

## *From the Pages of Tradition*

### R. SHIMON SCHWAB: A LETTER REGARDING THE "FRANKFURT" APPROACH

*In 1963, a scathing critique of the Torah and Derekh Eretz movement founded by R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (d. 1888) appeared in print.<sup>1</sup> It was authored by R. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler (d. 1953), a leading member of the Musar movement, mashgia'h of the Ponoviez yeshivah in Bnei Brak, and profound thinker.<sup>2</sup> Labelling the Torah and Derekh Eretz movement the "Frankfurt" approach, Rabbi Dessler conceded that very few graduates of Torah and Derekh Eretz educational institutions defected from traditional Judaism. This was certainly a strength. But, argued Rabbi Dessler, precisely because secular study was incorporated into its curriculum, the "Frankfurt" approach was doomed to failure. In effect, it produced no gedolei yisrael and precious few rabbinic scholars (lomedim) of note. In contrast, the East European yeshivot had only one educational goal: the production of gedolei yisrael. Secular study was banned from the yeshiva curriculum because nothing short of total immersion in Torah study would produce gedolei yisrael. The gedolim in Eastern Europe were well aware that heavy casualties would result from this single-minded approach to Jewish education. But that was a price they were prepared to pay in order to produce gedolei yisrael.*

*A letter was sent to Rabbi Shimon Schwab, soliciting his response to Rabbi Dessler's critique. His response was published anonymously in ha-Ma'ayan, a distinguished Israeli Torah journal, in 1966.<sup>3</sup> We are indebted to the editorial board of ha-Ma'ayan for granting us permission to republish the essay in English translation.<sup>4</sup>*

*Rabbi Shimon Schwab (1908-1995) was born in Frankfurt am Main, where he was introduced to the legacy of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch. In 1926 he left for Lithuania, where he studied at the yeshiva of Telz. He would later study at the yeshiva of Mir in Poland. While in Eastern Europe, he met, and came under the influence of, such gedolei yisrael as the Hafetz Hayyim of Radin, R. Hayyim Ozer Grodzenski of Vilna, and R. Yeruham Levovitz of Mir. After serving in two rabbinical posts in Germany, he accepted a call to serve as spiritual leader of Congregation Shearith Israel in Baltimore, Maryland in 1936. His many accomplishments in Baltimore included an instrumental role in the founding of its Bais Ya'akov School for Girls. In 1958, he joined the rab-*

*binate of K'hal Adas Jeshurun in Washington Heights, New York, serving together with, and later succeeding, the late Rabbi Dr. Joseph Breuer as leader of the kehillah.*<sup>5</sup> *A prolific author, he will be remembered primarily for Bet ha-Sho'evah (New York, 1942); These and Those (New York, 1966); Ma'ayan Bet ha-Sho'evah (Brooklyn, 1994); and three volumes of selected studies, published in book form between 1988 and 1994.*<sup>6</sup>

In response to your letter: I received the issue of *ha-Ma'ayan* (Tishre 5724 [1963]) upon publication, and read R. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler's (of blessed memory) essay. It was reissued in his *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu*, volume 3, which just appeared in print.

Who am I to render an opinion regarding a matter about which greater and better rabbinic scholars have yet to reach agreement? The rabbis of the previous generation, indeed the ancestors of Rabbi Dessler who were the founders of the Musar movement, R. Israel Salanter [d. 1883] and his disciple R. Simhah Zissel [Broida, d. 1897], addressed this issue.<sup>7</sup> I have heard that their view on these matters came very close to that of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, but that they were outnumbered and opposed by the majority of [East European] rabbis at the time. It seems to me that this was always the case historically. The majority of rabbis refused to engage in secular study, lest they be ensnared by it. On the other hand, in every generation a minority of Torah sages engaged in secular study, using it as a handmaiden to serve the cause of Torah. That minority pursued its own path and sanctified God's name throughout the universe, as is well known. R. Moses Isserles [d. 1572] already wrote in a responsum to R. Solomon Luria [d. 1574] that it was an ancient debate between the sages ( see *She'elot u-Teshuvot R. Moses Isserles*, §§ 6 and 7; cf. [R. Abba Mari b. Moses Astruc of Lunel, d. 1300] *Minhat Qena'ot*).

Who knows! It may well be that both approaches, "Torah and Derekh Eretz" and "Torah Only" are true, both reflecting the essence of Torah. What is crucial is that one's intent be for the sake of Heaven, always according the Torah primary status, and making secular study secondary. No rabbinic court ever banned secular study. Indeed, the Torah scholars of the various generations never ruled officially in favor of the one approach over the other. Everyone is free to select whichever approach finds favor in his eyes. Let him consult his teachers and follow in the footsteps of his forefathers. The advocates of the one approach must respect the advocates of the other approach. They may not cast aspersions on the approach they reject. To the contrary, they must provide support for each other. In particular, one must be wary of repudi-

ating the views of the opposing approach, without first mastering the fundamentals of the approach being criticized. It seems to me that the majority of the critics of the Hirschian approach have not plumbed the depths of his writings and, consequently, have not understood him properly. Let everyone stand guard over his approach for the sake of Heaven, until such time that a light shines forth and our justices and rabbinic advisors will return. Only then will all doubts be resolved and the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.

Regarding Germany, it is worth noting that with the appearance of [Moses] Mendelssohn's [d. 1786] disciples and their polluted teachings, large numbers of Jews drowned in the sinful waters of heresy, conversion to Christianity, ignorance, and assimilation. Only a remnant remained loyal to God and His Torah, i.e., those who came under the influence of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, of blessed memory, and his colleagues. They [the Rabbis] built fences around the breaches that marked their generation and renewed the foundations of the Jewish religion. Indeed, they focused all their attention on repairing the breaches. Their most talented disciples necessarily devoted themselves entirely to the pressing needs of their generation, i.e., to winning Jews back to Judaism. These disciples followed with precision the instructions they received from their teachers. One can hardly blame them [i.e., the teachers], if none of them [i.e., the disciples] were recognized as renowned *geonim*. Nevertheless, several of the disciples were distinguished rabbinic scholars. Perhaps, in proportion to the number of observant Jews in Germany, no fewer Torah scholars were produced in Germany than in Eastern Europe. In Eastern Europe, with its population of some 5,000,000 Jews, most of them observant Jews who studied in *hadarim*, aside from the thousands and tens of thousands who attended *yeshivot*, it comes as no surprise that many renowned *geonim* were produced. Moreover, truthfully, it must be noted that already two hundred years prior to Mendelssohn renowned *geonim* were no longer being produced in Germany. It is well known that the majority of rabbis, originally from Germany and elsewhere in Western Europe, already by that time had migrated to Poland, Lithuania, and Russia. When Mendelssohn's disciples began polluting the air of Germany, few were the recognized *geonim* in Germany who were native born and trained in Germany. A child could count them. Virtually all rabbis in Germany, Holland, and the like at that time were natives of Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, and other Eastern lands. This is no small matter! Surely, at that time, our forefathers in Germany did not pursue secular study and did not attend Gentile schools. Rather, the vast majority of them were

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Torah true, God-fearing, observant Jews. Yet they imported their rabbis from afar, selecting the *geonim* from Eastern lands, because they could no longer produce them (with some exceptions) in the West. Who knows why a specific land produces *geonim* over a prescribed period of time, only to cease doing so when the privilege is transferred to another venue! This very question needs to be asked regarding the Jewish communities in Babylonia, Spain, and North Africa, all of which were centers of Torah, yet at an appointed time they ceased to be so. Why this phenomenon occurs is hidden from us; doubtless, it is reckoned among the secrets of He who announced the generations from the start.<sup>8</sup>

In the period following Mendelssohn, the only renowned native-born *geonim* in Germany were R. Moses Sofer [d. 1839], his teacher R. Nathan Adler [d. 1800], and R. Wolf Hamburger [d. 1850].<sup>9</sup> In a slightly later period, we find the last *gaon* in Germany, R. Jacob Ettlinger [d. 1871], author of *Arukh la-Ner*, a renowned authority, universally recognized in all *yeshivot*. He, however, mastered secular study and attended the University of Würzburg for an academic year. He studied at the university together with his colleagues R. Mendel Kargau [d. 1842]<sup>10</sup> and Hakham Isaac Bernays [d. 1849], the teacher of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch.<sup>11</sup> (Incidentally, R. Jacob Ettlinger published a periodical, half in fluent German and half in Hebrew, called *Der Treue Zions-Waechter* [Hebrew title: *Shomer Ziyon ha-Ne'eman*]. In this regard, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch followed in his footsteps.)

The upshot of all this is that the claim that the “Frankfurt” approach was not capable of transforming gifted students into *geonim* in Torah is erroneous. It is certainly true that gifted students suffer no loss of talent by engaging in increased study. Thus, quite the contrary, to the extent they increase their secular study, their minds are broadened and their Torah studies are deepened proportionately, so long as they truly study for the sake of Heaven. On the other hand, a student lacking in intelligence, who is also denied exposure to secular study, will hardly grow in Torah and become a distinguished *gaon* due to that denial alone. R. Barukh [Schick, d. 1808] of Shklov,<sup>12</sup> in the introduction to his Hebrew translation of Euclid, testifies: “In the month of Teveth 5538 [1777-8], I heard from the holy lips of the Gaon of Vilna that to the extent one is deficient in secular wisdom he will be deficient a hundredfold in Torah study. . . . He urged me to translate into Hebrew as much secular wisdom as possible, so as to cause the nations to disgorge what they have swallowed, thereby increasing knowledge among the Jews.” R. Barukh also states: “There are Jews who are bereft of intelligence and secular study, which is precisely why they denigrate

the wisdom and knowledge they lack. Moreover, they hurl accusations of heresy against the wise, so that they be stigmatized and viewed as outcasts by the masses.”<sup>13</sup>

All the above I have written as a kind of “pilpul” in response to the letter of the *gaon*, Rabbi Dessler, in order to underscore the complexities of this difficult issue. The key question that remains unanswered is: What shall be the approach—in this orphaned generation—for the majority of Jewish schoolchildren? In particular, it is difficult for young students to engage in deep Torah study, yet still find time to master the essential and useful teachings of secular study. In any event, educational reform under the aegis of God-fearing teachers is necessary in order to stress the primacy of Torah study over secular study, and in order to refine secular study so that it can serve the interests of Torah study.

Those remnants of Jewry who, touched by God, wish to devote their lives to the study of Torah alone, and are prepared to lay down their lives in order to study Torah for its own sake, come under the category of “the tribe of Levi,” as described by Maimonides, at the end of the Laws of Shemitah and the Jubilee Year 13:12-13. But I worry about all the tribes of Israel, all twelve tribes, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They too are obligated to study and live by the Torah, making it primary in their lives and rendering all else secondary. I need to worry about them as well, to inculcate the fear of God in them, and to teach them how to live a life sanctified by the commandments and characterized by the sanctification of God’s name.

The approach of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch enables us to educate and produce God-fearing and Torah loyal young men, and righteous and valiant young women. Indeed, this is the “Frankfurt” approach, also known as the “Torah and Derekh Eretz” approach. It is a tried and tested method. It is especially appropriate in this country, at this time, which has much in common with the Haskalah period in Germany during the previous century. Had not R. Samson Raphael Hirsch established this approach for us, we would not dare to expropriate it without the prior approval of the Roshei Ha-Yeshivah and Gedolei Ha-Torah of our generation. But since R. Samson Raphael Hirsch merited producing several generations (indeed, over one hundred years) of observant Jews in Western Europe—and the so-called “Frankfurt” approach has grown and matured, yielding rich produce—all who follow this path walk in a well-trodden path and drink from a well dug by experts. (See regarding these matters, Maharal of Prague [d. 1609], *Netivot Olam*, section *Netiv ha-Torah*, chapter 14; and R. Jacob Emden [d. 1776], *She’elat Ya’avetz*, vol. 1, §41.)

Those who, for the sake of Heaven, oppose this approach, must admit that a ban on secular study in our time and in our countries would be a “decree that the majority of the community could not comply with.” Let the Jewish community rest undisturbed.

Regarding the minority of Jews who desire to study Torah only—and to do so throughout their lives at the renowned citadels of Torah—may blessings fall upon them and may they merit to study Torah for its own sake. Fortunate is their lot; the entire world exists for their sake. It is a sacred obligation to enhance, strengthen, and support their cause. No one disputes this. The debate is confined to the educational approaches regarding Jewish day schools and related educational institutions that serve the majority of Jewish students in our country at this time.

It seems to me that both [i.e., the “Frankfurt” and the “Torah only”] educational approaches are well-grounded in the sources, and both are essential for the continued existence of the Jewish people in our time. So it shall remain until the redemption takes place. Then, Elijah the Prophet will resolve all problems, including this one. He will decide retroactively whether R. Samson Raphael Hirsch’s approach was a time-bound one, intended only for his generation, or whether it was intended for all generations and all places. The Lord, blessed be He, will then shed new light on Zion, may it happen soon in our time.

Regarding the land of Israel, it has its own halakhic decisors. They are the great masters of the Holy Land, famous in Torah and in the fear of God. All Jews residing in the land of Israel must abide by their decision. No authorities outside the land of Israel may rule on their behalf. Let the Torah be observed in the palace of the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. Let there be peace over Israel.<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

1. It first appeared in the periodical *ha-Ma'ayan* 4:1 (1963)61-64. It was reissued (with minor changes) in *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* (Jerusalem, 1963), vol. 3, pp. 355-60.
2. See Lion Carmell, “Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler,” in Leo Jung, ed., *Guardians of Our Heritage* (New York, 1958), pp. 675-99. Cf. R. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *Hiddushei ha-Gaon Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler 'al Shas* (Jerusalem, 1992).
3. “A Letter Regarding the Frankfurt Approach” (Hebrew), *ha-Ma'ayan* 6:4 (1966)4-7.

4. Special thanks are due its editor, Yonah Immanuel, and Professor Mordechai Breuer of Bar-Ilan University, a member of its editorial board, for confirming my suspicion that the anonymous author was, in fact, R. Shimon Schwab.
5. See Moses L. Schwab, "Rav Simon Schwab: A Biography," in *The Living Hirschian Legacy* (New York, 1988), pp. 45-51.
6. They are: *Selected Writings* (Lakewood, 1988); *Selected Speeches* (Lakewood, 1991); and *Selected Essays* (Lakewood, 1994).
7. R. Simhah Zissel Broida, as indicated, was a disciple of R. Israel Salanter and a pillar of the Musar movement in Lithuania and Russia. He founded Torah institutions in Kelm (in Lithuania) and Grobin (in Latvia) that advanced the educational program of the movement. At those institutions, three hours per day were devoted to secular study, including Russian language, history, arithmetic, and geography. In general, see Israel I. Elyashév's essay in Immanuel Etkes, ed., *Mosad ha-Yeshivah* (Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 204-32.
8. Cf. Isaiah 41:4.
9. R. Wolf Hamburger, prolific author of rabbinic responsa and novellae, was among the last great *roshei yeshivah* in Germany. He headed the yeshiva in Fuerth, where R. Seligmann Baer Bamberger was among his disciples.
10. R. Mendel Kargau, author of *Giddulei Taharah*, was a disciple of Rabbis Ezekiel Landau, Nathan Adler, and Pinhas Horowitz. He too taught at the yeshiva in Fuerth, and was a close associate of R. Wolf Hamburger.
11. For discussion and bibliography regarding Hakham Bernays, see my essay in Jacob J. Schacter, ed., *Judaism's Encounter With Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?* (Northvale, 1997; in press).
12. See David E. Fishman, "A Polish Rabbi Meets the Berlin Haskalah: The Case of R. Barukh Schick," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 12 (1987)95-121.
13. *Sefer Uqlidos* (The Hague, 1780), introduction.
14. For another response to Rabbi Dessler's critique of the "Frankfurt" approach, see William Z. Low, "Some Remarks on a Letter of Rabbi E.E. Dessler," in H. Chaim Schimmel and Aryeh Carmell, eds., *Encounter: Essays on Torah and Modern Life* (Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 204-18.