

HIRSCHIANS AND KOOKIANS IN AMERICA: REPORT ON AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

by Rabbi Mayer Schiller



Does the totality of existence have intrinsic significance? That is, as a friend used to say, "an ice breaker of a question."

It is a question that has been touched on, generally superficially, during the seemingly endless discussions concerning "secular studies and Torah Judaism." Yet, it remained essentially ignored by most Orthodox thinkers on its deeper levels despite its obvious life-long ramifications. In the end, we all partake of and live in the world. What exactly are we to make of it?

In the *Yeshivische* and *Hasidische* worlds, the questions have long been answered. To these *velten*, pledged as they are to the renaissance of Eastern European piety and Torah scholarship in America, there is little doubt that outside the realms of pure *lernen* and *mitzvah* practice there is nothing—no

events, no studies, no interests, no people, no hopes, no joys, no sorrows that are of inherent meaning. Everything else besides the Jew's fulfillment of the Torah's demands is worthwhile only so far as it relates back to those demands. All other natural and human phenomena are, at worst, traps designed by the Creator to distract Jews from their spiritual tasks or, at best, capable of offering them brief respites from their ongoing performance. Alternatively (but in the same vein), one hears some talk in these camps of certain aspects of Being as metaphors capable of illustrating the nature of a Jew's relationship with God or as a source of inspiration enabling Jews to better commit themselves to *lernen* and *mitzvot*.

Although this approach seems to somewhat shortchange the world's billions of other inhabitants as well as the apparent super abundance of natural, aesthetic, historical and emotional dimensions of Being, it is undoubtedly an inwardly consistent one and has succeeded eminently in creating generations of God fearing and Torah knowledgeable Jews. In America, it has in the long run, proved to many more alluring than the dreamy, utopian, secular humanisms of the 20's, through the 60's. To this day, it stands refreshingly proud and firm against the steamroller conformism of the trendy, yet breathtakingly barren, bourgeois, security - hedonism of the capitalism triumphant 80's. Among its leaders were, and are to be found the vast majority of 20th century Torah saints and scholars in America.

History seems to be moving with



rapidity in this doctrine's direction. Torah Jewry is increasingly swept towards its unambiguous world view and uncompromising loyalty to *halacha* and *lumdas*. "Yes," this position's proponents are saying, "There is a material world but we must see through and beyond it. Our final resting place is elsewhere. The true reality of existence is not the multi-dimensional world and its people that we daily see and experience. All of that is of no significance to the Jew who must go about his only justifiable task, the amassing of *Torah* and *mitzvot* for eternity."

There are others, however, to whom positing God as Creator guarantees the intrinsic meaning of Being. It is to the adherents of this

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notion and their passage through the inhospitable environs of 20th century America to which we now turn our attentions. In order to properly situate our school in the ongoing tale of Jewish history we must return to 19th century Germany. It was there that seeds were planted that, over 100 years later, would still produce fruits on our own shores. In 1836, the *Landesrabbiner* of Oldenberg, Germany, published a brief work *The Nineteen Letters*, which he followed two years later with the much longer *Horeb*. These works brought instant fame to their author, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888). In an era when assorted Reform and *Haskalah* heresies had seemingly won the day, R. Hirsch's writings presented an attractive, persuasive, thoughtful and moving articulation of the basic beliefs and laws of Torah Judaism. Imbued with a wide ranging knowledge of both Torah and wordly disciplines, *Rabbiner* Hirsch injected new blood into the sagging spiritual body of German Jewry. He also put forth the novel notion that "the world need not be closed to Jews." In the soaring rhetorical style of the period, R. Hirsch proclaimed, "Behold! In nature and history God speaks to you! . . . God is the God of nature as well as man . . . The spirit of Israel is in sympathy with all culture, provided it leads towards the recognition of truth."

A SOURCE OF SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT

This approach led R. Hirsch not only to tolerate "secular studies" by

viewing them as a means to acquire a livelihood or better understand the Torah, but to emphatically declare "these studies should be a source of spiritual enlightenment for you." Yet, it was not merely in the academic world that the champion of German Orthodoxy saw God's handiwork but in the total plenitude of being. Returning from a trip to the Swiss Alps in his old age, he joyously exclaimed, "Now, I will be ready to reply when I am asked in heaven, 'Hast thou seen My own Switzerland?'" In sum, R. Hirsch taught the all encompassing doctrine that, "All that is truly beautiful and good, all that enlightens the spirit of man—in all this we see the reflection of the wisdom of the Creator, an echo of the voice and spirit of God."

In 1851, this philosophy was given a chance to be put into practice as *Rabbiner* Hirsch left his position as Chief Rabbi of Moravia and accepted the leadership of a fledgling Orthodox congregation in Frankfort-On-the-Main. It was there that he led the resurrection of Torah Judaism throughout Germany, wrote prolifically and established a series of primary and secondary schools where his approach *Torah Im Derek Eretz* (Torah With the Way of the World) was to serve as the doctrinal cornerstone. In their heyday, the schools' population numbered close to 1000 students to whom both Torah and "the world" were imparted.

As is invariably the case in this tedious and confusing world of ours, R. Hirsch's ideals fared far better in his writings than they did in actual practice. Although large segments of the Frankfort community recommitted themselves to Torah under his ste-

wardship, their level of Torah study and depth perception of *halacha* remained far beneath the master's hopes. There were many reasons for this failure, including government edicts and prior communal norms but the fact remains that, in Frankfort, *Torah Im Derek Erez*, in its fullness, remained the province of a select few and never permeated, except in a superficial manner, the lives of the masses.



RABBI ABRAHAM ISAAC KOOK — A SPIRITUAL GIANT

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), who spent the decisive years of his life in Israel, was one of the spiritual giants of recent generations. He combined encyclopedic Torah knowledge with saintly piety, philosophic breath and depth and poetic grace. His devotion to the basic Jewish tenet that *emunah* (faith) and *mitzvot* are the heritage of all Jews is legendary. It would take us very far from the confines of the current topic to even begin to describe the man. Our concern at present is his role as theoretician of the "Anti-Puritan" school.

There are many similarities between *Rabbiner* Hirsch and *Rav* Kook as both men saw the totality of knowledge, in particular, and Being, in general, as worthwhile in and of themselves. R. Kook's call echoes that of the Frankfurt sage: "How shall man obtain a conception of the majesty of the Divine, so that the innate splendor residing within his soul may rise freely and without distortion? Through the expansion of his scientific faculties; through the liberation of the imagination and the enjoyments of bold flights of fancy; through the disciplined study of the world and life; through the cultivation of a rich multifarious sensitivity to every phase of Being. All these *desiderata* obviously require the study of all branches of wisdom, all the philosophies of life, all the ways of the diverse civilizations and the doctrine of ethics and religion of every nation and tongue."

In R. Kook's thought, due to his willingness to introduce *Kabbalah* into the discussion, the process of openness-to-Being is deepened. For R. Kook, there is a mystical unity which permeates existence waiting to be uplifted and unlocked by Torah Jews' (and all of mankind's) participation in it. In Messianic times we will all finally see that reality is One. R. Hirsch avoids mysticism in his writings and, hence, his view of existence does not seek to analyze its precise nature or grounding except to say that it is God's handiwork.

Be this difference as it may, our concern at present is the history of the doctrine's implementation, not an in-

Hirschian and Kookian theories are subtle, and their all embracing nature, difficult to articulate in black-and-white terms and do not yield clearly delineated ideal lifestyles and types.

depth dissection of its principles. As in the case of R. Hirsch, R. Kook's philosophy has been imperfectly put into practice by his followers. Most of them, especially in Israel, seem to de-emphasize his call for a total embracing of knowledge, beauty, life and nature while harping on his advocacy of an activist, Messianic Zionism. Again, there are exceptions. Our concern is with the norm.

HIRSCHIANISM AND KOOKIANISM IN AMERICA

How have Hirschianism and Kookianism fared in America? The *Yeshivishe* world has made clear over the years that it wants no part of an "openness-to-Being" doctrine. (Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner z'l, and some Chaim Berliners are perhaps an exception to the rule.) Despite speaking English and devoting somewhere in the vicinity of three hours a day to secular subjects on the secondary school level, they are emphatically "Torah Only-ists." Their three hours of "English"

are probably traceable to their roots sunk in an era when American Orthodoxy had not yet realized how important the secular educational establishment of the land is (or perhaps in those days it was not quite so important) and they, therefore, assumed that the law required that a certain basic curriculum be taught.

The *Hasidische*, as always a much tougher breed than the *Yeshivishe*, are free of such illusions. Their approach to the *insipid* educational powers-that-be is akin to Ohio State's towards Northwestern. They "mow 'em down" with their scrubs. Hence, since they want no secular training, they have none.

Between 1906 and 1908, the Rabbi Issaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of New York's Lower East Side experienced a protracted conflict between its rabbinical students who wanted secular studies introduced into their curriculum and the school's Board of Directors who, in accord with "Torah Only" teachings, refused. After a drawn out conflict featuring assorted lockouts and strikes, the students achieved a semblance of victory. The curriculum was altered, a new Board of Directors was formed, who assigned the new "President of the Faculty" Rabbi Bernard L. Levinthal the task of "producing decent and observant rabbis who are equipped with knowledge in the spirit of the times."

This move, although certainly a breakthrough at the time, was a far cry from the "openness-to-Being" teach-

For R. Kook, there is a mystical unity which permeates existence waiting to be uplifted and unlocked by Torah Jews' (and all of mankind's) participation in it.

In Adirim, Yaakov, age 9, gets up at 5:30 A.M. and hurries off to school — but not the same school that most of the neighboring children go to.

On a lonely desert road near Ashdod, 3 children wait for a bus which travels an extra 40 minutes just to pick them up to take them, not to the local school, but to a place quite distant.

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—A letter from
Menachem Begin,
Prime Minister of Israel,
April 1978

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—Yosef Dor, Ministry of
Education, at a meeting
April 25, 1982.

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It was 1953, a year in which the immigration of both Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewry to Israel was reaching a climax. Thousands of parents were looking for an alternative to the government's secular educational system. The leading Torah sages in the world joined in declaring the need for an independent school system to reach throughout the existing settlements and for the immigrants flooding the land. One-hundred four schools with

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ings of advanced Hirschian or Kookian thinking. It was essentially a pragmatic step based upon a desire to swim comfortably in what was a much romanticized American Dream. By 1915, the Seminary had merged with Yeshivat Etz Chaim (also of the lower East Side) and, despite numerous difficulties, under the inspired leadership of Dr. Bernard Revel was able to establish, in 1916 and 1928, secondary and college level facilities. These institutions, all of which would continue to expand to our own day, would offer a framework for the "openness" schools to develop and advocate their theories.

**YESHIVA UNIVERSITY —
"CULTURE AND SPIRITUALITY?"**

Although Revel seems not to have been directly influenced by either Hirschian or Kookian theories (his biographer, Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, describes him as being "only concerned . . . with guide(ing) the Yeshiva successfully through the labyrinths of American life"), we do find phrases in his talks that roughly approximate the "openness" schools philosophy. In his "Statement of Aims" for Yeshiva College, Revel hopes that the school would "afford a harmonious union of culture and spirituality." This process would "aid in the spiritualization of our lives and the synthesis of the Jewish personality, bringing into harmonious relation the mind of the Torah—true student youth and the modern mind." This "synthesis," a term that would become increasingly popular with Y.U. oriented theoreticians over the ensuing six decades (and would incidentally be a source of criticism from Hirschians and others who felt that it implied a less than perfect conception of Torah), is left vague in Revel's talks. How is it to be accomplished? By study? Reflection? Or action? Haziness aside (and one

wonders as to how much this haziness is not part-and-parcel of "openness" doctrine in general, perhaps a necessary component of a philosophy seeking to embrace and do "all"), Revel clearly called for imbuing Jewish youth with "the facts of life and the materials and spirit of general culture." Academically, at least, "openness" was underway.

Under Dr. Samuel Belkin, who assumed Yeshiva's presidency in 1943, "synthesis" continued to be much spoken about. Belkin, an expert in the writings of Philo and the Alexandrian community where he lived, saw the college as "giving secular education a higher purpose" and making the institution "a living symbol of intellectual progress and moral activity." He spoke of "reintegrating our lives with the ideals of Torah and with our search after God's knowledge." Although Belkin's obvious infatuation with "American democracy" makes some of his teachings seem a bit time and place bound (as is the case with R. Hirsch's enthusiasm for "emancipation, brotherhood and progress" and other trendy nineteenth century cliches), he clearly believed in Being's relevance and intrinsic worth, albeit not seeking to anchor that meaning in any larger metaphysical doctrines.

**THE SCHOOLS OF "MODERN
ORTHODOXY"**

By the mid 1950's, a whole school of "Modern Orthodox," (as they came to be called), thinkers had sprung up, each advocating various forms of "integration" or "synthesis." Their diversity seemed to indicate that "openness" could be clothed in anything from personalist-existentialist to rational-classicist garb, a consoling thought for those who had felt that Revelation and Being were capable of assorted philosophical decipherings. One of them, Dr. Norman Lamm

would eventually follow Belkin as the University's president. He was almost unique among the group in that his "openness" theories drew strongly on *Hasidic* and *Kabbalistic* sources and was soundly rooted in Kookian notions about the Ultimate Unity of Being. And so, what had begun with RIETS seminarians fighting to add English studies to their routine, became 70 years later, an institution doctrinally pledged to the deepest levels of mystical "openness-to-Being" theory.

During the late 40's, the Hirschians relocated to the Washington Heights section of New York City, and established a community and yeshiva (Yeshiva Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch) pledged to their version of "openness." Of course, it was accompanied by the anti-Zionist and Orthodox-separatist positions of the Rabbiner himself and accordingly was at odds with its larger neighbor eight blocks to the East. Besides disagreeing on these seemingly unrelated matters, Hirschians and Y.U.'ers have engaged in frequent and often acrimonious debate as to precisely how the world should be "absorbed," "integrated," "synthesized" or "ruled over" by or with the Torah. These arguments (and the Hirschians would probably cite the academic detachment of some Y.U.'ers as part of their critique—How comfortably can pious *Avodot Hashem* actually live with the Ivory Tower detached mood of objective scholarship?) significant in terms of how "openness" is to be implemented should not obscure the fact that both schools see Being as significant due to God's authorship of it.

Now that we know who is attempting to travel Hirschian and Kookian paths in America the central question of our meanderings emerges: How have they fared in the land of capitalist mobocracy?

First, there is an interesting paradox

Many of those reared in Hirschian and Y.U.ian circles who have left the *geshmake* of *lernen* and *mussar* piety have jumped ship and become *Yeshivishe*.

at work here. Many of those reared in Hirschian and Y.U.ian circles who have felt the *geshmak* of *lernen* and *mussar* piety have jumped ship and become *Yeshivishe*. This need not mean that they have physically left their environs—although in some cases that does happen—but that doctrinally they are in the Volozhin-Brisk, Baltimore-Lakewood camp. They know little of and reject that which they know of the “openness” teachers.

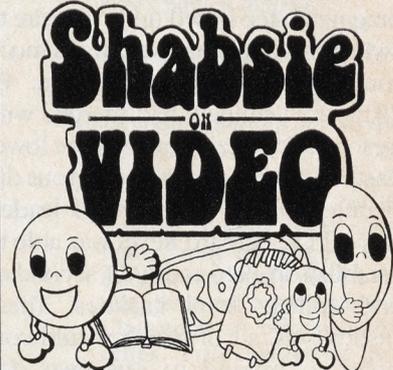
There are many reasons for this. Hirschian and Kookian theories are subtle, and their all embracing nature, difficult to articulate in black-and-white terms, do not yield clearly delineated ideal life-styles and types. For youth yearning for quick inspiration and seeking universal lucidity they are often too demanding. It is tempting to consign most of existence to the realm of *shtusim* and live one's life in seeming purity. More importantly, though many if not most of the *rebbeim* at the above institutions pledged to “openness” are neither familiar with nor loyal to its beliefs. Therefore a painful estrangement results in which the pious and learned cream of the crop is never exposed to Hirschian or Kookian affirmations.

The problem becomes seriously compounded in the Modern Orthodox camp which attracts legions of participants (“followers” would seem an improper term here) whose loyalty to *halacha* is not of the clear and uncompromising sort nearly universal in the *Yeshivishe* and *Hasidische* camps. This fact may well be, when perceived from a broad perspective, a positive happening for without the

option which these people see (however incorrectly) that Modern Orthodox offers them, how many would opt for the foreboding environs of the right and how many for the more comfortable precincts of the heretical? However, it remains a given that the overwhelming majority of Modern Orthodox fellow travellers (not its leadership or pious upper crust) although loyal to such basics as *shabbat* and *kasbrut*, are not committed to a cartload of *mizvot* ranging from thrice daily prayer (not to mention *minyan*) to *tzitzit* wearing to basic *brachot* recitals to pre-marital sexual norms. The list goes on and on and would invariably include those areas of *halacha* which require more than elementary knowledge such as *bishul* on *shabbat*, *nidab*, sink and stove *kasbrut* norms and so forth.

Now, what results from all this is that the aspiring Kookian finds no place to call home. Those Modern Orthodox youth imbued with a sense of religious consistency and idealism see their (essentially) ideologically *yeshivishe rebbeim* on the one hand and their disinterested peers on the other. They are rarely, if ever, exposed to Kookianism as espoused by Lamm and others and, indeed, are rarely taught that *lumduk*, *dikduk*, *halacha*, etc. can be part of even so much as a pious rationalism even of the Belkin mold. Hence, they turn to a modified *yeshivishism*; modified by Zionism, by *kiruv* interests, by the ability to read and write English but not by the “openness” to the totality of knowl-

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edge, of the beauties of existence, of the panorama of man's strivings of the Kookian vision.

As far as the Hirschians go, things have not fared much better doctrinally. Although their rank-and-file is more loyal to *balacha* than the bulk of Modern Orthodox "fellow travellers" there are few true Hirschians among them, that is, Jews imbued with *lumdus*, piety, the spirit of *Tanach* and steeped in the bounties of man and God as the *Rabbiner* called for.

"AUTHENTIC" TORAH IM DEREK EREZ

In June of 1965, Rabbi Shlomo Danzinger, as lucid an exponent of Hirschianism as there is, wrote that "The goal (of authentic *Torah Im Derek Eretz*) has not been achieved to date. It is worthy of our utmost efforts and strivings." By 1986, though, he had begun, despite his loyalty to the *Rabbiner's* doctrines, to despair a bit. "In practice, I do not realistically expect the imple-

mentation of this ideal form of *Torah Im Derek Eretz* in our time. Opposition of the establishment and preconceived notions are powerful deterrents to any change of the status quo."

So, there the matter stands at present. Small pockets of Kookians inhabit the Y.U. orbit deriving their inspiration from the voluminous writings of the master. Smaller still, numbers of Hirschians flit about in the Agudah-*Yeshivishe* world they choose to inhabit. And, it should be added, throughout the "hard core" yeshivas, there are isolated individuals who find the visionaries of Frankfort and Jerusalem a source of consolation and exaltation.

These remnants, surrounded by the forces of heresy and puritanism, continue to posit that Being is not a lie or a snare, but part-and-parcel of the Creator's design.

The present writer who is moved by the beauty and logic of all Torah Schools — *Yeshivishe*, *Hasidish*, Hirschian and Kookian—wishes the "openness" school the best of luck. Although doctrinally inclined in their

direction he still hesitates a bit at their doorstep due to their seeming need to reduce Being and Torah to symbols of moralistic essences (the Hirschians) or supra temporal mystical realities (the Kookians). God as Creator suffices for this correspondent who feels, as the years go by, increasingly less need to sneak behind the curtain of Being's stage set. Yet, of all the options, the "openness" dawn is clearly the most receptive to God as Creator and to criticize their sometime flights of fancy along more phenomenological grounds must await another thinker combining piety, receptivity and faith and more philosophical diligence than the present one.

* * *

Rabbi Mayer Schiller teaches Gemara and assorted "secular studies" at Ohr Torah Institute in Forest Hills, N.Y. He is the author of The Road Back, on Jewish philosophy and The (Guilty) Conscience of the Conservative, on political thought. This past year, he also coached the YUHSBM hockey team to the final game of the playoffs.

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