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Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's Nineteen Letters on Judaism: Orthodoxy Confronts the Modern World

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Rabbi Dr. Moshe Y. Miller

In 1836, when a book called *The Nineteen Letters on Judaism* was published by one Ben Uziel in the German state of Oldenburg, Orthodox Judaism as we know it today did not exist. The book was published under a penname because its author, a young and idealistic German rabbi, did not want any attention drawn to himself that might detract from the cause to which he devoted his maiden literary effort. The book was an immediate success and subsequent editions were published with the author's name: Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888). Why did Rabbi Hirsch write this book when he did? What are the main ideas of this book? What relation does the ideology expressed in it have to traditional Jewish thought, general thought, and contemporary Judaism? Over the course of this chapter, each of these issues will be treated.

I.

Prior to the nineteenth century, there were no denominations within Judaism. That is to say, there was no option for a Jew to identify as either

Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox (among other options). Instead, there was a traditional Jewish society that all Jews, by birth, belonged to. Some repudiated Judaism altogether in favor of another religion. Some, like Spinoza, expressed heretical ideas and were excommunicated from the traditional Jewish community. Others still remained within the fold of the Jewish community and gave lip service to its principles, but actually deviating from those principles in practice and thought, albeit clandestinely. The advent of the European Enlightenment and its Jewish counterpart, the Haskala, changed all of this.[1] The Haskala itself did not create any new Jewish denominations. It did, however, create a cadre of Jewish intellectuals who questioned many of the time-honored beliefs and practices of the traditionalists. Interestingly, the two most famous eighteenth-century *maskilim*, Moses Mendelssohn and Naphtali Herz Wessely, were strictly observant Jews their entire lives.[2]

The emphasis placed by the Enlightenment on human reason, which was accepted by the Haskala, proved detrimental for the preservation of traditional Judaism. At the turn of the nineteenth century, young Jewish intellectuals – and this was an intellectual era, in which young people took philosophical ideas seriously – began to reject many of the basic tenets of Jewish belief. Along with a desire for complete civic equality – what is known as Emancipation – many of these people

1. In characterizing the Haskala as the Jewish counterpart to the Enlightenment, I am following the regnant scholarly view, in opposition to Olga Litvak's intriguing revisionist study, *Haskalah: The Romantic Movement in Judaism* (New Brunswick, 2012). For the regnant view, see Shmuel Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment*, trans. Chaya Naor (Philadelphia, 2004). The above analysis is not intended to suggest that the changed intellectual orientation of German Jewry was the primary *cause* of weakened Jewish observance. For an excellent analysis of the social factors leading to a breakdown of observance in the city at the center of the Haskala, see Steven Lowenstein, *The Berlin Jewish Community: Enlightenment, Family and Crisis, 1770–1830* (Oxford, 1994). See also David Sorkin's classic study, *The Transformation of German Jewry, 1780–1840* (Detroit, 1999).
2. What may be surprising to many readers is that many of the *maskilim* were closer to Orthodox Judaism than to any of the more modernist denominations. Wessely in particular was quite traditional in outlook and, aside from a controversy engendered by one pamphlet that he wrote, was a respected rabbinic scholar who meets any contemporary definition of Orthodoxy.

abandoned Jewish observances in favor of a more secular lifestyle. At the same time, the most extreme elements were converting to Christianity, which granted them immediate social equality, something which many Jews, particularly in the pre-Emancipation period, desperately wanted. Into this breach, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, stepped the Reform movement. It sought to develop a version of Judaism that appealed to Germany's modernizing Jews, that would stem the tide of conversion, and that would retain a connection to Jewish identity among the masses of Jews to whom Orthodoxy appeared antiquated and irrelevant. Initially, the Reform movement was content with cosmetic changes to Jewish practices, such as reciting some of the prayers in German, deleting those prayers that seemed archaic, and having a non-Jew play an organ for Friday night synagogue services. These modifications, among others, were justified by the early Reform rabbis, who were learned and who wrote responsa in rabbinic Hebrew arguing for the halakhic validity of these practices. Although the lay founder of the Reform movement, Israel Jacobson, spearheaded several experimental Reform institutions in the early nineteenth century, the most successful was the Temple – this was the term used by the Reformers for their house of worship, as it was more universal than "synagogue" – that opened in Hamburg in 1818.

The earliest response of Orthodoxy – as the traditionalists came to be called – was the 1819 ban on the Hamburg Reform Temple, expressed in a Hebrew pamphlet titled *Eilu Divrei HaBrit (These are the Words of the Covenant)*. This pamphlet contained responsa by leading Orthodox rabbis condemning the early Reform movement's halakhic innovations. No attempt at dialogue with Reform leaders or an evaluation of Reform ideology was contained in this pamphlet. It consisted entirely of negation. Sensing the lacuna in this initial response of the Orthodox, the Hamburg Orthodox community decided that a new rabbi, who could disprove the Reform claim that only those Jews who repudiated the Orthodox interpretation of halakha could be genuinely modern, should be hired. They found their ideal candidate in Rabbi Isaac Bernays (1792–1849), who preferred the title *Ḥakham* over *Rabbiner* since the latter title was used by Reform rabbis. Rabbi Bernays, about whom the pioneering Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz stated that he was "the

first to recognize in a much profounder manner than Mendelssohn the importance of Judaism in the history of the world,"[3] and who was university educated, preached in a polished German (as opposed to Yiddish or Judeo-German, which had been the norm), and donned modern clerical robes, could not be accused of naively and dogmatically following ancestral custom without due consideration of the values of modernity. Rabbi Bernays and his colleague and friend, Rabbi Jacob Ettlinger (1798–1871), author of the famed talmudic commentary *Arukh LaNer*, ushered in the emergence of what historians call neo-Orthodoxy. This does not mean that they created a new faction of Judaism but rather that their response to modernity charted a new course in traditional Judaism's relationship to the modern world,[4] one that differed markedly from that of, for example, the Ḥatam Sofer, whose most famous adage was that "anything new is biblically prohibited." Contemporary modern Orthodoxy owes much of its character to the pioneering work of rabbis such as Bernays, Ettlinger, and their students, Rabbi Hirsch and Rabbi Dr. Esriel Hildesheimer (1820–1899).

II.

Samson Raphael Hirsch was ten years old when the Hamburg Reform Temple opened in 1818, and his parental home was the site of meetings to discuss how Orthodoxy might confront the Reformers. Some historians have speculated that this imbued the young Hirsch with a sense of mission and a Pinḥas-like zeal to dedicate his life to rehabilitating Orthodox Judaism and making it relevant for modern Jews. Hirsch attended the philosophic lectures of Rabbi Bernays and, upon his suggestion, attended the yeshiva of Rabbi Ettlinger in Mannheim. After receiving rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Ettlinger, Hirsch attended the University of Bonn to study philology, history, science, and philosophy. Contrary

3. Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, ed. M. Brann, 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1900), vol. 11, 388.
4. For the now-classic scholarly thesis about the formation of Orthodoxy, see Jacob Katz, "Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 2 (Bloomington, IN, 1986), 3–17. For critiques of Katz's position, see Yosef Salmon, Aviezer Ravitzky, and Adam S. Ferziger, eds., *Orthodox Judaism: New Perspectives* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2006).

to popular misconception, Hirsch was never awarded a doctorate,[5] and he had spent hardly a year at the university when he received an offer for what turned out to be his first rabbinic post: the chief rabbinate of Oldenburg, made vacant by the recent departure of Rabbi Dr. Nathan Adler, who later became the first modern British chief rabbi. Rabbi Adler recommended Hirsch for the position in Oldenburg and it was there that Hirsch spent the next ten years of his life, during which time he married his wife, Hannah née Jüdel (1805–1882), and wrote his first two books.

The young chief rabbi of Oldenburg, still in his twenties, began work on a systematic classification of the mitzvot that describes both the details of their observance and their underlying rationale. This would eventually be published, in German,[6] as *Horeb: Essays on Israel's Duties in the Diaspora*, in 1837. However, Hirsch first brought the manuscript to the non-Jewish publisher that he knew. The publisher told him that the book was simply too long and therefore too risky for a first publication, and suggested Hirsch write a shorter synopsis of his main ideas to see if that sold well. Based on this suggestion, Hirsch began composing what would become his most famous and influential work, *The Nineteen Letters*, which was modeled, to some degree, on Rabbi Judah Halevi's twelfth-century work, the *Kuzari*. That work presented readers with a dialogue between a Jewish sage and an unlearned individual who was inquiring about Judaism. That Hirsch would choose the *Kuzari* as a model is no surprise given his expressed preference for Judah Halevi as a Torah-true thinker of the Middle Ages who avoided the extremes of both superrationalism and anti-intellectualism, as will be discussed below. Thus, Hirsch's work begins with a letter by a character named Benjamin, who is a young Jew, soon to be married. Though raised religious, he has completely abandoned all observance, regarding Jewish law as an obstacle to social integration, on the one hand, and intellectual enrichment, on

5. However, most of Hirsch's sons and sons-in-law did acquire doctorates.
6. Although today such texts are commonly published in the vernacular, it is notable that most of Hirsch's writings were published in German. Prior to this time, rabbinic texts were almost always published in Hebrew. Despite the reluctance of his own family, Hirsch persisted in writing in a language that the masses of German Jews could understand.

the other. Judaism, asserts Benjamin, stifles all creative and artistic tendencies that Jews may have, forbids them even the most innocent enjoyments, and makes social interaction with non-Jews in the modern world virtually impossible. Benjamin expresses his complaints to his childhood friend, Naphtali, who is now an Orthodox rabbi (and who clearly is a stand-in for Hirsch himself).

Here is an excerpt from Benjamin's complaint:

> As for our own religious literature (*Wissenschaft*), it perverts the mind and leads it astray into subtleties and the minutiae of petty distinctions, until it becomes incapable of entertaining simple and natural opinions, so that I have always wondered quite a bit how you, who have taste and understanding for the beauties of Virgil, Tasso, and Shakespeare, and who are able to penetrate into the consistent structures of Leibnitz or Kant, can find pleasure in the rude and tasteless writings of the Old Testament, or in the illogical disputations of the Talmud?
>
> And what effect has it, the Law, upon heart and life? The broad principles of universal morality are narrowed into anxious scrupulosity about insignificant trifles. Nothing is taught except to fear God. Everything, even the pettiest details of life, is referred directly to God. Life itself becomes a continuous monastic service, nothing but prayers and ceremonies. The most praiseworthy Jew is he who lives most secluded, and knows least of the world, though he permits it to support him, but wastes his time in fasting and praying, and the perusal of senseless writings.[7]

These are bold words! For the first time in the modern era, an Orthodox rabbi is putting pen to paper to express the point of view of non-believing, non-traditional Jews.

7. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters*, 3. My citations from *The Nineteen Letters* are from the 2013 (Zurich: Verlag Morascha) reprint of the German original, which I have translated in conjunction with the Drachman and Elias English editions. Page numbers refer to this 2013 edition (henceforth, *TNL*). See below, Further Reading.

The initial response of Orthodoxy – the pamphlet issued in Hamburg in 1819, discussed above – did not attempt to engage in a dialogue with those Jews who could no longer uphold the tenets of Orthodoxy. It simply pointed out how they were wrong and described which halakhot were being violated by the early Reform innovations. A perplexed, university-educated young Jew certainly would not have been won over by any of the responsa contained in that pamphlet. With the publication of Hirsch's book, a new chapter in the history of Orthodoxy, one that insists that historic Judaism remain engaged with the modern world, began.

In terms of structure, only Letter One is written by Benjamin, the non-traditionalist. The remaining letters are all written by Naphtali (meaning, they present the views of Hirsch himself). While reviews written of the book by partisans of the Reform movement seized upon this fact and charged Hirsch with being disingenuous, this critique completely misses the point. Although Hirsch did wish to express the anti-Orthodox position in his book, he did not wish to carry on an equal dialogue between both points of view. His goal was to convince readers of the relevance of Orthodox Judaism to the nineteenth-century European world. Clearly, he had to devote the majority of his book to conveying this message. Subsequent letters contain references to the responses that Benjamin gave to Naphtali's ideas, and that was sufficient to achieve Hirsch's goals.

The first letter had ended with Benjamin asking Naphtali to respond to the former's questions about Judaism by forgetting his rabbinical office and telling Benjamin what Naphtali *really* believes. The second letter begins with Naphtali taking offense at this suggestion of professional bias. Naphtali maintains that he chose his career in the rabbinate *as a result* of his convictions. From an early age, he says, he had been reared by his "enlightened religious parents" (*erleuchtet religiösen Eltern*)[8] to study Tanakh and Talmud and to find the spirit of Judaism

8. Mordechai Breuer, review of Noah H. Rosenbloom, *Tradition in an Age of Reform*, *Tradition* 16:4 (Summer 1977): 140–149, expressing the dominant scholarly view, rejects the assertion of Rosenbloom that Hirsch's characterization of his parents as *erleuchtet* is an indication of their Haskala leanings. Hirsch's depiction of his parents this way should be viewed as synonymous with describing them as "openminded," in contemporary language.

in its texts.[9] Naphtali proceeds to address Benjamin's complaint that Judaism does not lead its adherents to happiness or perfection. Can the achievement of happiness truly be the barometer of a religion's success? How many people truly achieve it? Perhaps one of the most subjective attainments is that of happiness, defined differently by each individual. Perfection can only be obtained by those who have the truth, but "truth itself is conceived by a thousand thinkers in a thousand different ways."[10] Instead of exploring such hopeless pursuits, those investigating Judaism must determine what its own texts say about itself.

III.

The first teaching of Judaism, as the beginning of the Book of Genesis indicates, is that the entire world – everything that we can see and that which we cannot – is created by God. Everything in creation serves a purpose and no creations function in opposition to others; rather, all of creation functions in tandem to create a harmonious whole. "One immense bond of love, of receiving and giving, unites all creatures. None exists by itself and for itself." Thus, the first message conveyed to man by creation is that of love.[11] The next issues to be determined are the nature of man and his place in this world. Even if the Torah were silent on these points, says Naphtali, would they not be obvious? Man too is a creation of God and he too must somehow fulfill his role in this world just as everything else in creation does. But man is unique: he has been endowed with free will. What all other created beings, from plants to animals, planets to stars, do instinctively – that is, carrying out God's will – man must perform *of his own free will.*[12] The Torah describes man as created in the image of God, which Hirsch takes to be a calling, not

9. *TNL*, 5.
10. Ibid., 6.
11. Ibid., 17.
12. For examination of other aspects of this issue from the point of view of philosophers whose writings Hirsch was familiar with, see Michael H. Hoffheimer, "The Influence of Schiller's Theory of Nature on Hegel's Philosophical Development," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46:2 (1985): 231–244. For a broader examination of this matter, see the excellent study by Gunther S. Stent, *Paradoxes of Free Will* (Philadelphia, 2002).

merely a description. Man is to be a likeness of God, that is, he is meant to emulate God's ways to the best of his ability.

Readers of *The Nineteen Letters* may not realize that Hirsch is here responding to critiques of Judaism that were made on the basis of the philosophy of the towering figure of the Enlightenment – and, in some respects, its most perspicacious critic – Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant posited that no act that is performed out of compulsion – what he termed "heteronomously" – can be considered moral. A moral act is one that is carried out autonomously. But isn't Judaism predicated on a God who commands and forbids as He sees fit, with formidable punishments awaiting those who disobey His will? Does Judaism not, then, run afoul of Kant's moral theory? No, Hirsch avers, because Judaism expects man to *freely choose* to carry out God's will because he recognizes that this is his purpose in the world. The Mishna (Avot 2:4) calls upon man to "make His will as though it were your own will." In the traditional hierarchy of Jewish ethics, serving God out of love stands higher than serving God out of fear of punishment. Thus, Kant's critique is not applicable to traditional Judaism, as Hirsch understands it.[13]

Hirsch stresses the importance of history for the proper understanding of Judaism, which he considers the key to the salvation of all of mankind. The Torah is not a manual for how one nation fosters its unique relationship with its tribal god. Everything in it is predicated on the proper understanding of the role that all of humanity plays in God's world. The purpose of *Am Yisrael* from its inception was to serve as a model nation that would educate all of humanity to achieve its calling. This is how Hirsch understands the midrash cited by Rashi to Genesis 1:1 which states that the world was created "for the sake of Israel," that is, for the sake of a model nation that can inspire the rest of the world to strive to achieve its purpose – an inversion of the exclusivist reading of this midrash, to wit, that the whole world was created for the Jews.

13. Kant himself would probably not have been satisfied with Hirsch's response. See Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, 1991), 185–213; Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (New York, 2008), 34.

Hirsch instead posits that the Jews were created to serve as benefactors for the whole world.

Why was it necessary for such a model nation to exist? Hirsch says this is because mankind, in its earliest stages, demonstrated that it was not fit to reach its calling unaided. The history of the earliest generations of man is the history of the consistent failings of people to live up to the divine task. From Adam to Noah to Abraham, only unique individuals succeeded in placing God's will at the center of their lives while the rest of mankind strove for materialism and pleasure. God therefore selected the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as those most fit to serve as a priestly nation since those men demonstrated in their lifetimes their commitment to carrying out God's will and to imbuing in their children a yearning to implement "benevolence and justice" in all their endeavors (Gen. 18:19). Immediately prior to the giving of the Torah, God tells Moses that the Jewish people will be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6) which Hirsch, following Maimonides and Seforno, interprets to mean that the Jewish people are to be the spiritual regenerators of mankind.

Ironically, the German Reform movement adopted as a central tenet the so-called mission theory, the idea that the purpose of the Jewish people is to live scattered throughout the world and propagate their ideal of ethical monotheism to the gentiles. According to this view, the Return to Zion is a metaphor for a period during which Jews would be treated benignly by the non-Jewish nations, who would be inspired by the Jews' ethical zeal to grant human dignity to adherents of all creeds. The nineteenth century was seen as the dawn of that era by many Reform ideologues. Did Rabbi Hirsch simply advocate a slightly modified version of this theory? Although some writers have suggested that that is indeed the case, this view is difficult to sustain. The most pertinent question was, what is the content of the mission of the Jews? For the Reform movement, it consisted of promulgating monotheism while living ethical lives. If non-Jewish society adopted an ethical code that recognized God and the human dignity of all people, that would signal the success of the Jewish mission. But Hirsch's mission was a different one! He believed that the original purpose of Creation was not thwarted when mankind as a whole did not live up to its calling, leading to the

selection of Abraham and his descendants.[14] Quite the contrary. That purpose was now to be achieved via a people uniquely qualified to inspire others, by their own example, to submit their *entire* lives to the divine will. The Jew cheerfully obeying the intricate laws of *kashrut*, for example, will demonstrate that there are indeed people who answer to a Higher Authority (as in the old Hebrew National commercials) even in their seemingly mundane affairs.

IV.

In subsequent letters, Naphtali introduces Benjamin to the history of the Jewish people and the fact that it failed to live up to its calling while it retained political sovereignty in *Eretz Yisrael*. It prized its possessions and military strength over its obligations to God, and thus it became necessary to exile the people from its land. In Letter Nine, Hirsch creatively translates Jeremiah 2:28 as "the number of your cities has become your god, O Judah."[15] (This verse is usually translated to mean that the Jews worshiped as many gods as the number of its cities.) Since the nation of Israel valued its material prosperity and its political security more than the spiritual values it was created to propagate, it had to be deprived of that which led to this situation. There was a short reunion in *Eretz Yisrael* under the leadership of Ezra. Then, on the eve of their second exile with the destruction of the Second Temple,[16] the mission of the Jews was further advanced by the creation of Christianity. This is because that new religion, though theologically flawed, did bring to the world knowledge of the One God (albeit in an adulterated fashion), the brotherhood of man, man's moral superiority over animals, and the

14. This is precisely the view of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707–1746); that is, that the selection of the Jewish people constituted a rejection of the salvific potential of the rest of mankind. See his *Derekh Hashem*, trans. Aryeh Kaplan (New York, 1997), 141.

15. *TNL*, 45.

16. Rabbi Hirsch, following a general view among medieval authorities, considers the return of some Jews to *Eretz Yisrael* during the period of Ezra to have been an incomplete redemption which ultimately served to fortify the spiritual bond of the people to the Torah in order to prepare it for the more extensive exile following the destruction of the Second Temple.

renunciation of wealth- and pleasure-worship. Later, the emergence of Islam, which was also heavily influenced by Judaism, further carried out Israel's mission of teaching mankind essential truths about man's purpose in this world.[17] Though Hirsch, throughout his writings, is scathing in his critique of certain doctrines of Christianity, his basic theory of religious tolerance is well captured in this short passage from *The Nineteen Letters* (even though those religions are not referred to by name).

"[The Jewish people] accomplished its task better in exile than while in possession of good fortune," writes Hirsch.[18] Jews, scattered throughout the world, demonstrated selfless dedication to the values of the Torah and were prepared to sacrifice even life itself when put to the challenge. Still, an exilic existence is not ideal, for it can contribute to the erosion of pure Jewish values and it makes the implementation of God's will on a national scale impossible. God will therefore gather the dispersed of *Klal Yisrael* once again in the Holy Land at a time that He sees fit, and they will then successfully dedicate their entire national lives to the fulfillment of God's will, and the other nations will seek inspiration from the reestablished Jewish national polity. Therefore, Hirsch opposed collectivist efforts at ending the exile, such as the program of Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer (1795–1874), the celebrated proto-Zionist author of *Derishat Tziyon*. Hirsch believed that God Himself will sound the Shofar of Redemption when the Jews are fit for it. Hirsch's approach to this issue was later adopted by the Agudat Yisrael organization that was founded by his descendants and disciples. This does not mean, however, that Hirsch would have had a negative view of Jewish statehood. The case of his grandson Rabbi Isaac Breuer, a founder of the Aguda, who favored the creation of a Torah-state, is instructive.[19]

17. *TNL*, 46.
18. Ibid.
19. Suggestions concerning how Hirsch would interpret the watershed events of the twentieth century, which climaxed in the creation of a sovereign Jewish state in *Eretz Yisrael* for the first time in nearly two thousand years, are merely speculative. However, Hirsch's insistence on seeing the hand of God at work in the developments of history suggests that he would have been averse to the theological anti-Zionism of the Satmar Hasidim, which is predicated on seeing the machinations of the Satan in the creation of *Medinat Yisrael* (the State of Israel). Isaac Breuer's unique

v.

The most significant issue for nineteenth-century Jewish thinkers was the authority of the Torah's legislation. While Mendelssohn had posited that in revealing the Torah, God had established a legal system that would remain in effect for all time, the next generation of German Jews gravitated more toward Spinoza's theory that the legal portions of the Torah ceased to have any authority when the Jews went into exile. In discussing Judaism with Benjamin, it became necessary for Naphtali to explain the significance of the mitzvot. Hirsch was strongly opposed to the medieval view that the mitzvot are to be divided between "rational" and "revelational" laws, that is, "those which are discovered by reason and those based on divine revelation only."[20] This view allows for a fundamental dichotomy to be suggested between those commands that humans readily understand as containing essential moral teachings, and which they are therefore likely to preserve for all time, and those which elude our understanding, and which therefore may come to be perceived as "ceremonies" that had spiritual potency for ancient Jews but are less relevant to modern Jews. It was precisely those mitzvot whose rationale the leaders of Reform did not discern or whose utility they questioned that were the first to be discarded. Hirsch developed a very creative system of classification of the mitzvot in which such a dichotomy is not possible.

Hirsch develops six categories of mitzvot: (1) *torot*: instructions or doctrines concerning God and man's place in His world; (2) *mishpatim*: precepts of justice toward creatures similar and equal to ourselves, i.e., fellow human beings;[21] (3) *ḥukkim*: precepts of justice toward those creatures subordinate to us, namely, animals and plants as well as

brand of Zionism may have appealed to Hirsch. See Moshe Y. Miller, "Between Frankfurt and Satmar: A Study of Two Schools of Orthodox Jewish Anti-Zionism" (MA thesis, Touro College, 2006).

20. The first medieval authority to posit such a distinction was Rav Saadia Gaon. See his *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*, trans. (from the Arabic original) Alexander Altmann, 94–102. (Quote from Altmann's commentary, 96 n. 4.)

21. Hirsch stresses fellow human beings and not merely fellow Jews. For discussion of this issue, see Moshe Y. Miller, "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Nineteenth-Century German Orthodoxy on Judaism's Attitude toward Non-Jews" (PhD diss., Yeshiva University, 2014).

justice toward our own bodies; (4) *mitzvot*: precepts of love toward all beings (the most amorphous of Hirsch's six categories); (5) *edot*: observances which give symbolic testimony to fundamental truths about the nature of the Jewish people and its place in the world; and (6) *avoda*: divine worship which, today, consists primarily of prayer. The sequel to *The Nineteen Letters, Horeb*, was devoted to a discussion of those mitzvot that are still applicable in the absence of the *Beit HaMikdash* and the underlying symbolic meaning of each of those mitzvot. As Isaac Heinemann noted over half a century ago, Hirsch's work was the first of its kind to suggest as the motive for a particular mitzva an explanation that was in accord with the details of the halakha.[22] Instead of offering a general approach and treating the minutiae of the mitzva as the undecipherable will of God, Hirsch insisted that each rationale be based on the details; for example, the materials that render a sukka invalid for use according to the Talmud. For Hirsch, these details teach us a great deal about the meaning of this mitzva.[23]

VI.

After cursory sketches of the categories of mitzvot and primary examples from each category, in Letter Fifteen Hirsch discusses the suffering and isolation of the Jewish people. As for individuals, Hirsch takes strong exception to the view that the Torah interdicts pleasure. On the contrary, there is not one form of pleasure that it forbids; each is merely regulated by its laws so that it is properly utilized. Taking up a line of argument that is often cited by hedonists for a very different goal, Hirsch asks:

> Would God endow us with instincts only to have them proscribed by His law to the point of their eradication!! The highest form of serving God, according to this [Torah] teaching, is "to be joyful

22. Isaac Heinemann, *Taamei HaMitzvot BeSifrut Yisrael*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1956), 91–92, 107–109. This view was expressed earlier in more partisan fashion by Hirsch's son, Dr. Mendel Hirsch. See his *Humanism and Judaism*, trans. J. Gilbert (London, 1928), 76–77.

23. The reader is encouraged to make use of Dayan Dr. I. Grunfeld's excellent English edition of the *Horeb*, which is both faithful to the original German and eminently readable.

before God," serene joyfulness in life based on our awareness that our life, thinking, feelings, speech, actions, our joys and our sorrows are all objects of God's attention.[24]

In this passage, Hirsch argues decisively against those currents within traditional Jewish thought that regard asceticism as a religious ideal.

As to the accomplishments of other nations which impressed Benjamin so much, Hirsch argues that, aside from the fact that these nations were merely seeking their own temporal happiness and not the enrichment of mankind when engaged in their endeavors, have not the Jewish people's achievements eclipsed those of other nations? After all, achievements in the realm of science, culture, art, and inventive skill only have value if they are subordinated to the spiritual purpose of human existence. The Jewish people can take pride in being the bearers of God's word for humanity. As for their isolation from other nations, how else could the Jews have preserved their spiritual identity but through isolation? Their task was to stand in opposition to the materialistic values of other civilizations, but this was never intended to foster chauvinistic attitudes toward non-Jews. The term that the Torah (Ex. 19:5) uses to describe the Jewish people, *segula*, does not mean that Israel has a monopoly on divine favor but rather that our God has a monopoly on *our* devotion; we must revere none but Him.[25] Hirsch here rejects the view, widely prevalent even to this day in many sectors of the Orthodox world, that Judaism's God has favor toward only one nation and is, at best, indifferent to the well-being of the rest of mankind. Hirsch, throughout his writings, consistently rejects this view as a distortion of Judaism.

Hirsch further notes that the entire purpose of human existence, a goal toward which we strive and for whose achievement we pray daily, is the unification of all human beings in the worship of God. The brotherhood of mankind is an ideal that the Jewish people has taught to the rest of humanity. Hirsch daringly suggests, in a footnote, that the well-known rabbinic adage that "*ḥasidei umot haolam yesh lahem ḥelek*

24. *TNL*, 76.

25. Hirsch, in a footnote, cites a passage in Tractate Bava Kamma 87a, as proof for this interpretation of the word "*segula*." Cf. Rabbi Obadiah Seforno to Exodus 19:5.

laOlam haBa," "the pious of the nations of the world have a share in the World to Come," that is, an afterlife in Paradise, can be understood to mean that the righteous of all nations will have a share in attaining the goal of all of human history, namely, advancing humanity toward the End of Days. This revolutionary reading of that rabbinic passage was noted by Abraham Geiger in one of his reviews of *The Nineteen Letters*.[26] Hirsch obviously felt justified in offering this creative rereading since its goal was to undergird his view that all nations play a role in advancing God's purposes for mankind over the course of history, though the Jews have been assigned the most prominent role in achieving that goal.

Hirsch continues the fifteenth letter by discussing Judaism's attitude toward dogma and speculation concerning faith. Following Mendelssohn, Hirsch argues that Judaism posits 613 commandments of faith but no dogmas. The truths that lie at the heart of Judaism are discernible to all who are open to perceiving them. The kind of speculation that is valuable, according to Judaism, is that which leads to greater understanding of the interrelationship between all of creation, man, and the world, and God's plan for the course of human history. The Torah discusses all of these things, and it should be studied as a guide to life.[27] For that reason, says Hirsch, the manner of Torah study that has come into vogue in the previous century – commonly known as *pilpul* (but which Hirsch calls *vorherrschend Grübelgeist*, or abstruse speculation) – is regrettable. Unlike the medieval codifiers of halakha and those who wrote the classic commentaries to the *Shulḥan Arukh* during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the eighteenth-century pilpulists were not expanding the application of Jewish law to daily life, but were merely engaged in mental gymnastics.

But Hirsch goes further, and criticizes those who study Torah without due attention to its application to life. He notes that the reason the Talmud (Kiddushin 40b) concludes that "study" is greater than "action" is because the former necessarily leads to the latter. This indicates, in his view, that any Torah study which, by its nature, cannot be connected to real life, is misguided. Hirsch goes further and argues

26. Abraham Geiger, *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für Jüdische Theologie* 3 (1837), 82ff.
27. *TNL*, 19.

that "scholarship has become an end [in itself] rather than a means [toward an end], and few have kept in mind its true objective."[28] This is a strong critique of what has become the hallmark of the Lithuanian yeshivot, an ideology based on Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin's definition of *Torah lishma*, in his classic work *Nefesh HaḤayim*, as the study of Torah in order to know the Torah. According to Rabbi Chaim, any furtherance of our knowledge of any aspect of Torah is a fulfillment of the greatest mitzva in the Torah which, indeed, ought to be considered "an end in itself"! Although both Rabbi Chaim and Rabbi Hirsch have ample precedent among the *Rishonim* for their respective views, Rabbi Hirsch had to deal with the argument of Reformers that much of talmudic law had ceased to be relevant to the lives of modern Jews. In his view, part of the blame for that erroneous conclusion was the mistaken method of Torah study pursued in German academies in the century following the composition of the classic commentaries on the *Shulḥan Arukh* (though Hirsch was certainly not criticizing Rabbi Chaim's yeshiva in Volozhin, which had opened not long before Hirsch wrote *The Nineteen Letters* and about which he knew little).[29]

Though Hirsch disagrees with Rabbi Chaim's understanding of *Torah lishma*, he accords high merit to studying laws concerning the *Beit HaMikdash* or those treating ritual purity, since they are certainly in the category of being connected to life even if at the present, unfortunately, they are not practical. Hirsch writes further that people should spend time seeking out the spirit of Judaism in Tanakh. He was disappointed that this was not the method of advanced yeshivot, whose curriculums generally do not allot any time for Tanakh study.[30] In fact, Hirsch himself headed a large yeshiva in Nikolsburg during the four years that he served as the Moravian chief rabbi. There, he delivered lectures on Talmud – focusing on its plain meaning – and taught

28. Ibid., 80.

29. That Hirsch is decidedly *not* criticizing the Volozhin yeshiva, which opened in 1803, is made clear in a letter from 1835 (printed in the Grunfeld edition of *Horeb*, cxliii), wherein Hirsch criticizes the "mistaken method of Torah study" that has been pursued "for the last hundred years."

30. This critique was expressed as early as 1837 in Hirsch's *Horeb*. See the Grunfeld edition, 410 (par. 551).

the Book of Psalms in the synagogue. This unconventional approach led to sarcastic remarks that "formerly, we used to study the Talmud and say *Tehillim*; now we say the Talmud and study *Tehillim*." What is clear is that Hirsch did value Talmud study but he had formed definite opinions about its proper method and the position it occupies in the hierarchy of Jewish learning.

Hirsch ends this letter by discussing the halakhot which make social intercourse with non-Jews difficult. He affirms that such laws are necessary to preserve the purity of Judaism and to prevent assimilation and intermarriage. In the realm of ethics, however, Judaism does not distinguish between our obligations toward fellow Jews and gentiles:

> Be just in action, truthful in word, bear love in your heart for your non-Jewish brethren (*trage Liebe im Herzen gegen deinen nicht-jüdischen Bruder*), as your Torah teaches you. Feed their hungry... assist them by word and action. In short, display the whole noble breadth of your Jewishness.[31]

VII.

Letter Sixteen is devoted to the question of Emancipation. A Jew full of enthusiasm for the noble mission of Judaism may understandably quiver at the thought that Jews are now being granted civic rights and entering the world of European culture, as this may lead to assimilation. However, if properly utilized, the opportunities afforded by Emancipation for greater *kiddush Hashem* in our dealings with non-Jews can bring about an even more successful implementation of our mission. In Hirsch's words:

> I bless Emancipation when I see how excess oppression isolated Yisrael[32] from the [broader] life [of the surrounding world], has stunted the development of its spirit, has inhibited the free unfolding of its noble character.... For Yisrael, I bless Emancipa-

31. *TNL*, 84.

32. I have rendered the original German "Jissroel" as "Yisrael," which is simply Hirsch's way of saying "the Jewish people."

> tion only if, concurrently, the proper spirit awakens in Yisrael... [and we] strive to elevate and ennoble ourselves, to implant the spirit of Judaism in our souls in order to produce a life in which that spirit shall be reflected and realized. I bless it if Yisrael does not regard Emancipation as the goal of its mission but merely as a new facet of it, a new test, far more difficult than the test posed by oppression.[33]

But, Hirsch continues, he would grieve if Yisrael comes to regard Emancipation as the end of its exile, as the ultimate aim of its mission (as the German Reform movement would later claim). He would also grieve if Yisrael regarded Emancipation as nothing more than a way to lead a more comfortable, materialistic, and pleasurable life. Hirsch ends this letter by stating that only if we become true Jews, pervaded by the spirit of the Torah, would Judaism welcome Emancipation "as affording a greater opportunity for achieving its purpose, the realization of a noble [Torah] life."[34]

What is especially significant is that here is where Hirsch introduces his conception of *Torah im Derekh Eretz* (though not by name), which he understands to mean that the Torah is not intrinsically bound to any particular civilization, but is intended to serve as our guide for life in *any* civilization, and its values must be the yardstick by which we measure the values of the surrounding culture. This necessarily entails the involvement of the Jew in the wider, "non-Jewish" world. This ideology is thus opposed to the creation of spiritual ghettos wherein Jews will remain shut off from the influence of the surrounding culture. While Orthodox rabbis such as the Ḥatam Sofer preferred the cultural insularity of the ghetto for the spiritual fortification it provides, and therefore opposed Emancipation and encouraged Jews to shun all aspects of modern culture,[35] Hirsch disagreed. Though deeply concerned about

33. *TNL*, 89–90.

34. Ibid., 90.

35. On the Ḥatam Sofer, see Jacob Katz, "Towards a Biography of the Hatam Sofer," trans. David Ellenson, in Frances Malino and David Sorkin, eds., *Profiles in Diversity: Jews in a Changing Europe, 1750–1870* (Detroit, 1998), 223–266; Meir Hildesheimer,

the potential of Emancipation to upend traditional values, he boldly proclaimed that the change in the social and political context of the lives of European Jews called upon them to implement the Torah's vision for society rather than retreating from the broader world. A Jew who applies the Torah's values to inform *all* facets of his life, and who refuses to compartmentalize his Judaism to the private sphere, is someone who is trying to live up to the Hirschian ideal.

VIII.

In Letter Eighteen, Hirsch provides an ambitious overview of Jewish intellectual history from the destruction of the Second Temple until the nineteenth century. At the beginning of this synopsis, he provides a rational explanation of the well-known rabbinic statement attributing the destruction of the Second Temple to the fact that the Jews "did not first utter the blessing over the Torah":

> Yisrael's entire being rests upon the Torah: it is its basis and its goal; and its lifeblood. If our relationship to the Torah is proper, then Yisrael can suffer no ills. But if this relationship is not proper, then Yisrael cannot be healthy. There is no wrong development in Judaism which does not owe its origin to a flawed understanding of the Torah, or is at least perpetuated thereby. Our sages, with profound insight, point to this as the true cause of our first national catastrophe, *shelo berekhu baTorah tehila*, meaning that they did not study the Torah with the resolve to fulfill it in life and for the sake of living it. Life fled from the [study of] Jewish literature and that literature could not therefore properly pervade life, could not provide it light and warmth. If you search for the

"The German Language and Secular Studies: Attitudes Towards Them in the Thought of the Hatam Sofer and His Disciples," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 62 (1996): 129–163; Marc B. Shapiro, "Aspects of Rabbi Moses Sofer's Intellectual Profile," in Jay M. Harris, ed., *Be'erot Yitzhak: Studies in Memory of Isadore Twersky* (Cambridge, 2005), 285–310; and the revisionist reading of Aaron M. Schreiber, "The Hatam Sofer's Nuanced Attitude Towards Secular Learning, *Maskilim* and Reformers," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 11 (2002–2003): 123–173.

> cause of our present sickness, you will, again, find it only in this [misconception].[36]

Hirsch then goes on to present a synopsis of how the spirit of the Torah was developed over the course of the centuries from the beginning of the talmudic period. Hirsch says that only the legal aspect of the Oral Law was initially committed to writing. Later, due to the "pressure of the times," the various midrashim were written down but they contained the spirit of the Torah only in a "veiled form." This required students to make extra efforts to grasp the deeper meaning of the Torah. After a brief reference to the geonic period, Hirsch proceeds to the Golden Age of Muslim Spain. During that period, he says, Jews were drawn after Greek philosophy, as transmitted by Arabic sources. They began to accept Aristotle's view that the highest purpose of man is to achieve intellectual perfection. Thus, they did not conceive of Judaism as being primarily concerned with man's actions in this world, with knowledge serving only as a means toward the performance of good deeds.

The greatest thinker among these Jews was Maimonides:

> This great man to whom, and to whom alone, we owe the preservation of practical Judaism, is responsible, because he sought to reconcile Judaism with the difficulties which confronted it from without, instead of developing it creatively from within, for all the good and the evil born [subsequently].[37]

Although Maimonides is to be commended for the enormous work he did for the preservation of halakha by the writing of his Code, since his intellectual orientation was shaped by Greek philosophy, he developed an approach to the rationale for the mitzvot, says Hirsch, that is both untenable and spiritually dangerous. If the mitzvot are only means to the end of achieving intellectual perfection, as Maimonides writes, then perhaps, says Hirsch, if other methods of achieving such perfection can be found, the mitzvot will then become inessential. Furthermore,

36. *TNL*, 96.
37. Ibid., 97.

Maimonides' pragmatic rationales for many of the mitzvot render the Talmud's concern with the minutiae of the mitzvot incomprehensible. For example, if Shabbat was given to the Jews primarily so that they could acquire correct notions and rest their bodies (*Guide* II:31), then why does the Talmud devote many folios to determining what actions constitute *melakha* (work)? It even declares the writing of two letters – something that may well be part of intellectual activity – to be a capital crime while many acts that involve much physical exertion are free from penalty![38]

Hirsch then notes that other medieval authorities who had a more profound grasp of Judaism developed an opposition not only to Maimonides' philosophy but to all intellectual inquiry concerning Judaism. The passages in *Ḥazal* opposing being *dareish taama dikera* (investigating the reasons for biblical injunctions) were utilized as weapons to repel any efforts to elucidate the spirit behind the details of Jewish law. In studying the Talmud, the only legitimate question came to be, "What is stated here?" – that is, what does this halakha entail? The equally important question, "Why is it so stated?" – i.e., what is

38. Hirsch's critique of Maimonides is quite bold, and in his subsequent writings he omits this line of criticism and consistently adopts a reverential attitude toward Maimonides as a pillar of halakha. It should also be noted that these critical remarks were directed more at Reformers who justified their approach on the basis of Maimonidean ideas than at Maimonides himself. George Y. Kohler, *Reading Maimonides' Philosophy in 19th Century Germany: The Guide to Religious Reform* (Heidelberg, 2012), discusses how Maimonides was utilized by Reformers, and on p. 50 makes the following observation: "To Hirsch's credit, this description [of the legacy of Maimonides' philosophy in Letter Eighteen] is, in fact, more or less the lesson that the Reform movement learned from Maimonides' overall approach to the authority of Mosaic law." Hirsch himself notes this misuse of Maimonides' writings in the following passage: "It is true that Maimonides' *Moreh HaNevukhim* was burned. But Maimonides himself would have been the first to toss his book into the flames if he had lived to see how his book has been misused and is still misused today" (*The Collected Writings of Rabbi S. Raphael Hirsch*, vol. 6, 129). For the broader methodological issues that Hirsch had with Maimonides, see Michah Gottlieb, "Counter-Enlightenment in a Jewish Key: Anti-Maimonideanism in Nineteenth-Century Orthodoxy," in James T. Robinson, ed., *The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought* (Leiden, 2009), 259–287.

the significance of this religious act? – was suppressed.[39] On the basis of a misunderstood passage of the *Tosafot*,[40] opposition to all study of Tanakh emerged, a mistaken approach, says Hirsch, about which *Ḥazal* themselves forewarned.[41]

During this entire period, asserts Hirsch, only a few Jewish thinkers found the proper balance between favoring intellectual inquiry and opposition to extreme philosophical rationalization. Hirsch singles out Nahmanides and Rabbi Judah Halevi, author of the *Kuzari*, as being the greatest of them. Hirsch also commends the *Ḥasidei Ashkenaz* (German Pietists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries) for their selfless dedication of possessions and even life for the sake of God, though he notes that the persecutions that medieval German Jewry experienced robbed it of its intellectual vitality.

Around the same time, the Kabbala was introduced to the Jewish world when the Zohar was first circulated around 1290. This work is an invaluable repository of the genuine spirit of Judaism. However, it too was generally misunderstood by the masses, and what ought to have been guidance concerning the inner meaning of Judaism was instead turned into a "magical mechanism, a means of influencing or resisting theosophic worlds and anti-worlds."[42] That is, the supernatural aspects of the Kabbala became the primary appeal of this branch of Jewish wisdom instead of its elucidation of the true inner spirit of Judaism.[43]

The cumulative effect of the various Jewish intellectual trends that matured over the course of the Middle Ages which Hirsch regarded as

39. See Mosheh Lichtenstein, "'What' Hath Brisk Wrought: The Brisker Derekh Revisited," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 9 (2000): 1–18.

40. To Sanhedrin 24a, s.v. "*belula*."

41. Hirsch cites Masekhet Soferim 15:9.

42. *TNL*, 100–101.

43. Interestingly, Hirsch's use of Kabbala in his writings, especially *Horeb*, was criticized by reformist rabbis such as Hirsch B. Fassel, who was upset that Hirsch included the practice of gazing at one's fingernails through the light of the Havdala candle (par. 192 of *Horeb*). See Michael L. Miller, *Rabbis and Revolution: The Jews of Moravia in the Age of Emancipation* (Redwood City, 2010), 145. The details of this practice, as Hirsch describes them, accord with what the Rema writes (*Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayim* 298:3) in the name of the Zohar. Hirsch not only made copious use of the Zohar in his notes that he used when preparing the writing of *Horeb* but, in one case at least

problematic led to a very serious vacuum in the intellectual state of the Jewish people precisely when such a situation posed the greatest danger: the European Enlightenment. When a Jewish manifestation of this movement emerged in mid-eighteenth-century Germany – the Haskala – its most gifted mind was Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786). Unfortunately, in Hirsch's view, Mendelssohn was not up to the lofty task with which he was presented. The Jewish people needed a thinker who would creatively develop Jewish thought "from within," that is, based on its own sources. By contrast, Mendelssohn

> had not drawn his mental development from Judaism, was great chiefly in the philosophical disciplines of metaphysics and aesthetics ... and did not build up Judaism as a science from itself but merely defended it against political stupidity and pietistic Christian audacity; who was personally a practicing religious Jew who showed his brethren and the world: one can be a religious Jew *and yet* shine, distinguished, as a German Plato! This "and yet" was decisive.[44]

Hirsch means that Mendelssohn never demonstrated the harmony, the congruence, between his Jewish identity and his achievements as a man of European culture. There was an unabated dichotomy between the two, and those who preferred European culture over being "a religious Jew" ultimately chose the former.[45]

By contrast, Hirsch's own ideal of *Torah im Derekh Eretz* calls for a synthesis of all aspects of life with the Torah. This would mean, after a strong foundation in Torah study, acquiring broad worldly knowledge and then examining the views thus acquired and deciding if they are in harmony with the Torah. If they are not, they must be rejected.

(the mitzva of *mila*), he utilized more passages from the Zohar than from the Talmud! See *Rabbi Shimshon Refael Hirsch: Mishnato VeShitato*, ed. Yona Emanuel (Jerusalem, 1989), 339–341. Any claim that Hirsch was fundamentally anti-Kabbala is untenable.

44. *TNL*, 101–102.

45. Hirsch's very strong critique of Mendelssohn's philosophy of Judaism does not preclude the possibility of Mendelssohn's having influenced Hirsch. Hirsch agreed, for example, with the assertion that "faith makes you into a man while the Law makes you into a Jew," a position with unmistakable Mendelssohnian undertones.

This is why, for example, Hirsch dedicated an oration to the memory of the German poet Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805) on his centenary, because his ideas, Hirsch maintained, were drawn from Jewish truths as promulgated in the Bible. On the other hand, Hirsch told an acquaintance that had Goethe's (1749–1832) centenary occurred while Hirsch was in Frankfurt, he would have left Frankfurt just so as not to feel compelled to dignify Goethe with a tribute.[46] Goethe's eroticism and anti-Semitism were incompatible with Torah teachings; thus, there was no reason for Jews to peruse his writings. In fact, though Hirsch never issued a ban on the study of texts that conflict with Torah teachings, he considered heretical texts to be a grave danger to Judaism and waged battles against scholars such as Heinrich Graetz and Zechariah Frankel whose views concerning the Oral Law Hirsch considered unacceptable.

After discussing the challenges that his own generation found itself up against, Hirsch ends *The Nineteen Letters* with an appeal to go back to the sources of Judaism – specifically, Tanakh, Talmud, and Midrash – in order to determine what Judaism says about itself and how its vision may be realized in a post-Emancipation world.[47] This includes the foundation of schools that adhere to the *Torah im Derekh Eretz* educational program and which therefore teach secular subjects from a Torah point of view:

> With [King] Davidic sentiment should nature be studied, with the ear of [Prophet] Isaiah should history be heard, and then, with the eye thus aroused and the ear thus opened, the teaching concerning God, world, man, Yisrael, and Torah should be drawn from the Tanakh. Then, having formulated this basic conception of Judaism, let us study the Talmud in this spirit. In the halakha, only further elucidation of ideas already known from the Tanakh should be sought.

46. Heinemann, *Taamei HaMitzvot*, vol. 2, 267 n. 75.
47. Hirsch himself clearly grappled with the apparent tensions between certain rabbinic texts and humanistic ideals that he cherished and considered to be fundamental to Judaism. For an examination of this issue, see my dissertation, "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Nineteenth-Century German Orthodoxy on Judaism's Attitude Toward Non-Jews."

Hirsch implores his readers to pursue this path without regard to the criticisms which it may engender – either from Reformers or from those Orthodox who value pilpulistic Talmud study above all else.[48]

IX.

One particularly striking aspect of Hirsch's presentation of Judaism in *The Nineteen Letters* is his willingness to criticize contemporary Orthodoxy. According to Hirsch, the blame for much of the misunderstanding of Judaism's true message and the subsequent development of the Reform movement, which sought to adapt Judaism to the times, lay at the feet of the Orthodox. While not naming any rabbis, Hirsch does state that

> today, two opposing generations confront each other: one of them has inherited uncomprehended (*unbegriffene*) Judaism, as mitzvot performed by mere habit, without their spirit, a holy mummy they bear [but are] afraid to rouse its spirit. The other [generation] is partly filled with noble enthusiasm for the welfare of the Jews but look upon Judaism as bereft of any life and spirit, a relic of an era long passed and buried, and tries to uncover its spirit and, not finding it, threatens through its well-intended efforts to sever the last life-nerve of Judaism – out of ignorance .... These [two opposing elements] are both mistaken.[49]

In this passage, Hirsch assigns equal blame to the older generation of the Orthodox as he does to the younger Reformers! It must be noted that in none of his later works does Hirsch express himself this way. Several factors may account for this. The one that seems the most compelling is the different posture of the Reform movement at these two periods. In the 1830s, during the composition of *The Nineteen Letters*, the Reform movement had not yet made drastic changes to halakha and had not yet established itself as the premiere faction of Judaism for German Jews. All this changed with the three Reform synods held in Brunswick, Frankfurt, and Breslau in the years 1844, 1845, and 1846.

48. *TNL*, 106–107.
49. Ibid., 105.

The overall purpose of these meetings was for the leaders of German Reform Judaism to discuss the direction their movement would take. Some of the key issues that were brought up were liturgical reforms, intermarriage, adjustments to observance of Shabbat and Jewish Holidays, and the status of the Hebrew language. These synods emboldened the German Reform movement and helped to create a veneer of legitimacy to its reforms of Jewish law among German Jews.

Hirsch penned a scathing Hebrew-language attack on the first Reform synod.[50] In it, Hirsch declares that the attendees at the conference were not rabbis and had no authority to modify the slightest jot of Jewish practice despite their pretensions to authority. Hirsch further declares that the time for zealotry has come, and that there can be no compromise between the Torah-true leaders and the Reform renegades. Strikingly, Hirsch writes that the only solution to his era's problems was the reintroduction of the educational program of *Torah im Derekh Eretz*, where Jewish schools would teach the youth Jewish and general subjects, with the latter being understood through the prism of the Torah, in which case the Torah has naught to fear from the study of what he calls *ḥokhma*, wisdom. What emerges from his remarks is a move away from his earlier conciliatory approach to Reform. The time for battle has come, and this militant approach to the Reform movement became Hirsch's consistent platform for the rest of his life.

If one is looking for a non-Jewish work that closely parallels Hirsch's *The Nineteen Letters*, it will not be found.[51] The roughly contemporaneous work whose stated goal was closest to Hirsch's may well be Friedrich Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, published in 1799 (revised several times, lastly in 1831). Schleiermacher was the most influential Protestant thinker of the nineteenth century,

50. This was originally published in *Sefer Torat HaKenaot* (Amsterdam, 1845), and has been reprinted in several works.

51. This is not intended to suggest that everything in *The Nineteen Letters* is strikingly original. Most of its central ideas are based on Hirsch's understanding of the classical texts of Judaism, and Hirsch's idiom owes much to that of philosophers from the school of German Idealism, though he borrowed their terminology and employed it for his own purposes, as noted by Pinchas Paul Grünewald, *Pédagogie, Esthétique et Ticoun Olam: Redressement du Monde – Samson Raphaël Hirsch* (Bern, 1986), 14.

deeply influenced by the Enlightenment and by Romanticism, and he is credited with ushering in the era of Liberal Protestant theology. Naturally, Hirsch and Schleiermacher disagreed not just about which religion will prove to be the salvation of mankind but also concerning the nature of religion and the manner in which it should be interpreted. In fact, Schleiermacher's views on religion were quite influential within German Reform Judaism. Still, their common goal was to inject religion with relevance at a time when its influence was waning and its truths being questioned due to Enlightenment thought.

x.

Contemporary readers may find the idiom of *The Nineteen Letters* to be slightly archaic but the ideas presented therein should strike a resonant chord with thinking Orthodox readers, unfamiliar with Hirsch's book, who have been thirsting for an intellectually compelling interpretation of the relevance of Orthodox Judaism for the modern world. Of the works on Jewish thought from the past two centuries, few have attempted a rational and systematic presentation of Judaism that insists on its essentially legal character and yet emphasizes the primarily ethical telos of its laws. Thus, Hirsch's *The Nineteen Letters* really does fill a vacuum. If you have ever pondered the relationship between the Jewish people and the other nations, particularly in the Diaspora lands today where Jews as individuals have been granted the same rights and responsibilities as their non-Jewish fellow citizens, this book will provide much food for thought. The book's treatment of this issue also has significant implications for the proper role in the international arena of the State of Israel – the Jewish state – which has ostensibly been granted full admission to the family of nations. If you have ever wondered why a perfect God "needs" people to sing His praises or to perform ritual acts that seem devoid of ethical content, *The Nineteen Letters* provides answers that will resonate. Readers who find *The Nineteen Letters* intriguing may well be spurred on to seek out Hirsch's other works, especially his monumental *Ḥumash* commentary which, aside from being a classic work of modern biblical exegesis, is a text that consistently brings out the lofty humane vision of the Torah.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's Nineteen Letters

The publication of *The Nineteen Letters* marked a turning point in the history of Judaism. The emergence of the Reform movement in previous decades provided Jews with a choice. They could cloister themselves within the spiritual ghetto of traditional Judaism as it was practiced until then, but in so doing, they would have to, effectively, renounce all aspects of modernity. As the Reform movement progressed, it provided an alternative, as it continued to incorporate modern sensibilities not only concerning externals like synagogue appearance but also concerning Judaism's values. A young educated Jew aware of recent European intellectual currents was gratified to find that Reform rabbis were not only cognizant of these currents but accepted many of their premises and evaluated traditional Jewish beliefs and practices on the basis of this knowledge. Slowly but steadily, those aspects of halakha that did not seem compatible with modern life were rejected as inapplicable in the present day. This presented a grave challenge to those who saw themselves as the guardians of tradition. The earliest reaction, that of the Hamburg *Beit Din* in 1819, was to simply excoriate the Reformers.

Samson Raphael Hirsch, guided by his teachers, Rabbis Bernays and Ettlinger, opted for a third course. He fervently believed that not only was traditional Judaism not rendered outdated by the dramatic changes in the European world, but that it was *precisely* this form of Judaism that provided solutions to the contemporary dilemma. The Torah was never intended to accept whatever values the changing times bring. The Torah had always stood in opposition to the varieties of paganism and hedonism that it encountered. Even in the "enlightened" nineteenth century, there were still values and ideas that were incompatible with the Torah, which Torah-true Jews therefore ought to oppose. But this spirited opposition is not to be conflated with obscurantism. Hirsch insists that the calling of the Jew never consisted of isolation from the world but engagement with it for the purpose of bringing to it the light of Torah.

The world of Orthodox Judaism as we know it today would not exist if not for Hirsch and his first-published work. *The Nineteen Letters* ushered in an era in which Orthodox rabbis could write in the vernacular language and borrow terminology from contemporary intellectual trends and even from ideological opponents (which Hirsch did quite

often). Orthodox Jews could now be proud that their "version" of Judaism, the only one that could plausibly claim fidelity to the texts of the Torah, was not in any way outdated or archaic. Its spokespersons were highly educated and articulate individuals who were well informed about recent scientific and philosophical developments. They were capable of marshaling an array of sources to buttress the truths and practices upheld by Orthodox Judaism. The ideology of *Torah UMadda*, to which Yeshiva University is committed, could not have been conceived if not for the development of the *Torah im Derekh Eretz* ideology of Hirsch and his colleagues in the German Orthodox rabbinate (despite whatever differences may exist between these two ideologies). In fact, *Torah im Derekh Eretz* has, to varying degrees, become the educational model for schools across the spectrum of Orthodoxy. In short, the emergence of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in the leadership of German Jewry heralded the arrival of a self-confident and assertive Orthodox Judaism for the modern world.

FURTHER READING

Hirsch, Samson Raphael. *Die Neunzehn Briefe über Judentum* (*The Nineteen Letters on Judaism*). There is presently no annotated scholarly edition of this work in any language. The original German, in Gothic script, was first printed in 1836, and reprinted a number of times since. The 1889 edition is currently available free as an e-book from Google Books. There have been two subsequent reprintings of the original German albeit in the Latin script that became more predominant in printed German during the twentieth century, both by Verlag Morascha (a branch of Feldheim Publishers) in Zurich. The first was reprinted/printed in 1987 and an identical reprint, the one cited in this essay, in 2013.

Aside from Hebrew, French, and other languages, this work has been translated into English three times (there is also a partial fourth translation): Bernard Drachman's excellent 1899 edition published by Funk and Wagnalls, now available free as a Google e-book; Jacob Breuer's 1960 edition; and Rabbi Joseph Elias' 1995 edition. The 1960 edition is condensed and is not recommended for that reason. The 1995 edition contains erudite footnotes by Rabbi Elias and the English translation by Karin Paritzky is the most up-to-date in terms of the idiom. The issue with

this edition is that Rabbi Elias' footnotes offer interpretations of Hirsch that align him with contemporary right-wing Orthodoxy in a manner that is not always compelling. For this reason, the Drachman edition remains the first recommendation.

Hirsch, Samson Raphael. *Horeb.* Translated by Dayan Dr. I. Grunfeld (London, 1962). This excellent English rendition of Hirsch's classic work on *taamei hamitzvot* is prefaced by Dayan Grunfeld's lengthy introductory essays, which are works of enormous erudition and scholarship. These essays have also been published separately as *Dayan Dr I. Grunfeld's Introduction to Samson Raphael Hirsch Horeb: A Comprehensive Study of Hirsch's Philosophy of Jewish Law.* In this writer's opinion, this remains the best introduction to Hirsch's thought.

Hirsch, Samson Raphael. *The Pentateuch, Translated and Explained by Samson Raphael Hirsch.* Translated by Isaac Levy (Gateshead, 1976). Although the newer Daniel Haberman English translation of Hirsch's *Ḥumash* commentary has become popular in the last several years, the earlier edition by Hirsch's grandson, Levy, is more faithful to the style and syntax of the original. Sure, we get some run-on sentences but that is the style of Hirsch's German, and despite a few errors and omissions, the Levy edition is very faithful to the original.

Hirsch, Samson Raphael. *The Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch,* vols. 1–9 (New York, 1984–2012). This is the English edition of Hirsch's *Gesammelte Schriften,* containing the essays from Hirsch's journal *Jeschurun,* covering a wide range of topics in Jewish thought.

Breuer, Mordechai. *Modernity Within Tradition: The Social History of Orthodox Jewry in Imperial Germany.* Translated by Elizabeth Petuchowski (New York, 1992). This book, by the greatest scholar of German Orthodoxy, contains much incisive analysis of Hirsch's ideology and his role as a leader of German Jewry.

Grunewald, Pinchas Paul. *Pédagogie, Esthétique et Ticoun Olam – Redressement du Monde: Samson Raphaël Hirsch* (Bern, 1986). This French-language study of Hirsch is an excellent analysis of Hirsch's educational theory and worldview from an academic scholar who was well versed in rabbinic literature and the German philosophical tradition.

Klugman, Eliyahu Meir. *Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch: Architect of Torah Judaism for the Modern World* (New York, 1996). While some

writers feel an almost ritual obligation to bash anything published by Artscroll, this is actually the most thorough and meticulously researched biography of Hirsch currently available. The late Prof. Mordechai Breuer, dean of Hirsch scholars, was heavily involved in the writing of this book, which provides footnotes for every assertion and which covers all the material in a respectful yet scholarly style. Dr. Shnayer Leiman has characterized Klugman's book as "magisterial" and even non-Jewish scholars of German Orthodoxy such as Dr. Matthias Morgenstern regularly cite it.

Liberles, Robert. *Religious Conflict in Social Context: The Resurgence of Orthodox Judaism in Frankfurt am Main, 1838–1877* (Westport, 1985). This classic study provides important social context to Hirsch's rabbinical position in Frankfurt.

Miller, Michael L. *Rabbis and Revolution: The Jews of Moravia in the Age of Emancipation* (Redwood City, 2010). Miller's study, based on his dissertation, closely examines, among other things, Hirsch's crucial four years in the Moravian rabbinate.

Morgenstern, Matthias. *From Frankfurt to Jerusalem: Isaac Breuer and the History of the Secession Dispute in Modern Jewish Orthodoxy* (Leiden, 2002). This expanded version of the original German is a brilliant study of the legacy of some of Hirsch's ideas on the succeeding generations and contains an excellent examination of Hirsch's rabbinic career.