

Interviews

Judaism, Culture and the Gentile World: A Conversation with Rabbi Mayer Schiller

Volume 3 , Issue 5 (April, 1990 | Nisan, 5750)



Rabbi Mayer Schiller is a Maggid Shiur (Talmudic lecturer) at Yeshiva University High School in Washington Heights. Born in 1951 to non-observant parents in Brooklyn he became “*frum*” at the time of his Bar Mitvah due to his own “readings and reflections” as well as having had, in his own words, the “privilege of meeting the Skverer Rebbe z”t”l” (Rabbi Jacob Joseph Twersky) whose “saintliness and love forever altered” his life. After attending the Breuer's Yeshiva and Mesivta Beth Shraga in Monsey, he spent ten years at the Yeshiva and Kollel of New Square.

Since 1977 he has “said a shiur” in several Modern Orthodox Yeshiva High Schools. A man of many interests Rabbi Schiller has authored books and articles on everything from religious and political thought to sports and popular culture. He lectures widely, always returning home to Monsey, New York, as he puts it, “to reimbibe the wellsprings of Chasidism” at his local Rachmistrivka Schteibel. Perhaps a living embodiment of Torah U-Maddah he has been involved in everything from radical political causes (European third positionism) to coaching Yeshiva hockey (34-7-5 lifetime at Ramaz and MTA).

An original and highly unusual thinker, Rabbi Schiller asks difficult questions that are frequently avoided, and like the child who revealed the secret about the emperors clothes, he exposes many of the shibboleths of Jewish life and thought. In this wide ranging conversation with Jewish Review editor, Sanford Drob and publisher, Harris Z. Tilevitz, Rabbi Schiller discusses a series of related questions concerning Jewish education and participation in American culture, the attitude of the Jew towards Gentiles both in Galut and in Israel and tensions between Jewish democratic liberalism and Zionist nationalism. Rather than offer us easy solutions, Rabbi Schiller awakens us to the call of some very serious and important questions

Jewish Review: Rabbi Schiller can you tell us something about your work at Yeshivah University High School.

Rabbi Schiller: I'm a rebbe for the 12th grade, the seniors. Basically, I see my job (and it's often a difficult one which throws me up against a whole tidal wave of cultural forces which I often fear are more powerful than I am) as an attempt to give a vision of God, Torah, and the Jew which is

profoundly serious and committed to young people many of whom who are inundated by the popular, superficial, smug, selfish hedonism and cynicism of contemporary American life.

Jewish Review: Yet you can't or don't discourage or prevent your students from being involved in contemporary American life?

Rabbi Schiller: I've become increasingly hesitant about encouraging such participation. The only way a person can participate in and absorb the "outside world" as a Torah Jew, is if he has a prior firm commitment, to Emunah and Torah and Mitzvos. If a person doesn't have that prior commitment then the old critique of the (religious) right is not just "whistling dixie". If you are not rooted in meticulous shemiras halakha (Jewish Observance) and involved in Shulkhan Arukh (Code of Jewish law) and basic emunah (belief) and bitochin (faith) then you really shouldn't absorb secular knowledge, or, what is a far greater danger today, popular culture.

Jewish Review: Why is that more dangerous in your view?

Rabbi Schiller: Really, the danger of secular knowledge and philosophy is finished, over with. At this point in history the danger to Torah Judaism is popular culture and the reason for this is that few become irreligious today because of Darwinism or Bible criticism, or from reading Camus, Sartre or Ayn Rand. This is because we are no longer living in an age of ideas. There's very little thinking, reading or debate about thoughts and ideas in today's western world. The big problem that educators have today is that they're in a time warp. They're still operating from the perspective of the 40's and 50's, when ideas were somewhat important. Ideas are now dead. That age is over. Ours is an age of MTV and video. Kids today run around, go to the movies and watch explosions of sights and sounds. People for the most part, can no longer read or write or engage in a discussion. So the threat today is not from any philosophical system or scholarly critique of Orthodox Judaism, it's simply the threat of being sucked up into a superficial redundant and childish materialism.

So to get back to your point I have a real fear of encouraging students to participate in the "world", (which to them usually means "low culture") if they don't have this prior yesod (foundation) of absolute commitment.

Jewish Review: So your goal as a rebbe is not to forge a synthesis between Torah and the secular culture?

Rabbi Schiller: Not at the beginning, it's first to solidify their commitment to Yiddishkeit. When I was younger I think I made some errors along these lines. I thought you could just jump into their lives in midstream and became enthused with them about their own interests. This might have been worthwhile if these interests were understood as stemming from God, but it was virtually worthless when they were seen (as was usually the case) as devoid of higher meaning. So as the years have gone on I've inclined much more in the direction of encouraging emunah, bitochin, Torah and Mitzvos, Tznius, Prishas, basic Yiddishkeit, feeling that only after that can one attempt to integrate the secular world. This latter task is a most difficult one and may be too demanding a derekh (path) for large numbers of people.

The problem is not secular knowledge because knowledge really means next to nothing to most of today's students. This is so true, you have no idea, and it's something that is missed by (virtually) all educators. "Openness" theorists are not facing the reality that "low culture" is secularism for contemporary modern Orthodox Jews.

Jewish Review: How do you relate to the Torah U-Madda philosophy of Yeshiva University?

Rabbi Schiller: As a philosophy I would say that I by and large, accept it, especially as presented by Rabbi Lamm in his mystical and, at times, phenomenological apologetic. But we must carefully limit this to an expression of philosophy. Yes, the world was created by God and I think that the things in it which He has not expressly prohibited are legitimate manifestations of His divinity and we can partake in them in a spirit of gratitude and awe, provided, of course, that no halakhas are violated. However, that is in terms of a philosophy for individuals. In terms of brutal, historical, cultural facts, we do not have a community in the larger or smaller sense of the term, at the present, which puts this into practice.

Jewish Review: But as a guiding philosophy does its legitimacy depend upon its popularity?

Rabbi Schiller: Philosophically, it could be legitimate and, indeed I (myself) am inclined to it because as I always say "I don't think God created tropical fish to lead us to sin". So philosophically I agree with it, but I don't know if communally, we can pull it off. It used to be one of my goals in life to lead large numbers of Modern Orthodox youth into a Torah U-Madda lifestyle, thinking that eventually there might be a community or whatever, but I don't know if it can be done. You see there is another problem: This isn't 19th century Germany, this is America. Can you really be open to secular culture in America in the 1980's and 90's? The filter system you'd have to build into your community would have to be so tremendously strong. The prior absorption in Torah and avodah (service) would have to be so uncompromising and passionate.

Jewish Review: Maybe it's a philosophy that only certain individuals can fulfill and it may be that its validity is for individuals rather than communities?

Rabbi Schiller: That could be. But the problem then would be this. How should you set up your elementary and secondary day school system? Because, if you're going to set up a traditionalist school system then no one is going to have the opportunity to do your Torah U-Madda. On the other hand if you're going to set up, for example, a day school, leading into a modern high school then you're going to wind up creating a student body where large numbers are less than dedicated to basic frumkeit). So how do you set up your education to create the opportunity for Torah U-Madda without risking their commitment to Torah?

Jewish Review: What brought you towards chasidism and how does chasiduth impact upon your current thinking?

Rabbi Schiller: I would, of course, like to say that it stems from a deep philosophical commitment that I had from when I was 12 years old and I first walked into New Square, but I'm not sure that that's true. When I was in 7th or 8th grade public school my group of friends were constantly debating Orthodox Judaism. Remember these were during the days when ideas still mattered. We decided that to really understand orthodoxy we would have to become Orthodox, so for a month three of us became Orthodox and visited Orthodox synagogues and communities. As part of that we visited the New Square community of Skverer chasidim and when the month was up I was hooked and they weren't. When I walked into Square I absolutely fell in love with the place and what was going on there and with the Skverer Rebbe.

Jewish Review: So your commitment to chasidism is as old as your commitment to frumkeit?

Rabbi Schiller: That's true. As the years went on and I became increasingly convinced that this derekh, the derekh of the Baal Shem was a unique gift of God and, at the risk of sounding a trifle provincial, head and shoulders above everything else. And by this I mean not in the sense of the chasidische chitzonyas (external manifestations) which also play a role, but the derekh of Baal Shem in the sense of realizing the intrinsic worth of every individual Jew, realizing that one can be beloved of God whatever one's spiritual station might be, realizing the cosmic importance of mitzvahs, realizing the wholeness of man which includes joy and song, loving and caring. I've simply found that there is really nothing else like it.

Jewish Review: Is it your commitment to chasidus that brings you in touch with the issues you approach with respect to mankind as a whole apart from the Jew?

Rabbi Schiller: I would say that chasidus heightened my awareness of other human beings, and although chasidim generally do not apply that awareness to non-Jews there is a certain empathy that chasidim possess for all people that did heighten my awareness of the gentile.

Jewish Review: I think for anyone who has had considerable exposure to secular philosophy and culture, when you confront chasidic thought or Jewish thought, for that matter, on the subject of the dignity of man and respect for the person, you can't help, but somehow, apply it to all people?

Rabbi Schiller: Right. Although the Jewish texts themselves are not always doing that exactly.

Jewish Review: In your article on "*The Forgotten Humanism of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*" you ask a series of questions about how Jews ought to relate to the predominately gentile societies in which they live. How Jews ought to relate to gentile and secular culture, traditions, customs and art, and also how Jews ought to relate to individual gentiles. Without necessarily answering "yes" or "no" to these questions, what is some of the wisdom which the Torah tradition has had with respect to these issues. What are some of the approaches that have been taken?

Rabbi Schiller: The approaches have been very divergent. The approach that we've seen throughout the Eastern European experience was largely one of isolation both imposed by the gentile society and also self-imposed. That approach has been, by and large, continued in western societies by significant numbers of Orthodox Jews. They view gentile society simply as the arena in which they can pursue their own Jewish agenda, and they have very little interest in that society except insofar as it can help them pursue that agenda in indirect ways. Now there have been other approaches throughout history, German orthodoxy attempted a different approach, as did Italian Jews during the Renaissance and the Spanish Jews, although they too fell prey to certain provincialisms.

Jewish Review: Fall prey?

Rabbi Schiller: That's a wrong term. I don't want to pre-judge the issue and say that it is necessarily the wrong approach to be parochial. I'm talking essentially about an approach that would have Jews weigh all societal questions on one scale of "how will this effect Jews", and should have very little, or a vastly secondary, concern for the wider society in and of itself. This parochial view is found in both religious and secular Jews, but it originally stems from the notion that the gentile is himself secondary in the eyes of the creator.

Jewish Review: So parallel to our sociological questions of how the Jew should behave in gentile society is a metaphysical question about the very status of the gentile. What is the nature of the gentile's soul?

Rabbi Schiller: I'm afraid that not enough attention has been paid to this question. There is, for example, a machlosh rishonim, on whether a Christian is owed Avodah Zorah (an idol worshipper), whether the trinity is Avodah Zorah (idol worship). Now the Meiri maintains that it isn't and others say that for a gentile it's not Avodah Zorah, but whatever our answer, we're not really facing what our answer entails. If Christianity is, as many maintain, Avodah Zorah, does this mean that the millions and millions of Catholics and Protestants who have lived for the past 2000 years have no share in haolam haba (the world to come)? Is that what we're saying about these millions of sincere, pious people? In reality we often don't assess the status of the gentile as if he himself had any intrinsic value. We always seem to be applying to him criteria that are relevant to us, but do not define either his objective or subjective status. Let's say, for arguments sake, that Christianity is Avodah Zorah, does that then mean that God judges the gentile as an idol worshipper or is he at least a tinok shenishba (a captive, innocent child)? In other words, why should the Christian be any worse than the tinok shenishba that the Rambam talks about in perek gimel of Hilkhos Mamarim where he says that the Karaim (Karaites) descendants are all like "captive children." Now seemingly the Protestant and the Catholic shouldn't be any worse off than the Karaim, but again, there has been very little attention paid to these questions .

Jewish Review: Some people would say that there is no need to pay attention to such questions.

Rabbi Schiller: Well, in what sense do you mean "need". If you mean "can I live my daily life without answering this question?" the answer is "yes" , but it's not that simple, because the answers we give to these questions have tremendous political and social implications. In other words, can we live ethically in societies while not caring about them? What are the implications for anti-semitism? If we hold to the notion that the gentile is secondary for God are we not in fact embracing a philosophy that is the fulfillment of every accusation that the anti-semites have made about us? We might respond that the upshot of this view is that we should all leave our host societies and become Zionists, but even that doesn't help us because once you arrive in Israel you have to deal with the Palestinians and the Arab people. So you really can't escape the question of "who are these gentiles and what are they doing here?"

Now, take the question of military service: should a Jew serve in the armies of the gentile nations he is living in? Should he try to get out of such service? try to get into it? If the answer is that he should try to get out of it or refuse to serve or lie his way out of it, then is the Jew a citizen? Should the gentile view him as a citizen. Should the Jew be granted equal rights if he is unwilling to make equal sacrifices? So I think you can't escape the practical implications of these questions.

Jewish Review: Could you comment on the contradiction which Rabbi Kahane has drawn between the Israeli state and democracy, or between the philosophy of Judaism and majority rule?

Rabbi Schiller: Kahane has asked a very simple question. He asks: if we believe in absolute truth how can we believe in majority rule? He's also asked another question, and that is whether a society which has a vision for itself (and in this particular case a religious vision, but I think this also applies to ethnic and cultural visions as well) allow for what I call 1789? or French revolutionary political rights? This is a very big problem and I don't think that Jews have (confronted) or answered it honestly. On the one hand, for the past three or four hundred years of world history we have been in the forefront of those movements that have championed majority rule, pluralism, and "bill of rights" type, 1789 rights. Yet

when we get to Eretz Yisrael and we have our own country we're all of a sudden saying "No, we don't believe in simple majority rule. We believe that a nation has the right to preserve its own identity." Now, would we extend that right to Englishmen, to Frenchmen, to Germans, to Americans? I think Kahane is asking great questions. His answer is (and I'm just quoting him here from memory) that there are no nationalisms except Jewish nationalism. Now that might be an answer, and if you follow the really hard line traditionalist approach the answer would be that there really are no other nationalisms in God's sight. All other nationalisms are a sham. So, when we're Jews in Western Europe and America we try to be liberal, pluralist and tolerant in order to protect ourselves, but not because we think societies ought to be that way in order to be healthy societies. We think healthy societies are non-pluralistic, but when you're living amongst those "crazy goyim" who can kill you at every turn you advocate political rights and pluralism.

Jewish Review: Kahane's view might be that since the gentiles have no legitimate nationalism their society should be democratic and pluralistic?

Rabbi Schiller: That's probably his position. But I don't think Kahane thinks about it very much. He's like everybody else in that he's not really seriously asking, for example, what a Catholic in Spain should want from his realm. We don't spend very much time as Jews thinking what a goy should be doing as a goy.

Jewish Review: Kahane would probably say "let the goyim worry about it". He creates his rationale in order to get to a certain endpoint and whatever gets him there is what's important.

Rabbi Schiller: That's right. He's more of a practical political thinker than a philosopher. That's not a condemnation, just a fact.

Jewish Review: But you hold that even for those who don't hold his general political position the questions he raises are very important?

Rabbi Schiller: Sure he's hit us right in the teeth, he really has.

Jewish Review: You've said that for the religious right, and I suppose you are also speaking, for example, about the Gush Emunim in Israel, that gentiles are seen as largely a means whereby God punishes, tests or protects the Jews. The gentile's personal destiny is not only secondary to ours, but in some sense, part of our own destiny. Is this a philosophy that is clearly articulated?

Rabbi Schiller: Yes, definitely. Any standard Yeshivah or Chasidische place, or your West Bank Zionists would all say that quite clearly.

Jewish Review: Yet you also argue that Jewish commitments on the left are an extension of a philosophy which places little or no value on the gentile, and are actually self serving commitments. How is this so?

Rabbi Schiller: Not always, just sometimes. Take, for example, Jewish involvement in the civil rights movements. Ask a Jew why he was in favor of civil rights and very often he'll come up with something like the following rationale: "We could be next!" In fact recently there was a press report on Le Pen's movement in France which reported that French Jews are opposing Le Pen because they are afraid that after the Arabs they'll be next. Now this feeling is often subconscious and I'm not saying that there weren't also many Jews who were idealistic about their politics, but the question is did the Jew really

feel that a white Protestant southerner should have an integrated society? Or did the Jew really feel that for our own political agenda their ought to be an integrated society. Would the Jews have wanted integration with the blacks if the southern whites were Jewish Orthodox?

Jewish Review: Perhaps the liberal Jews were sincere?

Rabbi Schiller: Many were, and the insincerity of others was largely subconscious. But as far as liberal Jews are concerned I think that we're seeing a split on that issue today. The sincere liberals are continuing on with Tikkun and things like that, but those who were full of baloney now support Commentary and Public Interest. Let's take the Tikkun people. Are they really serious? I can't believe that they really want the demographic/racial extinction of European man. Demographic trends seem to show that within the next century America will essentially be a third world nation. Does the Jewish liberal really welcome that? I think they may say they welcome that because they live in suburbia. Do they really believe that all nations, peoples and cultures should be obliterated in an egalitarian world? I don't know what they want. They're stuck because they took the notions of democracy and human rights so seriously.

Jewish Review: Do you feel that we as Orthodox Jews cannot take such notions seriously in this country?

Rabbi Schiller: The only way you can take these ideas seriously is something along the lines of a certain segment of Orthodox Catholic thinking that has evolved since Vatican II, and the "Declaration on Religious Liberty". John Paul II was a good illustration of this kind of thinking. I'm talking about John Courtney Murray's famous book *We Hold These Truths* and the National Review-type Catholic. Somehow they feel that God gave man dignity and that dignity means that he must have the rights of the French Revolution. Now, of course, Catholic traditionalists have opposed this, but I think this is the only way we can put liberalism and traditional religion together: The dignity of man entitles him to certain rights and even if these rights subvert the Orthodoxy of others they must somehow be respected. It's an "iffy" proposition.

Jewish Review: Even if these rights subvert Jewish Orthodoxy?

Rabbi Schiller: That's the only way you could possibly do it. You'd have to say that the freedom of speech, the freedom of assembly, etc. are so intrinsically linked to the dignity of man that no coercive force should ever be allowed to interfere with them in any way. I think many Modern Orthodox Jewish thinkers who don't think too critically, would say something like this: that the Bill of Rights is one of the greatest things on the earth. If you asked a Rabbi Rackman or a Sol Roth about what their metaphysical (or theological) underpinning for their view on this is I don't know what they would say. It's rather nice. It's a friendly sort of thing. But can you really defend it in the end? I've studied at great length this controversy in the Catholic church for the past 25 years. I've been obsessed with it and I think the anti-Vatican II traditionalists are on very sound ground on this "freedom" question. They're the ones who can maintain a consistency in their Catholic faith (and I'm afraid it seems true in a Jewish context as well). But I must say that I am far more concerned with uncovering the tension between liberal democratic thought and Orthodox religion than I am in resolving it.

Jewish Review: It may be that this is one of the antinomies that we have in this life that we simply can't resolve?

Rabbi Schiller: The problem is this. If the Jew understood this contradiction would he then have the chutzpah to continue to do what he does in Western society? Maybe it's better that he doesn't grasp it because then he would lose his easy assent to these things and feel less at home in gentile society. If the assumption is correct that these rights are what protect us from the wrath of the goyim then maybe it's better that we continue to fool ourselves; for to be consciously manipulative (in backing liberal causes for selfish reasons) would be far harder than to be subconsciously manipulative (consciously thinking you are backing these causes from pure motives), which is the way the Jew operates now.

Jewish Review: Perhaps what we need to do is move this discussion into another, more philosophical level. Perhaps, as the kabbalists suggest, man's freedom of choice is somehow essential to God's world plan, indeed for the fulfillment of God's very own nature. If we had a religious legislation which we all followed as a matter of course there wouldn't (to use the kabbalistic imagery) have been a shevirah (shattering) nor would there be need for a tikkun (restoration) and man's existence would, itself, be superfluous. Perhaps, as the kabbalists suggest, it is by man having freedom of choice, even with respect to Torah and Mitzvahs, that his actions can be truly virtuous and worthwhile.

Rabbi Schiller: This (amazingly enough) brings me back to the debate between Frank Mayer and Brent Bozell in the National Review of the early sixties. They debated the question of whether coerced virtue can truly be virtue.

Jewish Review: That's exactly the point. Somehow it's a far better virtue that is not coerced.

Rabbi Schiller: Would you agree with that in a Jewish society?

Jewish Review: I would.

Rabbi Schiller: You would allow in a Jewish society Protestant missionaries and public distribution of Protestant literature?

Jewish Review: I think you have to distinguish between local situations and national ones. In my Shul I'm not going to allow it, but in the public arena I suppose I would.

Rabbi Schiller: Yes you're making a distinction between Schools, families and communities where you prohibit complete freedom of speech, etc; but in the nation you would permit it. Why?

Jewish Review: Because in order for there to be legitimate choice and individual needs, so to speak, a person must have some "safe haven" in which the choices can be realized. If he lives, in a world in which pluralism affects his very home, then he has no capacity to solidify his choices and therefore effectively has no choice at all. On the other hand, if he lives in a world in which choice is not possible at all because all of his actions are legislated, then his activities lack, as we said before, any genuine moral or even spiritual value. Perhaps, in order for true choice to be realized certain areas of society, and perhaps certain parts of the world need to be protected from pluralism. I might add parenthetically that this is one powerful justification for the existence of the Jewish State: that recent history has shown that a Jewish choice is impossible unless there is such a haven for Jews, protected from the tyranny of pluralism and majority rule.

Rabbi Schiller: These are certainly points worthy of discussion. I can't say I agree on everything, but at least we're dealing with basic questions.

Jewish Review: Now, before we get too far ahead in political philosophy I'd like to come back to halakha. You have said that halakha frequently differentiates between Jew and gentile, generally understandably, but sometimes in a painful, puzzling manner. Although many apologies have been offered for halakhas of this sort many problems remain to discomfort sincere Jewish humanists. Could you discuss an example of this?

Rabbi Schiller: I think pekuach nefesh on Shabbos is the granddaddy of all of these. That it is permissible to violate the Sabbath for Jewish pekuach nefesh, but not gentile. But it gets more troubling than this. There are halakhas to the effect that with an eved avodah zora (an idol-worshiper) the law is "ayn ma'alim", regardless of whether it is Shabbos or not. These are disquieting halakhas. You can sneak out of this by saying that Christianity is not avodah zora, but as a student of mine once asked with reference to the Chinese servant on the old television series, Bonanza, "This means we have to save the Christians, but we can kill Hop Sing?" Now sincere Jewish humanists are discomforted by this sort of thing. Our task, when confronting doctrines or laws in the Torah which we do not understand, is to believe and obey with humility and faith. God's will, as manifested in both Revelation and in the events of our lives at times, leaves us perplexed. This must in no way weaken our emunah or obedience. Interestingly, the Orthodox right seems to have little problem with these matters.

Jewish Review: I suppose it is true that as much as one can be captivated by a book like Tanya, the author is clear that there is a distinction between the Jewish and gentile soul.

Rabbi Schiller: There's a lot more there than a mere distinction. Jews and non Jews are different. Fundamentally different. But how different and what practical ramifications should those differences have is complex and troubling.

Jewish Review: What about the value of dialogue with non-Jews. Mainstream Orthodoxy takes a very negative view of such dialogue, particularly on a religious level

Rabbi Schiller: On a communal level I agree, but privately I think a great deal can be accomplished by simple conversation. The gentiles are often not who we think they are. I've had many conversations with the anti-Vatican II traditionalists amongst the Catholics over the years and you would think they would be the worst anti-semites, but when you get to sit down and talk with them they are not at all like the stereotype. You can talk to them.

Jewish Review: I'd like to discuss the examples you give in your article of seemingly insensitive Jewish behavior in society, of the Chinese cabdriver who told you about the arrogance of "rabbis" who were cutting him off on the road, or of your student who didn't seem to care about the events in Belfast. Is this really reflective of a philosophy or is it just bad manners and insensitivity?

Rabbi Schiller: It's reflective of a philosophy dimly perceived. The chasidische bus driver who creates this chillul Hashem every time he goes on the Garden State Parkway could not consciously articulate the philosophy that's motivating him, but it's clear what he's doing. "I want to get back to Monsey as fast as I possibly can, and all of these goyim driving their goyische cars are of no difference to me, and their reactions are of no consequence to me."

Jewish Review: You think it's an insularity rather than just a general indifference to all human beings in such a person's case?

Rabbi Schiller: Eastern Europeans, and consequently chasidim in America, don't have some of the restraints that Anglo-Saxon and Northern European cultures have. They're not as reserved. They don't need as much physical space. They push easier. There's an element of that even amongst themselves, but it's much more than that. It is reflective of certain attitudes.

Jewish Review: How does, and to what extent does, the philosophy of Samson Raphael Hirsch help us deal with the kinds of dilemmas we've been speaking about?

Rabbi Schiller: Well, because Hirsch really felt himself to be a German, a German citizen, and he sincerely wanted Jews to be genuine patriots caring about the German nation and people, (although he was wary of Jewish/gentile socializing) everything he writes on this subject offers us an alternative to our current approach. The problem, however, is very complex. It is complex in part because the kind of nation which Hirsch was urging us to be patriotic to has almost ceased to exist, insofar as almost all western societies have gone over to a contractual, liberal, capitalist view of the state. So I don't know if Hirschian patriotism is relevant in a western world in which a concept of the nation as more than a contractual agreement no longer exists. There's almost no patriotism, for example, to America the nation anymore. That died either in 1865, 1932, or when Senator McCarthy was censured or maybe when General McArthur died. It certainly doesn't exist anymore outside of, say, West Point. It's important to make the distinction between a "nation" and a "state". If you were to ask Americans what America is they would point to the Constitution, freedom, democracy. If you would ask a Russian, an Englishman, or a Frenchman, they wouldn't equate their particular form of government with their "nation". They believe that a nation exists outside of the government. A Russian loves "Mother Russia," the nation, although he may despise the government. An American can make no such distinction. There is no America outside of the American system of government. Now, even in European countries there is a movement towards this contractual conception of the realm, and therefore Hirschian patriotism becomes almost outdated in a west that has moved beyond a spiritual conception of the nation.

Jewish Review: So you're saying that the nation used to be thought of in much of the same way as Jews think of Israel?

Rabbi Schiller: Yes, in terms of a sacred bond.

Jewish Review: Hirsch managed somehow to have a "sacred bond" both to Germany and to Clal Yisrael?

Rabbi Schiller: Yes, he felt this was not a contradiction although he did not equate them.

Jewish Review: How was he able to live both of them?

Rabbi Schiller: Because he felt that the Jewish people were a religion and not a political entity, at least prior to the Messiah. He was an anti-zionist. He felt that viewing the Jewish people as a political entity pre-messiah, is a violation of the three oaths (Ketubot, III a) of galut, etc.

Jewish Review: So, then Hirsch's patriotism becomes doubly irrelevant. First because the concept of a nation is different now than it was in Hirsch's day, and second because, at least those of us who are Zionist, have an allegiance to Israel. Even those of us who have no allegiance to the state of Israel would have an allegiance to clal Yisrael in a more "national" sense than Hirsch had.

Rabbi Schiller: But even if you have an allegiance to clal Yisrael in a national religious sense, as long as what constitutes this nation is religion, then a Hirschian would probably still say “why can't the Jew be as patriotic to Germany or France as are the Protestants and Catholics? Catholics are bound to each other by religious ties, but they can still be patriots.”

Jewish Review: Isn't that the classical Reform view, that we are a religion like Catholicism and Protestantism?

Rabbi Schiller: It was a German view, one that was shared by the Orthodox there as well. Orthodox as well as Liberal Jews were all anti-Zionists. We see where their loyalty got them, though. What a terrible irony.

Jewish Review: Maybe what we're getting at here is that both poles of the antimony we've been speaking of, liberalism and nationalism both have to be in place in order to prevent the excesses of each other. You have, on the one hand, a certain virtue in nationalism and a view of the sacred nature of the state, particularly the Jewish state. But taken without the liberal, pluralistic view to act as its goal or its balance, you end up with the worst forms of Nazism or the ugliest forms of egalitarianism, a communism in which all ethnic and national pride is obliterated.

Rabbi Schiller: I was discussing this several weeks ago and concluded that on the one hand you have the fascist-monarchist conception of the state, and on the other hand you have America. But why couldn't you, so to speak, have the best of both? This is the question you're posing right now. Why can't you have a sacred view of life, but one that nonetheless respects, or at least doesn't trample upon the dignity of individuals? I don't know. Things just don't seem to work that way.

Jewish Review: From the point of view of individuals it may be very difficult if not impossible to maintain them both, but from the point of view of world history the tension or balance may be necessary. It may, for example, be a healthy contradiction that both of the tendencies exist within the Israeli State and society.

Rabbi Schiller: Yes, it may be a necessary balance in history: where one goes up, the other goes down. Of course, I must tell you that there is a form of nationalism today, it calls itself the “third position”, or “the third way” which is different. It is a nationalism which emphasizes regionalism, decentralization and distributist economic policy. They say they're nationalist, but they believe in independence for Wales, and Scotland and the Cornish and so forth. They are decentralist nationalists and their position is very attractive to me. It combines the best of the anti-capitalist, anti-multi-racial continental European right with the humanism and communalism of the New Left.

Jewish Review: It's a pre-World War I mentality.

Rabbi Schiller: Yes, even further back to pre-unification Italy or Germany for example. Third position nationalists would argue that even within today's large nations the local communities should be granted far more autonomy. They stress ecology, communalism. Like Fromm they feel it's more important “to be” than “to have”.

Jewish Review: You have visited England in an effort to mitigate the prejudice that exists against Jews among the nationalist movements there. What is the point of these efforts? Especially if we ourselves are trapped in our own prejudice about gentiles in order to maintain our nationalism?

Rabbi Schiller: Well, I said to them that the only way that people can attempt to live in true tolerance and not in false liberal tolerance is by attempting to really listen to each other, to empathize with the particular cultural distinctions of each other and not seek to obliterate them. In part the trip was made to satisfy my own curiosity as to whether I could speak to them and whether they were indeed evil people, and I found many of them to be good people, quite reasonable. They see themselves as the persecuted minority, persecuted by the left, and the media and by the Thatcher government and capitalism.

Jewish Review: But what is your attraction to these people and to the political right in general. Is it that they advocate something that is close to Yiddishkeit?

Rabbi Schiller: You're now probing my own psychology. When I was very young I took these things very seriously: Westerns like Davy Crocket, The Lone Ranger, and The Rifleman. I read a lot of Greek mythology. I loved the Illiad when I was a little boy, and my father took me to football games at West Point; Army home games in the late 1950's when they were a great team. I loved West Point. The uniforms, the football games, the whole thing. Those influences are I think what led me towards the right. There was something in notions like honor, dignity, romance (in the larger sense of the term), quest, loyalty, order, and love that led me first to the American right, and (when I saw how superficial they were) to the European right. I became frum around the same time that I became politically aware, in the early sixties. The two seemed to be touching similar, I would say, metaphysical substrata. The things that I was loving about a traditionalist (right wing) view of society were the same sorts of things that I was loving in my ascent to Torah, Mitzvahs, and so forth. I've always viewed my political/social views as a personal intuition or affection derived from the basic core dogmas of Torah and Mitzvahs. This is not to say that this derivation is imbued with absolute truth, but I feel my views do somewhat correspond with the spirit of Judaism and of all western faiths.

Put in another way, to me the truths of Torah are absolute and binding upon all Jews. It is the solemn obligation of our lives to heed their absolute call. As far as political, social, aesthetic, cultural and personal affections go we are to a large extent free, but that freedom and the choices we make within it must be nurtured by faith. That's what I've tried to do, probably failing very often, throughout my life.