of women in contemporary religious discussion. Alas, the good intentions fall somewhat flat.

Secondly, the selections in the section on women fail to reflect what the section-introduction attributes to them. The introduction claims to point to selections allegedly advancing an “autonomous realm” for women or the idea of an “autonomous woman.” The relevant readings, however, do not bear out this claim to autonomy. Another example of an over-claim here is that Reb Tzadok Hakohen of Lublin “associated” women with “transgressions for the sake of Heaven.” The short selection from Reb Tzadok does indeed mention only women, including Yael and Esther, as “holy transgressors.” However, in doing so, Reb Tzadok simply follows the examples cited by the Talmud, and by the subsequent discussion of the *rishonim*, in connection with *aveirah lishmah*. A reading of Reb Tzadok’s work from which the selections are drawn would have brought the reader’s attention to men whom he counts as having sinned for the sake of Heaven, as well as the women cited.

Finally, the section on women has the scent of apologetics. We are treated to selections on Sarah as a great prophet, to Miriam as a source of greatness, and so on. At the same time, the author omits the most extensive reference to women in early Hasidic literature, in the writings of Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye. The *Toildo* expands on the Aristotelian notion, found later in Rambam and Maharal (as the introduction to this section notes), that men are “form” and women “matter.” Form rules matter. Just so, men rule women. Though the introduction mentions this theme, one would not guess from the selections the far greater weight given in Hasidic thought to this idea and to the correlative lack of women’s autonomy than to any other view.

Is this work prepared to dance with the Hasidim, if need be? I am not sure. My problem is this: while the author and contributors show sensitivity to and love for the material, they may not adequately report the rhythms of Hasidism *as a movement*. Hasidism as a movement has a certain rhythm: a back and forth motion, swaying toward daring, radical teachings and then back to moderation and consolidation. The back and forth movement characterizes some chronological shifts as well as differences between thinkers of one period. To capture this dialectic rhythm of the movement, this anthology would have had to give serious space to the more daring and radical movements of the Hasidic “dance.” Instead, a golden thread runs throughout the book of presenting Hasidism in a relatively monochromic, conservative tone. The laudable goal of showing Hasidic continuity with the tradition apparently has caused the author to lean too far in that direction.

The pull to a conservative rendition of Hasidism is stated at several places in the book. Although the work does readily acknowledge Hasidic innovations with respect to the valuation and times of prayer, there is a systematic attempt to play down the innovative thinking of the Baal-Shem Tov and early Hasidism in the name

of “Jewish continuity.” We read that, in general, the Hasidim “sang the same lyrics to a *slightly* new tune” (p. 4, my emphasis), and that, “The basic themes of life and death...are common to Hasidism and ‘perennial’ Jewish literature,” the Hasidim adding only “zest and profundity” to old themes (p. 490). The repeated emphasis on moderation goes too far.

Acknowledging the possible charge that the book “makes too much of the continuities between Hasidism and its ‘Orthodox’ opponents,” the introduc-

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tion replies defensively that the anthology confines the selections almost entirely to early Hasidism, when Hasidism was (allegedly) at its most radical. Thus if the selections of the anthology seem moderate rather than radical, that just shows how moderate a movement Hasidism really was!

This defense notwithstanding, the author omits, tucks away, or refers but obliquely to some of the more radical lines of Hasidic thought. As a result, we get a somewhat unbalanced view of the movement overall. As an academic work, this anthology is obligated to represent the fullest spectrum of

Hasidic thought in all of its historical truth, regardless of the author’s beliefs in the matter. On the other hand, as the work of an Orthodox rabbi and community leader, the author might well have wished to de-emphasize certain topics. The tension between “full disclosure” and ideological selection is built in to an academic work on Hasidism that seeks to be responsible to its religious base and institutional grounding. While I can sympathize with the predicament, history has taught us, I believe, that fuller disclosure is best in the long run.

In keeping with that assessment, I suggest three topics, of a more radical import, the anthology might well have treated more fully. The notion of contemplative prayer is not adequately treated. Especially missed is a selection from one of the great classics of Hasidic literature, the *Kuntres haHitpa’alut* of the “Middle Rebbe” of Habad, Rav Dov Baer. A second topic is *aveirah lishmah*, transgression for the sake of Heaven. In this anthology, there is scant attention to this topic. The only explicit mention of this entire theme is in a 22-line selection from *Takanat Hashavim*, buried, as I have noted already, in the last section of the book, on women. (There is also an oblique reference to it in a selection from Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye about the “descent of the *tzaddik*.”) A third topic is the problem of free will in early Hasidism. How to provide room for an autonomous subject in the overpowering Divine presence? Some solutions tend to the unusual. While the issue of free will does get mention in some endnotes, the issue does not appear as a topic that concerned the Hasidim. In this anthology, the reader gets little clue of the richness of these three topics in Hasidic thought.

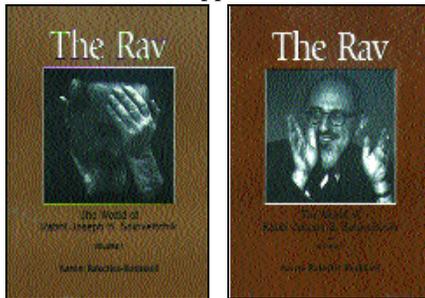
I do not wish to present Hasidism as a “radical” movement. Doing so would apply the opposite tilt to the one I find in this work. Rather, my concern is to urge more of an appreciation of the inner rhythms of Hasidim, moving between the more radical and the more sober, without which we might not be

prepared to “dance” with the Hasidim.

Whoever wishes to get up close to the Hasidim, listen to them attentively, and get something of the inner rhythm of this movement, would do well to study this anthology with care.

Notes

1. For more on this, see J. Gellman, “Buber’s Blunder: Buber’s Replies to Scholem and Schatz – Uffenheimer” *Modern Judaism* 20, 2000, 20–40.
2. This has been argued by Steven Katz in “Martin Buber’s Misuse of Hasidic Sources,” in his *Post Holocaust Dialogues* (New York, 1983), pp. 52–93.



The Rav

The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

By Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff

Ktav Publishing House, Inc.

Hoboken, N.J., 1999

Two volumes, 596 pages

Reviewed by Rabbi Philip Weinberger

The appearance of Rabbi Dr. Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff’s *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* focused my attention on a paradox that confronts me every time a new book or article appears about the saintly Rabbi Soloveitchik, זצ”ל. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the Rav was one of the most outstanding rabbinic titans, teaching and leading the Jewish people. A master of communication, orally and in print, he left behind multitudes of devoted students and admirers who still hang on his every word. Yet the Rav seems to have left a legacy that is unclear and misunderstood, despite his gifted powers of communication.

There are many critical questions that were left unsettled, relating to *halachah* as well as religious outlook and attitude. Among the numerous

questions, debated passionately by those who represent themselves as knowing the Rav’s authentic thinking, are: What was the Rav’s view toward secular education; *Torah u’Madda* new religious practices by women; reciting *Hallel* on Yom HaAtzma’ut; and Religious Zionism?

Because of this alleged unclarity with regard to the Rav’s positions, there is a raging battle among his followers as to who may legitimately and authentically present the Rav’s opinions, thoughts, ideas and teachings. Approximately a year after the passing of the Rav, Rabbi Hershel Schachter, a distinguished and highly respected *rosh yeshiva* and *rosh kollel* at Yeshiva University, wrote a masterful and comprehensive intellectual biography of the Rav entitled *Nefesh Harav*. The book records hundreds of *pesakim*, teachings and attitudes of the Rav. It also portrays the Rav as a traditional *gadol* with enormous gifts of *chiddush* (creative and innovative insights in Torah), originality and virtuosity. Subsequently, Professor Lawrence Kaplan distributed a paper stating that Rabbi Schachter’s *Nefesh Harav* “tends to flatten the Rav’s profile.” On that occasion, and in other forums since, the question continuously arose: Who has the right to speak on the Rav’s behalf?

There are, of course, many other examples of this continuing debate. What is striking however is not only the substance of the debate, but rather the fact that the Rav left so much room for the battle to proceed. How could so careful a teacher, who could literally spend hours at a time in *shiurim* defining with precision the meaning of a particular word or phrase, be misunderstood on so many basic and critical issues?

Upon reflection, however, it is not all that surprising that this tragedy of miscommunication has occurred after the Rav’s passing. The Rav himself,

despite his best efforts, was misunderstood and misquoted in his lifetime by able people who presumably had the best of intentions. In fact, one passionate and beautiful essay written by the Rav addressed misunderstandings by contemporary journalists. In an essay entitled *Al Ahavat Hatorah Veguelat Hanefesh* printed in *B’sod Hayachid V’hayachad*, the Rav responds to an article printed in *Hadoar* written by Moshe Meishlish. Mr. Meishlish’s criticism of the Rav was based upon statements attributed to him by a journalist named Weisel who had interviewed the Rav. In his essay, the Rav states that although the journalist in question was distinguished and well intentioned, the views presented were the journalist’s misunderstanding of the Rav’s statements. The Rav then proceeded to present, and explain with precision, his ideas on the State of Israel, *chinuch*, the relationship between the intellectual and emotional aspects of *limud hatorah* and the element of suffering in the religious experience, among other subjects.

The Rav illustrates that he was misunderstood by journalists because of their lack of familiarity with the Rav’s precise use of language and terminology, and because the Rav’s thoughts, ideas and speech were extraordinarily nuanced, delicate, subtle and sophisticated. Is it surprising that after the Rav’s passing there is disagreement over his positions?

I am pleased to note that Rabbi Rakeffet’s book avoids, for the most part, recasting the Rav’s positions, because it is largely a presentation of selections of the Rav’s own words — not the reworking by the author of the Rav’s statements. The book presents a brief biography of the Rav and then presents insights, traditions, reflections, stories and observations from the Rav and about the Rav in more than 20 areas of interest. A partial list of subjects includes: Lithuanian lore; Chassidism; the *Volozhin* Yeshiva; rabbinic ancestors; Jewish life in Brisk, Khaslavichy, and Pruzhana; reflections on American Jewry; Zionism; the

Rabbi Weinberger is rabbi of the Young Israel of Teaneck (N.J.). He was a student of Rav Soloveitchik.

Holocaust; teaching; and Yeshiva University. The book has the benefit of the talented editing of Rabbi Joseph Epstein and contains enchanting and inspiring photographs of the Rav taken and collected over a 50-year period by Rabbi Irwin Albert.

The Rav concentrated the majority of his time, effort and talent on learning and analyzing the Talmud and its commentaries. In his lifetime, he presented his teachings in his thousands of *shiurim* and in a very limited number of printed *chiddushei Torah*. Many more of them now appear in print: some of his manuscripts have been published posthumously and many of his *talmidim* have begun printing the Rav's *chiddushim* on various tractates of the Talmud and Rambam. In addition, the Rav also produced highly significant works on *hashkafah* and Jewish philosophy that are also available in print. Those who diligently study these works are richly rewarded.

Over a period of more than 40 years, the Rav embellished and flavored his lectures and writings with fascinating stories and brilliant insights about Torah, Torah personalities, Jewish life, Israel, Jewish history and destiny. These inspiring and captivating insights are now gathered together in Rabbi Rakeffet's book.

The author makes no pretense that his book presents the Rav's penetrating Talmudic analysis and insight (*lomdut*), nor does he purport to synthesize or analyze the Rav's masterful philosophical works and creations. Rather, the volume offers classified insights and stories presented by the Rav over decades. The major contribution of the work lies in making available a systematic arrangement of many of the Rav's ideas, insights and stories to the scholarly and non-scholarly Jewish world. Rabbi Rakeffet culled this material from hundreds of hours of painstaking research and listening, transcribing and often translating hundreds of the Rav's lectures and *shiurim* as well as through interviewing students, contemporaries, family members and friends of the Rav.

If not for this considerable effort, much of the Rav's precious insights would have been lost to us.

However, the book falls short, even on its own terms, in its failure to more deeply explore the complexity and nuances of the Rav's thoughts and insights that were influenced by the religious, existential, and personal tensions that the Rav experienced and talked about. Similarly, the book does not treat much of the controversy that sometimes surrounded the Rav in a meaningful way. This work would have been enhanced had it explored and presented the Rav's responses to these tensions and controversies. It would then have provided an even deeper appreciation of the Rav as a towering religious personality.

It is interesting to note that in a cassette lecture about the Rav presented by Rabbi Rakeffet, and distributed by the Orthodox Union,* as well as in the book, Rabbi Rakeffet repeatedly describes the Rav as standing 6 feet, 2 inches tall. The Rav's actual height was much less. In a document "American Naturalization Declaration of Intention" signed by the Rav, his height is given as 5 feet, 8 inches.** It seems that Rabbi Rakeffet sees the Rav, in his mind's eye, as larger than life (as many *talmidim* see their own *rebbe*.) Rabbi Rakeffet's larger than life view influences not only his physical perception of the Rav, but permeates his view throughout the Rav's biography.

For example, in the biographical section, there is no acknowledgement of how the Rav was inappropriately treated and often marginalized in the yeshivah universe because of his embracing secular studies and Religious Zionism (albeit in a disciplined and highly nuanced manner) and for his refusal to walk in step with and embrace every policy or idea maintained by other *rashei yeshivah*.

Because of the reluctance to acknowledge this aspect of the Rav's life, some valuable material, offering highly interesting insights into the Rav's personality

and thought was omitted. For example, in a letter to Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Shragai, reprinted in *B'ayot Actualiot le-Ohr ha-Halachah*, the Rav responds to those in Israel questioning the level of his commitment to the Mizrahi party. The Rav tells Rabbi Shragai that he is hurt by these accusations. Moreover, the Rav writes:

If I were to judge this matter (which party to associate with) based on pragmatic or political considerations or from considerations of convenience, devoid of meaning, I would join the zealots who ask nothing of their members (not diligence in Torah study, not pure fear of Heaven, nor spending money on tzedakah, nor excessive care with regard to mitzvot) except to besmirch our movement. I could clothe myself with the mantle of atzaddik and "fighter of the Lord's battles." I did not do this (and, God willing, will not do this [translation my own]).

This and other letters to Rabbi Shragai show clearly what a man of principle the Rav was. He refused to make critical decisions based on petty considerations, notwithstanding the political consequences that he would suffer. There are, undoubtedly, other valuable sources omitted by Rabbi Rakeffet in order to avoid difficult issues. Notwithstanding this flaw, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* makes a major contribution to the continuing literature about the Rav and his teachings. Scholars and laymen alike are indebted to Rabbi Rakeffet for his vital work. **JA**

* For information, contact the OU at 212-613-8226, levenej@ou.org or through the web site, www.ou.org.

** A copy of this document is printed in *Larger Than Life*, Volume II by Rabbi Shimon Deutsch, page 281.