

The Relevance of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch In Our Time

"HOW RELEVANT IS RABBI SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH today?" is a question which is being asked not only by his critics of the right and of the left, but also in his own German-Jewish communities. The mere question is a symptom of the suspicion that historical and geographic changes may have made much that is Hirschian obsolete. As one who does not belong to any of the three groups mentioned, the present writer disagrees.

Critics of the right have always maintained that Rav Hirsch's method was an emergency measure ("*horaas shaah*") suited to the special circumstances of a Jewry which was not only on the threshold of Reform and assimilation, but also culturally and geographically isolated from the mainstream of Torah-true population. What was appropriate to the West was deemed a threat to Eastern Jewry. Classical Orthodoxy in the East had to be shielded from the influence of a modified, relaxed Orthodoxy. So ran the argument.

To our everlasting sorrow, the East no longer exists. *Eretz Yisroel* is only geographically in the Middle East; culturally it is no less Western than the United States and Great Britain. Nevertheless, the spiritual heirs of the East maintain that the growth of the Yeshivos in the large, concentrated, and successful Orthodox populations of the present-day West makes the temporary solution of *Torah im Derech Eretz* no longer necessary. Yeshiva growth has reduced that concept to an anachronism, an heroic chapter in the history of Jewish survival, a glowing tribute to a great and saintly leader. Western Orthodoxy has developed Jewishly; matured to the point where it can dispense with Hirschianism and embrace the full Orthodoxy of the East. Thus argue the critics of the right today.

The critics of the left agree on the anachronistic nature of Hirschian thought in relation to a maturing Western Orthodoxy, but for opposite reasons. For them Hirsch's *Torah im Derech Eretz* was merely a transitional stage between the old ghetto and the total involvement in present-day life, which is, or should be, the goal of modern Orthodoxy. Hirsch advocated familiarity and contact with Western culture, but an acceptance of only those aspects which met the standard

of an unchanging Divine Torah. There was a dichotomy between an unchanging Torah and a dynamic, changing culture. What is required today, according to the vanguard of the left-wing, is complete immersion in modern society, sociologically, psychologically, and philosophically. Dichotomy must give way to an organic interplay between *Torah* and *Derech Eretz*—a dialogue. Through this confrontation a mutual influence will ensue that will *creatively* affect Torah values in relation to culture. No longer would an absolute preexisting rule or concept be applied to a societal circumstance. Instead these would, by confrontation, join together to create a new legal or conceptual standard. These critics of the left say they accept the divine origin of the Torah—for they consider themselves Orthodox—but their concept of halakhic development is not one of *application* of the received corpus of *Torah Shebbeal Peh* to new circumstances, but rather evolution of the corpus itself in law and in concept. Since they nevertheless call themselves Orthodox and halakhic, it should come as no surprise that they also invoke the Hirschian motto of *Torah im Derech Eretz*.

In the German-Jewish communities the response to new conditions has varied. Some maintain *Torah im Derech Eretz* unchanged from the dominant form it took in the past among the majority of its adherents in Europe. Some have gravitated towards the left. Others, impressed by the success of the Yeshivos, their intensive study methods, and by the external signs of Chasidic piety or the spiritual depth of Lithuanian *Musar*, have joined the critics of the right. The weaknesses of their own Western tradition are magnified, its strengths minimized, while the process is reversed with regard to the newly-adopted position.

There is no intention here to enter into an ideological controversy with the critics of the right, whom we love and respect, and who, following eminent authorities of the East, reject *for themselves* the principle of *Torah im Derech Eretz*. In relation to ourselves, however, we say as did the *Ramo* to the *Maharshal*, when the former was criticized for his philosophical studies: "It is an old difference of opinion among the authorities" (*mahalokes yeshanah bein hahakhamim*) — SHEELOS UTHESHUVOS RAMO, 7. Let it be clear that the Hirschi-

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an approach has historic-halakhic precedent. We too: *Yesh lanu al mi lismoch*. But putting this basic ideological difference aside, there are certain *facts* which must be recognized before there can be any appraisal of the relevance of R. Hirsch today.

The first of these facts is that Rav Hirsch did *not* conceive of his system as a temporary, emergency measure. Any objective reader of R. Hirsch's manifold works realizes that they contain, not a "*horaas shaah*," but a serious attempt of a spiritual giant to formulate Torah Judaism comprehensively. To Rav Hirsch ל"צ, his conception was not a modified or relaxed Orthodoxy, but a return to the fullness and breadth of Classical Orthodoxy.

The second basic fact to be stressed, because much confusion results from ignoring it, is that the *Torah im Derech Eretz* principle must be applied to the context of *today's Derech Eretz*. To freeze the principle in a particular mold of the past is inherently contradictory and antithetical to its underlying concept. In the words of Lithuanian-born Rabbi Yaakov Yehiel Weinberg of Montreaux (educated in Slabodka, former head of the Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin, author of *Sheelos Utheshuvos Seridei Esh*):

The present-day Jew—to the extent that he is not devoted to *Limud haTorah* and to the life of the Yeshiva—is bound by a thousand ties to modern culture. He is bound through business, industry, and communal affairs, as well as through education and professional training in the schools and universities. Words, sighs, and tears will not change this fact. The solutions being suggested by the small-minded and the short-sighted will not save a confused generation. My advice is that we learn from a great teacher in Israel who faced the challenge very successfully. *Certainly his educational method and approach require a new formulation which is better suited to the conditions of the day and to the spiritual needs of Jews who today strive for full mastery and profound knowledge of the Torah sources.* But the direction and the goal set by the great teacher remain valid"

(*Torath Hahayyim*, in the anthology, HARAV S. R. HIRSCH, MISHNATHO VESHITTATHO, Ezra, Jerusalem, 5722).

The present writer has shown elsewhere (CLARIFICATION OF R. HIRSCH'S CONCEPTS, *Tradition*, Vol. 6, No. 2) that it is *not* R. Hirsch's theoretical educational program as expressed in his writings that requires a new formulation, but the way the program had to be carried out in practice *out of sheer necessity*. However, Rabbi Weinberg is right in pointing out that one of the salient features of our changed Jewish milieu is the ability and the desire of the youth of today's mature Western Orthodoxy *by themselves* to "go back to the sources of Judaism—*Tenach, Shas, Midrash*," as R. Hirsch demanded in his Eighteenth Letter. Originally this was not possible for R. Hirsch's community, nor for other Western Communities. Intensive Talmudic study has finally come to the United States only after seventy-five years of preparatory ground-work. In Germany the

Frankfurt Yeshiva brought about an intensification of Talmudic study. Slowly more and more sons of Hirschian disciples desired intensive Talmudic training, but with tragic results for Rav Hirsch's concept.

Because of the lack of Talmudic training of his *baale batim*, Rav Hirsch acquainted his followers, especially through his Torah Commentary, with manifold halakhic concepts of the Talmud and *Rishonim*. These were supplemented by an analysis of the underlying spiritual concepts. This was done so masterfully and comprehensively that one who studies the Commentary carefully almost gains, through this secondary source, a Talmudic education. *Almost!*

Imagine a dynamic rabbi today zealously winning back a semi-assimilated, Jewishly-isolated community to full Torah observance and commitment. He would, of course, stress *Torah Shebikhesav* as his basic text. He would introduce the concepts and rules of *Torah Shebbeal Peh* only in conjunction with the former. This is the necessary method of rebuilding. The extent to which Rav Hirsch did this was massive, but he could do no more. Intensive study of *Gemara* takes a long time to develop in a renewed community.

However, Classical Orthodoxy, *without neglecting other areas of Torah study*, demands *intensive* study of Talmud as the *main preoccupation* of an educated Jew, at least in his leisure time (*Rambam*, Talmud Torah I, 12). This is the ideal, which is not attained by all, but which must remain the ideal. *Any Orthodoxy which modifies this ideal has ipso facto modified its Orthodoxy.* Before the Hirschian community had reached the educational level that made intensive study of Talmud possible, a kind of *Torah im Derech Eretz* had already grown up which had, to some extent, dispensed with the above-mentioned ideal not only in practice, but as an ideal.

... at the end of the nineteenth century the word Yeshiva, to the average Orthodox German Jew, denoted something that belonged to past history. When Rabbi Hirsch's successor, Rabbi Salomon Breuer, soon after taking office in the Spring of 5650, called for the establishment of a Yeshiva—this call was by no means received with enthusiasm in all quarters. Some of the loyal adherents of Rabbi Hirsch misunderstood the teachings and principles of their spiritual mentor and saw in a Yeshiva an unknown institution, the founding of which would be something of an 'East European development' quite foreign to them. (THE FRANKFURT YESHIVA, Dayan Dr. E. Posen, RABBI DR. JOSEPH BREUER JUBILEE VOLUME, Feldheim, New York 1962).

The fact also produced inevitable side-effects, despite the amazing renewal of Orthodoxy in Germany. *All this was in no way related to the fundamental concepts of Rav Hirsch concerning Torah Judaism.* Unfortunately, however, the *illusion* had already been created that *intensive* Talmudic study was not in harmony with Rav Hirsch's concepts, and that to be consistent such study had to be pursued only by adopting the basic outlook of

“... anyone who walks uprightly as G-d made him, who throws off the yoke of the manifold calculations which the sons of men have invented ... he comes sanctified as most holy.”

the East and by rejecting the fundamental concepts of Rav Hirsch. Thus those who could have brought the *Torah im Derech Eretz* of Rav Hirsch to its highest fulfillment, tragically—and needlessly—abandoned their great Rav and his concept.

The confusion persists to this day, and herein lie the challenge and the relevance of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch today. Conditions are now favorable for a *Torah im Derech Eretz* practised by *talmidei chachamim* capable of and committed to intensive Talmudic preoccupation, at least in leisure time. Some fruit of this excellent vineyard is already visible; it compares favorably in various ways with the fruit from other vineyards.

The ideal program of such a *Torah im Derech Eretz* until the end of secondary school would be intensive Talmudic training, without, however, neglecting *Torah*, *Neviim*, *Ukesuvim*, and related areas of Torah study. There would be the most effective instruction in general knowledge by the most economical means by Orthodox, Torah-oriented teachers, who would teach in harmony with the Torah and from the context of its all-encompassing view. *Limud HaTorah* would be clearly *ikkar*, with general knowledge auxiliary and secondary, but effectively taught.

After this secondary school education, many would choose to go on to business or to the professions, and Talmudic preoccupation would be left for their free time. Before pursuing their professional training, they would probably devote a year or two exclusively to improving their Talmudic competence. In guiding our youth, we would point out that this is the general course, “for not all can ascend to the high level of exclusive preoccupation with the Torah,— and this is covered by the statement of *Berakhos* 35b: *Many did as Rabbi Shimeon ben Yohai, but did not achieve success*, which implies only when done by the many” (*Beur Halachoh* to *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim*, 156, wherein it is stated: “Afterwards one should engage in his worldly occupations, for all Torah study without worldly occupation must in the end fail and become the cause of sin; for impoverishment will lead one to transgress G-d’s Will.”).

On the other hand, some would make the Torah their profession—*Torasan ummanusan*—“for there can at all times be found individuals who successfully carry out such a program. In this vein the *Rambam* writes in Chapter 13 of *Shemittah and Yovel*: ‘Not only the tribe of Levi, but anyone in the world whose inclination and mind lead him to separate himself [from worldly occupations] and to stand before Hashem, to serve Him and to know Him; anyone who walks up-

rightly as G-d made him, who throws off the yoke of the manifold calculations which the sons of men have invented—any such man becomes sanctified as most holy. Hashem will be his portion and inheritance in the eternal world, and will grant him in this world a measure sufficient for his needs, as He granted the Kohanim and Levites’” (*Beur Halachoh*, *ibid.*). For those who choose this path, higher institutions of learning would be established to teach Talmud on the highest qualitative and quantitative level. In loyalty to the *Torah im Derech Eretz* ideal they would still maintain an interest in general thought and affairs, and relate to them. They would do the same after becoming the recognized Torah authorities.

In choosing the path best suited to them, our youth would not be coerced by authority, philosophical outlook, or the personal inclination of others into any decision. They would choose according to their own inclination, personality, ability, and opportunity, under expert guidance. There would be no sense of compromise in choosing the general course, as there often is today among non-Hirschians. A sense of compromise vitiates one’s Torah outlook and breeds further compromises. All would strive to serve the Divine purpose faithfully; all would help build a healthy Torah community, which has always been based on many and varied occupations. But intensive Talmudic preoccupation would be the free time activity of all, and those whose Torah would be *ummanusan* would be considered the most valued resource of the community, members of the highest of all professions.

This mature form of *Torah im Derech Eretz* would perhaps prevent the present trend towards the polarization of Orthodoxy into, on the one hand, a camp that completely rejects modern culture to the point of no contact and no meaningful interest, and, on the other, the left-wing’s total immersion in modern life and thought—according to the theory outlined above—which leads only to the rejection of Orthodoxy in its classical sense and halachic concept. The highest calibre of Torah competence and authority coupled with a true conversance with the modern context of life and thought, which would characterize this ideal camp of *Torah im Derech Eretz*, would generate vocal and respected representatives of true Torah Judaism, who would displace the present and the aspiring left-wing usurpers.

This, in one man’s view, is the relevance of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch today. The goal has not been achieved to date. It is worthy of our utmost effort and strivings.