

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on Jews in a Non-Jewish World

By: MARC B. SHAPIRO

The place of Jews in the wider non-Jewish world is a major theme in the writings of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch. It was Hirsch, more than anyone else, who explained the meaning of Emancipation for Jews. He set out how Jews should live as (supposed) equals with Christians in modern society, a situation that brought enormous blessings for Jewish society, but also tremendous challenges. Hirsch's important writings on this matter have been available in English for some time, with one significant exception, namely, the essay translated below (which is actually the first part of a longer essay). Presumably, the reason it was not translated was because it was never included in the German edition of Hirsch's collected writings. As to why it was omitted, this is perhaps because it was seen as simply a book review, and thus not deserving of inclusion in what became the canonical collection, as it were, of Hirsch's writings.

This omission was unfortunate, for the essay, while ostensibly a review, also presents a significant perspective not merely on wider Christian society, but on aspects of Christianity itself. It is at odds with typical Orthodox presentations in that it encourages Jews to appreciate at least some aspects of what Christianity means to one's non-Jewish neighbors, even if only from a Jewish perspective. As Hirsch comments, with reference to German textbooks that were intended for use in Jewish schools and had therefore removed Christian elements, Jewish students "should not remain unacquainted with this Christian worldview, its sensitivities and way of life, but instead learn to look at it from a Jewish point of view." Hirsch's sentiments here fit in well with what he writes elsewhere. Moshe Miller, in his recent doctoral dissertation, has analyzed Hirsch's attitude towards Christianity and concludes that while Hirsch was not hesitant about criticizing the errors in Christian belief, he also had a "genuine appreciation for Christianity's contribution to civilization that is striking."¹ Yet as Hirsch's essay stresses—and this same point is noted

¹ "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Nineteenth-Century German Orthodoxy on Judaism's Attitude toward Non-Jews" (unpublished doctoral dissertation,

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by Miller with regard to other texts of Hirsch—what Christians see as the contributions of Christianity, based on the truths of their religion, are viewed by Hirsch as truths of Judaism, later recycled by Christianity. From one angle, this is a strong critique, as it removes from Christianity anything that can be termed “positive originality.” What is left, though he does not spell it out, is “negative originality,” and the Jewish people have, of course, suffered mightily on account of this originality.

The late Professor Mordechai Breuer made one brief mistaken reference to this essay,² which I referred to in an article,³ and Moshe Miller also took note of Hirsch’s essay in his recent dissertation.⁴ Yet other than this, I have never seen any mention of the essay, a situation that will hopefully now change. The first part of the essay, which is found below, was expertly translated by Dr. Esther Bauer, and I extend my thanks to her. I have made only slight edits to her translation, a few of them on the advice of Rabbi Jonah Sievers. This translation is part of my continuing efforts to make important German Orthodox writings available to the English-speaking world.⁵

Yeshiva University, 2014), p. 275. In Ephraim Chamiel’s recent book, *The Middle Way: The Emergence of Modern Religious Trends in Nineteenth-Century Judaism*, trans. Jeffrey Green (Brighton, MA, 2014), vol. 2, pp. 238–276, he presents the most complete discussion to date of Hirsch’s approach to Christianity. Although he too mentions Hirsch’s positive evaluation of the spread of Christianity, an approach that follows in the footsteps of Maimonides, Chamiel also calls attention to Hirsch’s very negative view of the doctrines of Christianity, which Hirsch regarded as tainted by paganism.

² Mordechai Breuer, *Jüdische Orthodoxie im Deutschen Reich 1871–1918* (Frankfurt, 1986), p. 90, English translation: *Modernity within Tradition*, trans. Elizabeth Petuchowski (New York, 1992), pp. 88–89. In summarizing a part of the essay, Breuer writes: “The Jewish pupil should enjoy even the description of a Christmas evening, because this celebration was an ‘echo of Jewish bliss’ (‘Echo jüdischer Seligkeit’).” This is an accurate summary of what Hirsch writes, but the exact words placed in quotation marks do not appear in the essay.

³ “Torah Study on Christmas Eve,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1999), p. 346 n. 100.

⁴ “Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch,” p. 277.

⁵ I previously published “Rabbi David Zevi Hoffmann on Torah and *Wissenschaft*,” *Torah u-Madda Journal* 6 (1995–1996), pp. 129–137; “Rabbi David Tsevi Hoffmann on Orthodox Involvement with the Hebrew University,” *Tradition* 33 (Spring, 1999), 88–93; “Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer’s Program of Torah u-Madda,” *Torah u-Madda Journal* 9 (2000), pp. 76–86; “*Torah im Derekh Eretz* in the Shadow of Hitler,” *ibid.*, 14 (2006–2007), pp. 84–96; “Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Friedrich von Schiller,” *ibid.*, 15 (2008–2009), pp. 172–187;

**A. *Haesters' Text and Reading Books for Israelite Schools*,
edited by Emanuel Hecht⁶**

The Primer

We shall begin our little book review with a survey of small books, or rather a survey of the books for our youngsters. Who didn't feel respect for these little books and encyclopedias as Jean Paul⁷ did, [books] meant to develop the intellects and minds of our children and provide the essential pre-schooling to allow them to receive and create all the greatness and splendor that is about to delight their intellect? And who wouldn't be sincerely grateful for any true effort by professionals who have chosen to supply the needs of these youngsters, and are striving to provide better and more appropriate text and reading books for our children? Better and more appropriate is meant in two ways: pertaining to method and to subject matter. After all, the fields of didactics and pedagogy are, while the oldest skill of humankind and as old as the first babble of the first human child, far from a closed subject. It has not yet even been established which is the best method for teaching the ABC's! Fortunately, many roads lead to Rome, and the success of a method depends mostly and essentially on the individual teacher. A good teacher will achieve good results even when using an inadequate method, and the best of methods remains of little use in the hands of an inept person. Naturally, a good teacher will achieve pleasing results when using a better method. However, there is no single method that can claim to be the only solution. In this respect, nearly everything is only of relative value. The most important factor is how it is used and employed.

The issue is different in regards to subject matter. Insofar as choice of subject matter is related to method, and employed to teach our children the ability and fluency in reading, such as in reading-class for example, the choice is not overly important even though relevant enough to not be ignored. The child has an easier time and learns to read faster if the subject matter is chosen purposefully and grouped methodically; yet he will learn how to read using any subject matter that is chosen, even though it might be harder and slower. Once the child has achieved proficiency, it is no longer that important how proficiency was achieved,

"Torah im Derekh Eretz as a Means of Last Resort," *Milín Havivin* 7 (2013–2014), pp. 162–170.

⁶ *Jeschurun* 4 (May 1858), pp. 394–399. Hirsch was the editor of this journal and author of the unsigned articles.

⁷ German romantic writer (1763–1825).

and based on what subject matter. Perhaps the difficulties to be overcome in using a less methodical way should not be considered a loss, since abstract thinking, memorizing, and the talent of combining are practiced subconsciously and automatically due to the irregular subject matter and similarities that have to be assorted and arranged in one's mind. The easiest method is not always the most profitable for the mind.

However, the initial subject matter used for our children's first reading practice also constitutes food for the intellect and mind of the youngsters. It is certainly of great importance what kind of mental nourishment they are offered in this way, since all subject matter presented to the intellect and mind for absorption will directly or indirectly become and remain a part of the mind, more or less consciously. No image or emotion is completely lost. Thus, it is of concern what kind of mental images and emotions are being presented to the souls of our youngsters to absorb, retain, reproduce, and to mentally combine. The more unrestrained and lively the children's souls, the more significant, thorough, and far-reaching will likely be that which awakens the first impressions in their soul, and imprints the first subject matter. Therefore, the more care should be employed in regards to the first textbooks and reading books for our youngsters.

The non-Jewish youth cannot complain that the needs of their soul might not be properly met. Literature for school and the youth in Germany compares to a field that is cultivated more or less successfully, and with great zeal. Only the Jewish youth are still treated like an orphan. The needs of Jewish youth and of their schools have so far barely been subject to the kind of serious consideration that would benefit them. There are few writings created for the instruction and education of Jewish youth, and from this sparse selection only a small amount is usable.

Based on this need for appropriate reading books for Jewish schools, Mr. Emanuel Hecht was prompted to edit Haesters' text books for upper and middle classes, as well as the primer for Jewish schools, "especially so due to the currently heavily emphasized denominational tides in schools and school books," as stated in the introduction to the first edition of the text and reading book for upper classes. For this purpose, he considered it his task to remove Christian views, expressions, and explanations, as well as the echoes of Positive Christianity,⁸ and to

⁸ Regarding this term, which was later adopted by the Nazis but originally meant nothing more than the traditional dogmatic teachings of Christianity, see Sam-

“present the book with specifically Jewish ideas, to add a positive Jewish content to the general humanistic one, and finally to see to a certain extent to the emancipation of rabbinic intellectual culture, in order to further pedagogical ends by allocating equal space to the sayings and tales of Jewish sages, as well as to Jewish history, besides that of other nations.” This effort will certainly be assured of grateful appreciation from all sides.

For the benefit of Jewish youth education, the specific Jewish elements added by Mr. Hecht in these books shall be analyzed with special care.⁹ To begin with, we would like to comment about the removal of the positive Christian elements.

As useful and desirable such a purification of the text and reading books handed to our children would, from a Jewish point of view, generally be, we nevertheless believe that one should not be all too fearful in this regard. Books that are written solely from a Christian denominational point of view and based entirely on their worldview and philosophy are indeed not suited as teaching and educational aids for the Jewish youth. However, we see no danger if the purely humanistic point of view predominates in the book and is influenced by the idea of God, even if here and there Christian ideas appear, and even Christianity itself as it is realized in everyday life.

Based on our experience, such [exposure] has probably never affected anyone adversely. We do not think that students in middle and upper classes should remain unacquainted with this Christian worldview, its sensitivities and way of life, but instead should learn to look at it from a Jewish point of view. Eventually, they will lead their lives surrounded by a Christian world, and even as children they encounter Christian elements everywhere. Shouldn't they be able to faithfully keep their Jewish way of thinking and action and put it into practice with strong and heartfelt self-confidence in the midst of this Christian world? If care would be taken to develop the right kind of conscience with regards to their Jewish world, one that is grounded, deep, and enthusiastic, so that a real and true understanding of their Jewish elements would not be lacking, then their acquaintance with Christian elements would not be harmful, but would only raise their Jewish self-confidence. It would only increase their esteem and enthusiasm for Jewish thought and life, and

uel Koehne, “Nazism and Religion: The Problem of ‘Positive Christianity,’” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 60 (March 2014), pp. 28–42.

⁹ This analysis is found in the second half of the essay that has not been translated here.

for all divinely instituted Jewish history and doctrine, which is the only source of everything that is Jewish—and we can add here also, the source of the truth and goodness in Christianity.

Let the Christian thinker rejoice over the enlightenment of minds, the refinement of character, of the civilizing and humanizing of the nations, and describe these benefits as having been bestowed upon humanity by Christianity! The Jewish thinker rejoices about this along with him, but sees each wreath that the Christian humanitarian ascribes to Christianity just one more leaf in the unfading wreath of victory of Judaism. Thus, what truths has Christianity brought to humanity to enlighten minds, refine hearts, and save nations, for which it has not been purely as a messenger of Judaism, drawing from the deep well of Jewish doctrine? And how much more is still left! All of this is only a drop of the well, a spark of the fullness of Jewish light, a partial ray of the entire Jewish sun, compared to a life that is entirely devoted to God! All this is simply a guarantee of the true salvation of mankind to come, based on the ancient Jewish truth!

Shouldn't the Jewish youth share in this bliss, this elated hope of the Jewish thinker? Let the reading book praise examples of mercy and charity, nobility, and philanthropy as illustrations of Christian love and of a Christian outlook. The Jewish boy says, facing heathenism: Quite true! Remembering his Jewishness, he again says joyfully: Yes! After all, the Jewish feeling of love for all humanity has a spirit that far surpasses Christian love and charity, never limiting Jewish philanthropy within the narrow confines of "denominations". A spark from it [the Jewish spirit] has lit up the hearts of heathens through Christianity, and it brings joy to people through that which is known as Christian love and charity. Yes, the Jewish boy must even rejoice over the depiction of a Christmas Eve, which is, rightfully so, rarely missing in any reading book for Christian youth!

If he is only a Jewish boy, and his parents' home a Jewish home, and if his life as a child is a Jewish life—we only speak of such here, and are only writing on behalf of such—Judaism is alive for him, in all the festivals and celebrations, with all its sanctification permeating his entire life each day and night, and especially so in his home and family. How happy will he be in this spirit, which does not confine religious sanctification to the temples. This spirit turns parents into priests, house and table into temples and altars, and allows one to celebrate the high point of one's blessedness within the family circle. Even if this [in its Christian manifestation] is only a weak and clouded echo of the Jewish spirit, it has already become part of non-Jewish homes and children, and at least once a year a bliss is spread that had not been thought possible among

heathens. How many Christmas Eves does the year bring to Jewish boys and girls! Each week there is a Sabbath evening, and each season brings a festival evening. Parents and children are united around the table at home, lifted up again and again in alternating festive moods of remembrance and consecration, directed not towards a deceased mediator, but to the living God of all past and future. He bestows His blessings not through childish knickknacks. Rather, His nearness is palpable to the child's heart by the gift-giving of His blessings in peace and rest, in exhilaration and in joy, and by filling the entire earthly existence with bliss!! [sic] May therefore our Jewish education and instruction of our youth be correct, and may our teachers and educators be filled with the authentic Jewish spirit and knowledge. This will enable our children to not be harmed by their acquaintance with Christian elements in their reading book, and in life. Such elements, even in matters that are antithetical [to Judaism], will offer a welcome opportunity for their teachers and educators to illuminate more clearly the noble mission of Judaism and the unsurpassed abundance of its blessings.

We believe, however, that the following needs to be stated: Overly anxious parents and teachers should not put too much emphasis on this [religious] factor when selecting their text and reading books. They should not make their choice based on only one consideration, namely, that all Christian elements should be removed, even though the particular book chosen might be inferior for teaching purposes than another book wherein Christian elements might be found every now and then.

