BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Rediscovering the Hirschian Legacy

Three books have been published in the past year which illuminate the life and thought of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. In the following pages, two eminent scholars, Rabbi Shelomoh E. Danziger and Dr. Judith Bleich, explore the world of Rabbi Hirsch and the meaning of his legacy today.

THE WORLD OF RABBI S. R. HIRSCH
THE NINETEEN LETTERS

Newly translated and with commentary by Rabbi Joseph Elias
Feldheim Publishers, 1995, 359 pages

REVIEWED BY
RABBI SHELOMOH E. DANZIGER

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), the great Frankfurt *rav*, was the *gaon* and *tzaddik* who inspired Western Orthodoxy to conquer, to "Toraize," the new *derech eretz* (i.e., civilization) of the post-ghetto era. In the words of Dayan Grunfeld: "The universality of Rav Hirsch's mind, the range of his intellect and knowledge, the depth of his historic vision, the clarity of his Jewish conception are truly amazing, whilst the certainty and absoluteness of his religious convictions are awe-inspiring." The foundations of this Torah conception were first presented to the public in Rav Hirsch's *Nineteen Letters.* There has long been a need for a more current translation and explanatory comments. The need has now been met.

This commentary is marked by the erudition, *yir'as shamayim*, stylistic fluency and ideological information that characterize all the writings of Rabbi Elias. It is a magnum opus of a respected teacher of *hashkafah* (philosophical orientation) to generations of students in the Rika Breuer Seminary, of which he is the principal, and to readers of *The Jewish Observer*, of which he is on the editorial board.

The presentation of biographical and historical background, the moving eyewitness account of the meeting of Rav Yisrael Salanter and Rav Hirsch, the synopses that preface each Letter, the clarifying commentary and the liberal provision of cross-references — all these inform and fascinate the reader who wishes to understand the world of ideas of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch *zt"l.* Rabbi Elias has performed an arduous task in presenting this well-crafted, valuable work to the public.

Yet, devoted followers of Rav Hirsch, including this reviewer, may well object to the numerous views, cited at every opportunity, of those of different orientation who opposed, and still oppose, Hirschian principles. The virtual effect of this is to counteract, or at least to moderate, some of the most "Hirschian" concepts of the *Nineteen Letters*. The caveat of the commentator that he does not "presume to be a *posek,* to decide between different schools of thought" hardly answers the objection. What would have been appropriate in a book of *hashkafah* by Rabbi Elias seems less so in a book entitled *The World of Rabbi S.R. Hirsch — The Nineteen Letters.*

The eclectic approach of Rabbi Elias also leads him to a levelling of views that are really divergent. The following is an instructive example of the tendency to force Hirschian views into conformity with non-Hirschian ideas.

In 1876, Rav Hirsch wrote a series of *teshuvos* (in Hebrew) on *aggadah.** Rabbi Elias alludes to these responsa on p. 282. Editing does not permit full quotation, but what is quoted will disclose that Rav Hirsch makes the following points *very clearly:*

1. " 'We do not derive *halachah* from aggadic

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* *These were published in* HaMa'ayan, *Teves 5736/1976 and in English translation in* Light, *numbers 191-95, and republished in* Two Giants Speak *by Neve Yerushalayim College in 1994.*

To quote Rav Breuer: "Rav Hirsch and the proponents of his ideology were fully aware that their approach to Jewish education and professional training would also claim victims. They regretted this deeply, but they saw no other way... How many victims may have been claimed by *the rejection* of the *Torah im Derech Eretz* ideology?"

statements'...first of all because all aggadic statements are *not* (emphasis added) based on what was received at Sinai."

2. "We should not be wiser or more pious than the greatest of our early authorities (i.e., Rav Sherira Gaon, Rav Hai Gaon, Rabbeinu Nissim, Rabbeinu Hananel, Rabbeinu Shmuel HaNagid, Ritva)...(for whoever separates from them separates from life) —- all of whom...transmitted the principle that aggadic statements are only opinions *(sevara)* and conjecture *(umdana),* and we are to learn from them only what agrees with reason." To accept *aggadah* unconditionally "is *not* part of our obligation as Jews."

3. "These statements ought not be concealed from the *talmidim.* On the contrary, it is a *mitzvah* and obligation upon us to make all of this known to them."

4. The "opinion that the *aggados* were revealed at Sinai, and that there is no distinction *in this respect* between them and the received *halachos*...is a dangerous approach that poses grave danger to the *talmidim,* who will be raised on the basis of this view. It nearly, *chas veshalom,* opens the gates of heresy under their feet."

5. The statement of Yerushalmi that implies that aggadic statements are Sinaitic means only that "they too relate to the intention of [the Giver] of the Torah, blessed be He, that...there should arise in each generation ...individual scholars whose hearts are touched by God to draw from the well of Torah and *mitzvos* words of wisdom, rhetoric and *mussar* to draw hearts to love of God and the ways of His Torah... There is no doubt that these free methods too are acceptable to God, if they do not stray from the path of truth and verity, and that they are accepted and intended by Him from the very giving of His Torah. He informed Moshe of these modes (or: aspects, Heb. *panim)* too in a non-specific way, without specifying each specific statement that any scholar might at some time express publicly. On the contrary, He left it unspecified so that each scholar might distinguish himself, and that his wisdom might produce blossoms and flowers from the garden-bed of Torah and *mitzvos* to please God and man."

6. "Aside from all this (i.e., that the specific content of aggadic statements is not Sinaitic) it is absolutely impossible to derive *halachah* from aggadic statements [because] there are some aggadic statements that are expressed allegorically..."

These are *quotations* of Rav Hirsch's words.

Notwithstanding, after three pages (pp. 281-283) of strategic quotation, the clear intent of Rav Hirsch is circumvented by the concluding paragraphs of Rabbi Elias that read: *Their (i.e., the Sages') closeness, in history, to the revelation of the law and spirit of the Torah, and their spiritual stature and ability, infinitely greater than that of later generations, to grasp the meaning of G-d's revelation, vest their statements with authoritativeness. (It should be noted that, later in this letter, the author singles out Kabbalah in particular as the repository of the true spirit of Judaism.) In effect, this position* [i.e., of Rav Hirsch] differs little (sic!) *from that of Maharal, for example, or of Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzatto, who stress the* binding character (sic!) *of aggadic statements by our Sages, but also emphasize that they must be understood correctly: very often the outward form of the statement, its literal formulation, is meant only to serve as a cloak for the deeper, inner meaning (see* Ma'amar al ha-Aggados, *by Ramchal, and the discussion of this subject in* Michtav me-Eliyahu, *iv, 353-55).*

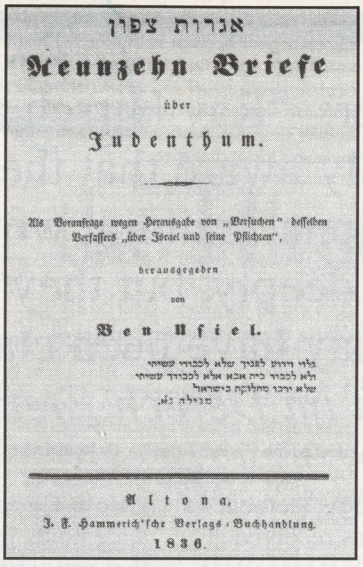
Of course, Rav Hirsch too refers to the allegorical cloak of some *aggados*, but only as a *supplementary* limitation of aggadic statements. Their primary limitation, according to Rav Hirsch, is that they are not Sinaitic in specific content and therefore *not binding,* as clearly stated by Rav Hirsch.

There is a discernible tendency in Rabbi Elias' commentary to reinterpret Rav Hirsch in conformity with the concepts of non-Hirschian thinkers, whose views are followed in many *yeshivos*. The nature of *aggados* is one instructive instance of this tendency. It is a curious fact that the recently published *teshuvos* of Rav Hirsch omitted the responsa on *aggadah.*

Another illustration of this tendency is with regard to Rav Hirsch's attitude toward *kabbalah.* In Letter Eighteen, Rav Hirsch writes: *Presently, a form of learning came into existence about which, not being initiated in it, I cannot venture to pass judgment, but which, if I comprehend rightly what I believe I under-*

stand, is an invaluable repository of the spirit of Tanach *and Talmud, but which has unfortunately been misunderstood. What should have been eternal progressive development was considered a static mechanism, and the inner significance and concept thereof was taken as external dream-worlds...Had it been correctly comprehended, practical Judaism might perhaps have been imbued with spriuality. Since it was misconstrued, however, it became thereby a magic mechanism, a means of influencing or resisting theosophic worlds and anti-worlds.*

This criticism is also voiced in Letter Ten, in which Rav Hirsch complains that the misinterpretation of *kabbalah* reduced its *spirit to physical terms, and man's inner and outer endeavors came to be interpreted as mere mechanical, magical, dynamic building of cosmic worlds — thereby often reducing all those activities that were meant to train and give vitality to the* [human] *spirit to mere amuletic performances.*


אגרות צפון

Neunzehn Briefe

über

Judenthum.

Als Vorausage wegen Herausgabe von „Versuchen" desselben Verfassers „über Israel und seine Pflichten",

herausgegeben

von

Ben Uziel.

גלוי וידוע לפני שלא לכבודי עשיתי
לא לכבוד כית אבא אלא לכבודך עשיתי
שלא ירבו מחלוקת בישראל
מגילה יג.

Altona,

J. F. Hammerich'sche Verlags-Buchhandlung.

1836.

Title Page, The Nineteen Letters

Rav Hirsch's critical attitude to *kabbalah*, or as Dayan Grunfeld prefers to term it, "this guarded attitude" (Introduction to *Horeb*), has in the interest of "ideological correctness" been reinterpreted apologetically by Jakob Rosenheim and Dayan Grunfeld, who are followed by Rabbi Elias. The apologia runs as follows:

1. Rav Hirsch does, after all, acknowledge *kabbalah* as "an invaluable repository of the spirit of *Tanach* and Talmud."

2. We find in Rav Hirsch's writings echoes of and parallels to ideas from kabbalistic literature.

3. Preparatory notes for *Horeb* indicate that Rav Hirsch made use of the *Zohar*.

4. It is said that his personal *siddur* contained marginal notes of a kabbalistic nature.

Therefore, the explanation of Rav Hirsch's attitude is, in the words of Dayan Grunfeld (Introduction to *Horeb*), that "Hirsch was concerned with the ethical side of Jewish symbolism and not its mystical side...His ethical symbolism did not exclude the possibility of a mystical symbolism which holds that every *mitzvah* has also a cosmic significance and that the effect of a commandment observed reaches to the remotest ramifications of the universe."

Or, in the words of Rabbi Elias (p. 155): *Rabbi S. R. Hirsch's avoidance of mystical and otherworldy speculation does not, however, indicate a denial of kabbalistic ideas. His ethical interpretations of the* mitzvos *and of Judaism in general merely represented emphasis on a different aspect of the Torah's teachings which complements the kabbalistic approach, rather then contradicting it. Both Rabbi S.R. Hirsch's approach to* mitzvos *and the kabbalistic approach stress that all human action produces effects. They differ only in that the kabbalistic approach emphasizes the effects on the whole universe, whereas the other approach underlines the effect on the doer and his world.*

A non-apologetic reading of Rav Hirsch's words in Letter Eighteen about *kabbalah* will indicate that Rav Hirsch is referring to two opposing, rather than complementary, approaches — the ethical, on the one hand, and the mystical, extramundane on the other. He is not complaining that the ethical does not complement the extramundane. His complaint is that the *proper understanding of kabbalah* should have been ethical, not extramundane. No amount of apologetics can get around the hard fact that Rav Hirsch calls the extramundane worlds of (what is in his opinion) "misconstrued" *kabbalah* "external *dream*-worlds."

In the same vein, Rav Hirsch's commentary to *Leviticus* 7:38 reiterates: *They (i.e., the* korbanos*) are neither a transitory concession to a generation that was still steeped in heathen ideas, nor do they form a chapter of kabbalistic, magic mysteries. They are* mitzvos, *laws like the rest of the Torah. Their meaning and purpose is teaching the way to keep the ideals of the Torah, and a means of help to keep the Torah.*

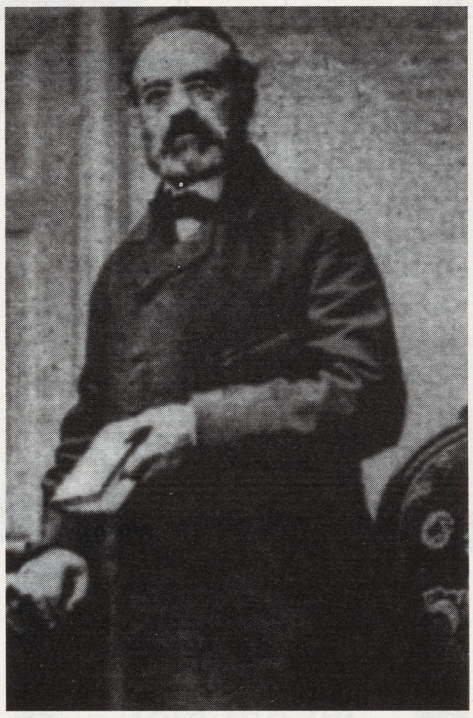
To Rav Hirsch, *kabbalah* is "an invaluable repository of the spirit of *Tanach* and Talmud" in the same sense as the *aggadah* contains that spirit. Both, in his view, are rhetorical and metaphorical works designed to suggest the betterment and spiritual elevation of man as he strives, through his acts, to draw nearer to God. Rav Hirsch, who was opposed to all theological speculations about Divinity (mystical as well as philosophical), uses *kabbalah only* as midrashic, metaphorical suggestions to man about his duties. He does not use *kabbalah* as a theological source of information about Divinity.

For example, the concept of the "*Galus* (Exile) of the *Shechinah*" in classical *kabbalah* refers to a disruption in the unity of the extramundane realm of Sefirotic Divinity, which requires the restored unification of *Tikkun*. Thus, the kabbalistic formula that precedes the performance of various *mitzvos* is: *L'shem yichud Kudsha B'rich Hu Ushechinteh*, "For the sake of the unification of the Holy One, Blessed is He, with His *Shechinah*."

Rav Hirsch, however, treats this concept as a midrashic metaphor that refers to *man's* world. Thus, in *Judaism Eternal*, Book One, chapter XI, Rav Hirsch speaks of the period when the Holy Temple still stood in Jerusalem, the period when the land belonged to the sanctuary and the sanctuary to the land, the time when the Torah reigned supreme, as the ideal time that "God's Majesty (i.e., *Shechinah*) rested on this Temple." Following the destruction of the Temple, this ideal was shattered. The Torah went into exile. *The unfolding of its spirit in the full blossoming of a blessed and God-*

inspired political life — 'Yerushalem' — this fulfillment of its Divine destiny was left to the future. It is for this 'Galus Shechinah', *this 'Exile of the Majesty of God' as our ancestors with true insight called it; it is for this sad disfigurement of the Torah that Jewish tears are shed and Jewish hearts mourn* [on Tisha B'Av].

It is in *this* midrashic, metaphorical sense that Rav Hirsch considered *kabbalah* "an invaluable repository of the spirit of *Tanach* and Talmud." It is in this rational manner that Rav Hirsch's writings echo with ideas from and parallels to kabbalistic literature. This is the kind of use that Rav Hirsch made of the *Zohar* in his preparatory notes for *Horeb*. Indeed, you will not find in *Horeb* any kabbalistic ideas of a theological nature, any speculations about Divinity or the *Sefiros*. It is therefore clear that the preparatory notes of a kabbalistic nature were put to use only in the kind of rational concepts we find in *Horeb*. The same applies to the alleged kabbalistic marginal notes in Rav Hirsch's personal *siddur.*



The tendency toward "ideological correctness" gathers strength when it deals with the Hirschian concept par excellence of *Torah im Derech Eretz.* So much has already been written on the various aspects and facets of this intriguing subject that a veritable literature has grown up around it. In various parts of his commentary, Rabbi Elias refers to and quotes from these writings, and adds his own insights as well. This makes for very informative reading. Systematic critical examination of all this material is not possible in the space allotted here.

Rabbi Elias' discussion of *Torah im Derech Eretz* is diffused and dispersed throughout his commentary. The treatment is intermittent. It ranges from glowing presentation of Rav Hirsch's views in theory to virtual dissuasion from following these views in practice. Thus, we read (pp.250-251): *The picture that emerges* [from Rav Hirsch's views] *is of a Judaism that affirms life and rejects seclusion, that emphasizes action rather than pure speculation or mystical meditation. (See Rambam's condemnation of asceticism in* Hilchos De'os *3:1... Note also the sharp words of* Arvei Nachal *on* Devarim *5:4: "The* mitzvoth *were given to be observed within the world, in human fashion, among the creatures — which excludes one who disregards worldly matters and whom people mistakenly consider to be a* chasid.*") The commandments are not designed merely to enable the Jew to escape the corrosive influence of the world, so that he can devote himself fully to spiritual endeavors. On the contrary, these spiritual pursuits, above all Torah study, are meant to lead to proper action, to the right response to the ever-changing conditions of life, in order "to prepare the world for the kingdom of G-d", as we put it in our daily prayers. In this way alone can man reach G-d. "... Only in using the mind and freedom of will which G-d has given us in the earthly sphere to which He has appointed us...*[do we gain] *the holiness that makes us worthy of the nearness of G-d" (CB 9:27).*

However, this positive picture is countered in practice by frequent references to the views of the *gedolim* of the "Torah Only" school who oppose the concept of *Torah im Derech Eretz,* not only as an educational system, but as a Torah outlook. Moreover, it is pointed out by Rabbi Elias that Hirschians often fell short of the ideal form of *Torah im Derech Eretz,* and turned it into "a kind of *Derech Eretz im Torah* that Rabbi S.R. Hirsch so bitterly decried" (p.322). Rabbi Elias suggests that the shortcomings of the Hirschians were not due exclusively to "historical circumstances of the time," but were basic weaknesses inherent in the application of *Torah im Derech Eretz* — a fact which "throw[s] light on the relevance of *Torah im Derech Eretz* for our time and society." These weaknesses, according to Rabbi Elias (pp.323-324), are:

1. It dissuades individuals from striving to achieve *gadlus baTorah* (greatness in Torah), since one can just as well be "a strictly *mitzvah*-observant and Torah-studying professional."

2. It is not practically possible to reach even acceptable levels of Torah knowledge while pursuing academic studies or while being immersed in business or a profession.

3. It exposes the Hirschian to today's culture of total permissiveness. In the words of Rabbi Elias: *Is there any way to meet this challenge other than by isolating oneself?... Can* Torah im Derech Eretz *have any relevance today? Would it not be more appropriate to forget about any mission to the nations, to limit our involvement in the world to the absolutely necessary minimum, and devote all our efforts to Torah study and self-perfection?*

Such statements by Rabbi Elias, coupled with the repeated references to the opposition of other Torah authorities to *Torah im Derech Eretz* ("see Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman, *Kovetz He'aros,* pp. 146-48, and Rabbi Baruch Ber Leibowitz, *Birkas Shemuel,* the end of *Kiddushin*") have a dampening effect — intended or not — on the reader who opens the *Nineteen Letters* to be guided and inspired by the *gaon* and *tzaddik* who authored them. Rabbi Elias has every right to present his own *hashkafos* in a book of his own, but not as post-

scripts to the *Nineteen Letters.* This seems inappropriate and even unfair.

Regarding the opposition of the "Torah Only" *gedolim,* Rav Breuer *z"l* wrote: *We neither look for nor require the agreement or approval of those who prefer a different course* [i.e., "Torah Only"]. *Their criticism does not touch us. We certainly respect the ideology of other circles provided their course is also an unmistakably consistent one. (A Time to Build,* p.17). Rambam, in his Introduction to *Mishneh Torah,* states that the jurisdiction of a *beis din* to issue decrees is limited to its own geographical area *(medinah).* Certainly, philosophical orientation *(hashkafah)* and outlook are no less limiting factors. A chassidic devotee would hardly be dissuaded by a *mussar* authority to limit his chassidic activities, nor would a *talmid* in a *mussar* yeshivah be dissuaded by a chassidic authority to modify his *mussar* approach. In the words of the Telzer *Rosh Yeshivah,* Rabbi A.Y. Bloch, in his responsum on *Torah im Derech Eretz:* "It is very difficult in such matters to give a clear halachic answer, because these matters are very much dependent on outlooks *(hashkafos)* and opinions, which are more the province of *aggadah* than *halachah.*" And: "There is no rule, 'The *halachah* is like so-and-so' in matters of *aggadah* as there is in *halachah*" (from Rav Hirsch's *teshuvah* on *aggadah*).

Concerning the danger of exposure to today's permissive culture, the point of Rabbi Elias is well-taken, but is the solution "isolating oneself," as he suggests? Today, real isolation is not possible. We are faced with a situation where "there is no alternate road" (*leka darka acharisa*) and its resultant *oness* (unavoidable exposure), as explained in *Bava Basra* 57B. To quote Rav Breuer again: "Rav Hirsch and the proponents of his ideology were fully aware that their approach to Jewish education and professional training would also claim victims. They regretted this deeply, but they saw no other way...How many victims may have been claimed by *the rejection* of the *Torah im Derech Eretz* ideology?" Every system claims victims.

Rabbi Elias suggests that we isolate ourselves and "forget about any mission to the nations," as though the *Torah im Derech Eretz* ideology invented that mission. Hashem imposed that mission on us when He gave us His Torah. "I...have set thee...for a light of the nations" (*Isaiah* 42:6) is not something we may choose to forget. It is the Divine definition of the place of the Torah People in the world.

Moreover, the "Torah Only" isolation that Rabbi Elias suggests as a means of solving problems caused by *Torah im Derech Eretz* creates problems of its own. Isolation limits our skills of communication and our opportunities for *Kiddush Hashem* as representatives of Torah Judaism. "Torah Only" isolation also results in economic problems that give rise to other religious dilemmas no less severe than those faced by the adherents of *Torah im Derech Eretz.*

INSTEAD OF TWO OPPOSING CAMPS, THERE SHOULD BE A MERGING OF THE BEST ELEMENTS OF BOTH CAMPS...

Rabbi Elias is concerned that *Torah im Derech Eretz* fails to produce *gedolei Torah.* Of course, we must produce *gedolei Torah,* but mass production of such *gedolim* is not possible. Those individuals who are produced because *nafsham chashkah baTorah* should, in the words of Rav Schwab's *These and Those,* "devote sufficient time and interest to gain...useful and learned information...in the world of science and philosophy... especially if he is...a guide and counselor, or...a spokesman for our generation."

Both camps have fallen short of ideal achievement. Mastery of the Torah *in toto,* in all *chadrei Torah,* is seldom achieved, if at all. It may not be achievable. A *rosh yeshivah* who is a master of *K'tzos* and the theoretical *chiddushei Torah* that are current in the *yeshivishe* analysis of Talmudic texts is seldom a master of *p'sak halachah,* or even of *all* Talmudic texts. A *posek* is seldom a master of the Talmudic texts in the manner just described. A yeshivah *mashgiach's* mastery may be limited to the realm of *aggadah* and *hashkafah.* None of these may be a master of *Tanach,* or even of *Chumash* according to *omek hap'shat,* as Rashbam calls it, or of *dikduk* according to Redak, or even of the *dikduk* of Rashi's commentary. We must all be satisfied with the less than ideal solution of specialization, and strive to learn as much Torah as possible according to individual circumstances and strengths.

Instead of *These and Those,* in the sense of two opposing camps, there should be a merging of the best elements of both camps: *Torah im Derech Eretz* with more intensive Torah learning and a moderating of *derech eretz,* as advised by Rav Hirsch in his commentary to *Avos* (6:6, s.v. *B'miut Derech Eretz).* The result would be the Hirschian ideal of a life of Torah excellence and *Kiddush Hashem.*

In fine, Rabbi Elias' book should be bought and read by all. It is a rich mine of information that captivates the reader. However, to the reader who wishes to be guided by the *Nineteen Letters* of *Rav Hirsch,* we must add: *caveat lector,* let the reader of the commentary exercise care to separate the Hirschian concepts from non-Hirschian views. §