

BOOK REVIEW

Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1884-1966, by MARC B. SHAPIRO
(Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000), 288pp.

Reviewed by
Mechy Frankel

The good news—and it by far predominates—first. This is a first rate, scholarly book. The author has expended considerable energies exhuming hitherto unavailable biographical material, either resident in private hands or effectively unavailable due to widespread and piecemeal dispersion in often obscure public records across three continents. He has also drawn on, and partially catalyzed the creation of, an oral history by interviewing an impressive cross-section of individuals still alive when the research for the book was conducted. To this wealth of raw material he has brought an integrating intelligence and judicious melding of disparate sources to create a vivid and ultimately convincing portrait of a most unconventional (at least to present day stereotypes) *gadol be-yisrael*.

The rewards for a reader's investment are substantial. Aside from the direct light shed on the personality and evolution of R. Weinberg's, *zikhrono livrakha*, *weltanschauung*, Shapiro provides invaluable sketches which illumine (and occasionally overturn) commonly held appreciation. Thus his brief retrospective on the circumstances surrounding the failure of the Berlin Rabbinical Seminary (founded by R. Hildesheimer) to relocate to *Erets Yisrael* prior to World War II in the face of the organized opposition orchestrated by R. Hayyim Ozer Grodzinski, *zikhrono livrakha*, places in proper perspective the onus-by-hindsight for this tragically conceived campaign. The effect of R. Hayyim's intervention, familiar to a fairly wide spectrum of the public whose reading tastes are not wholly localized in hagiographic works, is here balanced by an appreciation of the internal irresolution and outright opposition to the proposed move amongst the seminary's staff and board of directors. What emerges is that it was R. Meier Hildesheimer who agitated almost alone for the relocation against the majority of the decision-

making leadership's opposition—which included R. Weinberg, by then Seminary Rector. One cannot but infer that this, ultimately, was the decisive factor, whatever R. Hayyim's role.

It is not possible in a review of this limited scope to reprise all the nuggets contained in this work, but explicit notice should be taken of the subject of *Torah Im Derekh Erets*. Shapiro does an excellent job limning the differences between R. Hirsch, for whom *Torah Im Derekh Erets* was a living and *lekhathila* way of life, and the far less integrated conception of R. Ezriel Hildesheimer, and the educational consequences stemming from this ideological divide. Similarly, he provides a useful, if too brief, explication of *Torah Im Derekh Erets* itself as understood by R. Hirsch which, though known, is nevertheless useful in the face of persistent attempts to distort R. Hirsch's own views in a direction more consonant with certain prevailing ideological norms. R. Weinberg's role in the Rabbinical Seminary is explained as a continuation of an effort by the Seminary leadership to augment the *Wissenschaft* focus of the previous generation of Seminary luminaries (e.g. R. David Zevi Hoffman and his son-in-law, the distinguished Oriental scholar Jacob Barth) by melding it with a talmudic mastery available only from Eastern Europe. (This process had already started a few years earlier when the Seminary imported R. Aryeh Elya Kaplan, another gifted Eastern European *talmid hakham* and R. Weinberg's short lived predecessor as rector.)

Shapiro's account of the evolution and ultimate rejection of *Torah Im Derekh Erets* by the German Orthodox themselves is similarly instructive. Causally correlated with this shift from the Hirschian ideal was a sea change in attitude amongst the German Orthodox intelligentsia toward their Eastern European brethren. Whereas their nineteenth century standard bearers tended to think of their *Litvak* cousins as rather unsophisticated bumpkins, the twentieth century counterparts developed a great admiration for the Eastern European talmudic masters, romantically perceived more in touch with the unsullied spiritual wellsprings of an authentically Jewish soul.

R. Weinberg's attitude towards relations with non-Jews, his wholehearted adoption of Meiri's position regarding "modern" *goyim ha-gedurim be-darkhei ha-datot* will resonate with readers more attuned to Modern Orthodox persuasions (as Shapiro perceives it) than with the more "yeshivishly" acculturated. One is struck by the quite remarkable photograph included in the volume, showing R. Weinberg in a staged yet highly collegial grouping with his mentor—and quite Christian—

Professor Paul Kahle and other members of his academic *habbura*, including one Mehmet Ali. It is a picture truly worth a great deal of words.

Readers should also find illuminating Shapiro's recapitulation of R. Weinberg's halakhic response to the issue of *shehita* by stunning, an issue precipitated by the newly empowered Nazi government's delivery on a campaign promise to ban slaughter and mandate stunning for the meat industry. The activities of German Jewish leaders, including R. Weinberg, to reach a *modus vivendi* with the Nazis by campaigning against "western propaganda" alleging unfounded (!) official anti-Semitism provides fresh insight into both the desperation and self-delusion which gripped German Jewry in the mid-thirties.

Above all the reader will gain both a clearer picture and deeper appreciation of the intellectual evolution of R. Weinberg himself. We follow the development of this product of Slobodka and favorite of the Alter, with a traditional aversion to the German "*derekh*" and its associated talmudic *am ha'aratsus* to, in its final stages, a full embrace of the ideals of the Orthodox *haskala* embodied by the Berlin Rabbinical Seminary. But this embrace he always tempered with the *Litvak's* emphasis on talmudic mastery.

On the personal front, the external and melancholically resonant facts of R. Weinberg's life are adequately reprised in Shapiro's work. Acceding as a young man to urgings of the Alter, his family, and his own desire for the position that came with it, R. Weinberg reluctantly entered into marriage with the young daughter of the recently deceased rabbi of Pilwishki. His wife, sixteen years of age and uneducated, seems to have been singularly mismatched for the intellectually energized young *talmid hakham* who had already begun to dabble in the forbidden enticements of *hokhmat yisrael* (which maintained *sub rosa* coexistence within all the great *Litvak yeshivot*, to the continuing chagrin of the *rashei yeshiva*). The childless marriage ended in divorce after only a few years and R. Weinberg never remarried.

Maintaining a self-identification as well as a close personal and literary relationship with many of the Eastern European *gedolim* even after assimilating the culture of the Berlin Seminary, R. Weinberg was devastated by the loss of both his worlds, and spent the final two decades of his life in self-imposed exile, in Montreux, Switzerland. Montreux was then a backwater with few Jewish resources and far-removed from the post-war Torah centers slowly being rebuilt in Europe. R. Weinberg remained in Switzerland despite offers of generous appointments in major Jewish communities worldwide. His variously offered explana-

tions for refusal—distaste for partisan religious extremism and polarizing ideological feuds, and even claims that he lacked the funds to relocate—are difficult to deconstruct from this remove. Shapiro admirably refrains from excessively indulging in either mind reading or amateur psychoanalysis, though the temptation surely must have been great. Aside from the episodic entertainment of visiting Torah luminaries and maintenance of an extensive correspondence, R. Weinberg ended his days isolated from any regular social interaction with his natural peer group and without the library resources necessary to support either his halakhic investigations or his pre-war academic inquiries. His social seclusion was mitigated only by his adoption by the Weingorts, one of the 100 resident Jewish families, who provided, *in loco familia*, the only normal family life R. Weinberg ever experienced in his adult years.

Though of the yeshiva world, R. Weinberg was never a traditional *rosh yeshiva*. His pre-war professional life was split between the rabbinic, the university, and the Berlin Seminary—the latter institution never confused with a yeshiva by anyone. After the war, he lived out his days in Switzerland as a private citizen. While a leading halakhic authority in pre-war Germany, his international stature essentially developed only after the Holocaust.

His subsequent adoption by the Modern Orthodox is readily understandable. Here was a man who not only embraced academic studies, but actually engaged in such himself. Without conducting an exhaustive review, one still suspects there are not many other *gedolim* who have published a scholarly article co-authored by a Christian Bible scholar in the Hebrew Union College Annals. And his real, or rumored “flexibility” in halakhic rulings related to women’s issues and engagement with the external society resonate deeply with what one associates with Modern Orthodox sensibilities. Nevertheless, R. Weinberg continued to be held in high regard by the yeshiva world as well. In part one must attribute this fact to the close personal relations he always maintained, and attitude of complete deference which he almost always displayed, towards those giants of the traditional talmudic world. It may also, in part, be due to a lack of familiarity on the part of that world with R. Weinberg’s true perspectives. Thus his scholarly and ideological views were generally articulated in literary venues all but inaccessible to the yeshiva world. When discussions of secular studies were directed at eastern audiences, they tended to emphasize the ancillary pragmatic benefits of *Torah Im Derekh Erets*, rather than the Hirschian ideal which R. Weinberg had come to adopt.

• • •

While there is so much that is superb in this work, it is unfortunate but perhaps inevitable that it is also marred, not just by the odd error of fact or lack of focus on topics of more interest to the reviewer than the author, but also by—trivial in themselves—largely self-inflicted wounds.

The convention employed in the book, not always consistently, is to identify a rabbinical personage by title the first time he is referenced and subsequently only by his last name. While this is a perfectly conventional, though hardly mandatory, usage, it nevertheless grates to read of the doings of Grodzinski, Karelitz, or Kagan absent at least the honorific “R”; I do not believe the scholarly integrity of the work would have been compromised by such concessions to the ingrained sensibilities of what—I shall guess—is a significant component of the work’s readership.

The author is sometimes given to unsupported snap judgments. Thus Shapiro’s one line summary dismissal of the continuing scholarly relevance of R. Weinberg’s non-Jewish academic “rebbe”, Paul Kahle, does not sit well. True, many of Kahle’s conclusions are somewhat dated: the supposed temporal development of the Torah from an agglomeration of “vulgar” texts rather an *Urtext* (needless to say, neither option was acceptable to Kahle’s *talmid*, R. Weinberg); his identification of the *Ben-Naftali* masoretic tradition in particular manuscripts; finally, his description of the relationship between masoretic schools. Still, much of Kahle’s work retains enduring significance. If nothing else, his seminal contributions to the study of the Leningrad Codex and his co-editorship of the third edition of *Biblica Hebraica* would by itself suffice to guarantee not only his place in scholarly history but his ongoing contemporary relevance. Other contributions are of enduring value as well, for example his focus on the importance of the Babylonian masoretic tradition and his endorsement of the concept of vulgar texts (though divorced from the specific use he made of them). Finally, his great work on the masora embodied in fourteen early codices held by the Leningrad Museum is still the definitive resource for these uniquely important textual witnesses.

Shapiro’s summary characterization of Agudath Israel as an organization which initially aspired to be a universal umbrella for all Orthodox, but now “has degenerated into a political party . . .” is a clear example of an unnecessary and self-inflicting assessment. Not that he is wrong on the substance. But this is a summary judgment bound to inspire an instant and violent rejection amongst the gored. More importantly, it is not supported by argument nor is it particularly germane to the focus of the literary flow. It simply provides easy opportunity for those

uncomfortable with the book's theme to reject it out of hand by pointing to the prejudices of the author.

Shapiro identifies Slabodka as the innovator of the office of *mashgiab*. This is inaccurate as Volozhin itself had previously created the office and title.

The author also references the bitter fights waged over the right to communal separation in Hungary in one breath with struggles on the German front, with the Hungarian Orthodox struggle against the status quo *kehilot* and Neologs paralleled by the German Orthodox war versus the status quo and reformers. However, the Hungarian situation was more complex than its German counterpart due to the presence of a large Hassidic element within many communities. The Hasidim responded to a variety of local situations by petitioning the government for the right to be recognized as a separate, "Sefardic" confessional community. Their request occurred for reasons not necessarily related to the broader issue of centralization of the national Orthodox struggle with the Reform. And sometimes the struggles were between feuding factions among the *haredim* with nary a Neolog in sight (as occurred e.g. in Sighet where my own ancestors were prominent leaders of both warring Hasidic camps; though to be sure, the proximate cause of the Sighet separation was the "Sefardim's" wish to join the national Orthodox movement).

Shapiro's quick hit-and-run sketches of such personalities as the Rogatchover and R. Hayyim Heller are jarring, leaving the reader with distorted impressions of both these luminaries. While Shapiro does not create the material he cites, context is important, and so is the larger picture. Rabbenu Tam is not remembered today mainly for his (still startling for their vitriol) polemics against halakhic opponents. And while I appreciate that Shapiro has only brought certain individuals onstage within the narrow context of their chance intersection with R. Weinberg, a more balanced perspective should have been offered.

There are undeveloped threads as well, though, reasonably, outside the scope of Shapiro's focus. Reading this volume one can't help but reflect on the similarities and differences between the Hildesheimer Seminary in its final posture of embrace of talmudism of the Eastern European model, with the experience of Yeshiva University, the American institution which attempted a marriage between European talmudism and secular studies, though the latter's vision was not restricted to Jewish *Wissenschaft*. It would have been interesting to broaden Shapiro's comparison of the Frankfurt and Berlin approaches to include an assessment of Yeshiva's place in the spectrum—or perhaps

off in an orthogonal direction. One also wishes that he might have commented on the curious phenomenon observed presently, where even elements of the traditional yeshiva culture may cite the *Torah Im Derekh Erets* catchphrase with apparent approval, often with a *diyyuk* to distinguish it from an *ab initio pasul Torah u-Madda*. But of course these are new phenomena and outside the orbit of R. Weinberg's personal interactions, and thus the scope of this work, and we should be well satisfied with the work Shapiro has done.

There are numerous other contemporary and near contemporary *gedolim* whose inspiring life stories likewise await their critical redemption from the hagiographer's bondage. If Professor Shapiro could only be persuaded to turn his considerable talents to, say, R. Yitshak Hutner, *zikhrono livrakha, ha-megalle tefah u-mekhasse tefakhayyim*—the results could only be fascinating.

REVIEWER IN THIS ISSUE:

DR. MECHY FRANKEL, a graduate of RIETS, is a theoretical physicist who currently serves as Special Assistant for Advanced Nuclear Weapons to the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense.