

SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH.

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

Samson Raphael Hirsch was, indeed, a "prince and a great man" in Israel; a rare and noble figure in the Judaism of the century now so rapidly nearing its end. Our age, so barren of men of original and profound philosophic and religious concepts, of deep convictions and burning enthusiasm; so over-fruitful of weak and inane sciolists, who, parrot-like, repeat the semi-comprehended phrases of pseudo-religious materialism, because through them lies the road to place and pelf, and the approval of the rich and worldly; our age, that could so ill afford it, lost in him one who almost alone towered above the dead level of indifference and mediocrity, and waved on high the banner of Jewish science, Jewish loyalty, and Jewish idealism. Ten years have rolled into the abyss of the past since he took leave of earth; but to those who enjoyed the

inestimable privilege of knowing him, or of entering into spiritual or intellectual communion with him, his loss is as fresh, and the pain as keen, as though but yesterday had witnessed his demise, for the impression which he produced upon his vast circle of congregants and admirers was so profound, and the sentiments of admiration and esteem which he aroused were so sincere and ardent, that death alone could suffice to obliterate them. Samson Raphael Hirsch had also many opponents during his lifetime, and the aims and objects for which he toiled and fought with all the power of his restless brain and his fiery tongue, were, and still are, subjected to severe criticism; but in one point all, enemies and friends, agree, that his life was altogether great, that his view of Judaism was sublime in its intellectual grandeur and ethical purity, and that the manner in which he sought to realize it was altogether admirable, and adapted to confer glory and honor upon Israel in the eyes of the world. Nor did he live in vain or toil for naught. His life bears

the characteristic indication of the truly great, that it has been fertile in enduring results; he was not, like many so-called leaders, merely an eminent representative of principles, not actually upheld by those theoretically his adherents, a general without an army; on the contrary, he possessed the faculty of thoroughly convincing and winning his followers, of inspiring them with the same enthusiasm which burnt within his breast. The future of Judaism, of the ages-old historical Judaism, is safe in Germany in the keeping of those reared under the influence of his spirit, for he gave them that which alone can secure the well-being of a religion, profound attachment to it as the one priceless treasure of their lives, and an unyielding consistency and fidelity which will render permanently impossible anything like profane or sacrilegious trifling with the precepts of their most sacred heritage.

Nor is the influence of his spirit confined to the immediate circle of his own congregation, splendid though this latter be; far beyond the confines of the queenly city of Frankfort-on-

the-Main, where his chief life-work was done, throughout Germany, Austro-Hungary, and Russia, it has worked wonders upon the minds of Judah's children; and wherever Judaism is threatened, apparently in its very existence, and seems hopelessly delivered over to the twin destructive and disintegrating influences of modern anti-religionism and mediæval superstition and unculture, an approach to the ideal set by Hirsch seems the only way out of the almost insuperable difficulty.

Samson Raphael Hirsch was born on the 24th of Sivan, 5568 (1808), in the city of Hamburg, then, as now, an exemplary Jewish community, renowned for the great number of its pious and benevolent men and women. His father was a pious and learned Israelite, who, though a merchant, devoted much of his time to Hebrew studies; his grandfather was Rabbi Mendel Frankfurter, who founded the Talmud Torah in Hamburg, and was Assistant Rabbi of the neighboring congregation of Altona, for which service he never accepted any compensation. A grand uncle of his

was Rabbi Loeb Frankfurter, the author of the two Talmudic works, 'הרכסים לבקעה' and 'קול יהודה', well known in Rabbinical circles. The power of domestic precept and example in shaping the religious disposition of the boy was no doubt great, but there was soon added to it an influence far more potent in attuning his soul to piety and to that enthusiastic faith in God and Judaism, which never left him at any period of his life. Isaac Bernays, of whom Israel's greatest historian, Graetz, says that he understood the importance of Judaism in the history of the world far better than Mendelssohn, and that he possessed the ability to inspire his pupils with joyous devotion to their faith, became, in the year 1822, Rabbi, or, as he preferred to call himself, following the Portuguese usage, Chacham of the Hamburg congregation, and under the influence of his Biblical and Talmudical instruction and earnest sermons the youthful Hirsch insensibly found himself growing dissatisfied with the commercial career for which

¹ The Ridges Levelled.

² The Voice of Judah.

his parents had designed him, which dissatisfaction finally culminated in the definite resolve to choose the Rabbinical vocation as his life task. In furtherance of this plan he went to Mannheim, where, under the instruction of the venerable Rabbi Jacob Ettlinger, afterward Rabbi of Altona, he devoted himself assiduously to Talmudical studies until 1829, when he entered the University of Bonn. Here he came into close connection with a number of Jewish students, whose minds were full of restless and skeptical thought, and pulsating with strong ambition for careers of power and distinction, then, as now, so tremendously difficult for Jews to attain in Germany. They organized a debating society, and among the keenest and most brilliant debaters on all subjects, especially religious, was Samson Raphael Hirsch.

Abraham Geiger was one of those students, and a warm personal friend and admirer of Hirsch, of whose splendid intellectual gifts, remarkable eloquence, strict moral principles and personal amiability, he draws,

in his posthumous writings, a most attractive picture. Strange, indeed, that two warm friends, issuing from very similar family environments, both sincere and both inspired by genuine desire to work for the welfare of their people and their faith, should have sought the realization of their ideals upon roads so utterly divergent, leading to goals diametrically opposed.

Passing strange, but still a phenomenon which repeats itself in every country and every age, and which we can, without difficulty, see in our own surroundings and time.

Hirsch had hardly passed a year at the University when he was called, in 1830, as Land Rabbi to the Principality of Oldenburg. In Bonn he had been brought face to face with the Jewish religious problem as it manifested itself among the intellectual classes. In Oldenburg he beheld it in all its difficulty and apparent insolubility among the middle and lower classes, the mercantile and laboring elements of the Jewish people. These twain experiences were undoubtedly hard blows to

his ideal, but, instead of discouraging him, they aroused his latent energy, and strengthened in him the resolve to do his utmost to secure the wide dissemination and propagation of the true meaning of Judaism, as he understood it, and which through hard study and profound reflection had already at that youthful period ripened in him to a firm and solemn conviction. The first fruit of this resolve was one of the most, if not the most, significant and characteristic of his productions, the epoch-making writing entitled "Neunzehn Briefe über Judenthum, von Ben Uziel," which appeared in Altona in 1836, and which is the subject of the present translation. The fact that he published it under a pseudonym is characteristic for his intensity and singleness of purpose. Youth usually delights in publicity, and loves to concentrate the attention of the world upon itself, but he had no such object in view. He did not seek for fame, neither should his name, although his official position must have lent it some weight, assist in procuring a favorable reception for

his book. Not the name or position of the author, but what he had to say should attract attention, should give his co-religionists food for thought. But the fact of his authorship did not remain long unknown; the letters made a profound impression in German Jewish circles, and soon all knew that the youthful Rabbi of Oldenburg was the author of the eloquent and original defense of Orthodox Judaism. In the nineteen letters, which assume to be the correspondence between a young Rabbi called Naphtali ('צרי=Hirsch), and his youthful friend Benjamin, who, though originally religious, had, through contact with the world and the perusal of non-Jewish writings, lost his early convictions, Hirsch set up that view of Judaism called in Germany "Denkgläubigkeit," which we may translate as "intellectual or enlightened Orthodoxy," although he himself was intolerant of any name except Judaism or "Torah." The nineteen letters are a sort of modern *Moreh Nebuchim*, ✓ "Guide of the Perplexed," though very different in form and contents from the famous work

of the Cordovan philosopher, to whose theory of Judaism, its tenets and its law, Hirsch was strongly opposed. Like Maimonides, however, he addressed himself neither to the simple-minded believer, who found in the observance of his ancestral faith sufficiency of strength and solace for the battle of life, and nourishment for his intellectual and spiritual cravings, nor to the religious Nihilist to whom the whole of theology is but an exploded standpoint, but to the "perplexed," to those whose hearts still clung with warmest attachment to Judaism, but whose minds found much doubtful, incomprehensible, or seemingly purposeless in the faith endeared to them by a thousand ties.

In classic German, with a style oftentimes highly poetic and eloquent, and always impressive, and with masterly argumentation, he proceeded to confute their objections. Commencing with the demonstration of the necessity of the existence of God, as a *conditio sine qua non* of the universe, he follows with the postulate of the need of a human race to carry

into actuality the infinite potentiality of good in the Deity. But with freedom of the will comes the inevitable conflict between good and evil; humanity will not devote itself as a whole to the maintenance of the Divine law, the free will left to itself would soon produce an utter confusion of notions concerning good and evil. Hence the need of an entire community which shall dedicate itself entirely to the mission of teaching humanity to seek for the good, or what is the same, to obey the will of God. Such a people must have distinctive laws and customs to sanctify it and distinguish it from the mass of external humanity as especially consecrated to the service of God. This duty has been historically assumed by Israel; these distinctive laws form the ceremonial legislation of the Torah. Then follows the analysis of the Torah and the demonstration that every part is essential and necessary, either to the furtherance of the ideal of good on the part of mankind, or the establishment of Israel in its character of "servant of the All-One," and that no human

authority has power to abrogate any of the Divine institutions. Hirsch's system of what he calls the "scientific upbuilding of Judaism" (wissenschaftlicher Aufbau des Judentum's) is somewhat peculiar. While he insists that the doctrinal and ethical contents of Judaism can only be ascertained by absolute objectivity of investigation into its Biblical and Talmudic sources, uninfluenced by prejudices or notions drawn from extraneous spheres of thought, he utterly refuses to consider the question of the authenticity of revelation and the binding character of Jewish codes. For him the Torah is axiomatic, as unquestionably real as nature itself. To doubt or question this would be to put oneself outside of Judaism. While the first principle is truly scientific and must, of necessity, be approved by all, the second principle can not but be a serious difficulty to many an honest mind. Nor can it be denied that in the practical application of the first principle, the objective investigation of the Torah, he was occasionally guilty of both philosophical and

philological extravagances, which were sharply and deservedly attacked by his opponents. Nevertheless, as a whole, his work is profound and acute, and will have enduring value.

The publication of this work marked an epoch in the history of Judaism in Germany, and, indeed, in the world. It showed that orthodox Judaism was not maintained solely by the superstitious, or narrow-minded older generation, who had never been initiated into the science and culture of the age; but that it could be warmly, nay, enthusiastically, upheld by one who had thoroughly acquainted himself with the most daring researches of the new time, and met them with equally bold and open argument. More on this account, even, than because of the convincingness of the general theory, or the brilliancy of the special argument, the letters made a sensation, and aroused universal admiration. The lofty idealism which pervaded his description of the Israel-mission, the emphasis with which he pointed it out as particularly the duty of the cultured and wealthy

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to remain attached with entire and unswerving faithfulness to the religion and the people charged with so sublime a task, were admirably adapted to reach the hearts of the impressionable and earnest-thinking in Israel. A sensual or worldly-minded person found nothing attractive in the man or his ideas, but those possessed of higher impulses, and who seriously pondered over the problem of life and sought for light and truth, were at once won over by his profundity and evident sincerity, and among this best class of Israel he gained numerous and devoted followers. It was during his tenure of the Rabbinical office at Oldenburg that he received an unusually gifted and talented student, whose name was also destined to shine resplendent in the Jewish world. On the 8th of May, 1837, Heinrich Hirsch Graetz, destined to be known as the father of Jewish history, then in his twentieth year, became the disciple of the already renowned Oldenburg Rabbi. The impression produced upon the brilliant and earnest young thinker by his new teacher is well described in

the memoir of Professor Graetz by Rabbi Dr. Philipp Bloch, recently published under the auspices of the Jewish Publication Society,¹ and this description gives us an excellent characterization of the personality of Hirsch: "In Samson Raphael Hirsch he met a man whose spiritual elevation and noble character compelled his profound reverence, and who fully realized all the expectations he had harbored concerning him. Hirsch was a man of modern culture, and his manner was distinguished, even aristocratic, although he kept aloof from all social intercourse. He was short of stature, yet those who came in contact with him were strongly impressed by his external appearance, on account of his grave, dignified demeanor, forbidding familiarity. With great intellectual gifts, and rare qualities of the heart, he combined varied theological attainments, and an excellent classical education. . . . He was the only teacher from whom Graetz's self-centred being received scientific

¹ Index volume of Graetz's "History of the Jews." Philadelphia. 1898.

stimulation; perhaps the only man to exercise, so far as the stubborn peculiarity of Graetz's nature permitted it, permanent influence upon his reserved, independent nature."

In 1838 Hirsch published, as a necessary concomitant of the letters, his "Choreb—Essays on Yissroel's Duties in the Dispersion,"¹ which is a text-book on Judaism for the educated youth of Israel. Each law, ceremonial, ethical, or devotional, is thoroughly explained according to the part which it takes in the vast edifice of the ordinances designed to protect Israel in its devotion to the God-idea, or to assist in the diffusion of Jewish spiritual and ethical truth. In 1839 he published "First Communications from Naphtali's Correspondence."² This was a polemical essay against the reforms of Holdheim and others, and in it he showed himself a master of controversy. With incontrovertible reasoning and biting satire he exposed the utter hollowness and unworthiness of the so-called "Jewish re-

¹ Versuche über Jissroel's Pflichten in der Zerstreuung.

² Erste Mittheilungen aus Naphtali's Briefwechsel.

forms," as compared with the old, unadulterated Judaism, and that the latter alone could enable Israel to fulfill its mission. In 1841 he was elected Land-Rabbi of the Hanoverian districts of Aurich and Osnabrück, with his residence in Emden.

In 1844 appeared "Second Communications from a Correspondence Concerning the most Recent Jewish Literature,"¹ which contained a vigorous polemic against the contemporary reform movement in Judaism. In 1846 he received the highest compliment which could be paid to an orthodox Rabbi by being called to the Rabbinate of Nicolsburg in Moravia, which such distinguished Talmudists and representatives of the old school as Rabbi Mordechai Bäneth and Rabbi Nahum Trebitsch had held. That such a community should have at that period selected a man of modern culture as their spiritual head, without any suspicion of the genuineness of his piety, was, in itself, exceptional, and a high honor; but it

¹Zweite Mittheilungen aus einem Briefwechsel über die neueste jüdische Literatur.

was succeeded the next year by a still greater distinction, when he was installed as Land-Rabbi of Moravia and Austrian Silesia. This showed the high repute in which both his learning and piety stood in communities of unquestioned orthodoxy. In Austria he passed five busy and useful years in the reorganization of the Jewish congregations, the instruction of numerous disciples, and also, at one time in public politics, as a member of the Moravian Parliament. In 1851 he did the most heroic deed of his life; a deed which demonstrated most unmistakably that Judaism and truth only, not worldly glory or reward, were his life's single purpose. At that time Frankfort-on-the-Main was, as regards its Jewish congregation, entirely in the hands of the reformers. Frankfort, ranking with Worms as the oldest of South German communities, where our ancestors had, during the dark mædieval days, shown such patient endurance and active heroism in the cause of the sacred faith, was now given over to the reign of superficial and irreverent innovators. Eleven sincerely pious men

only had withdrawn from the general community and founded the organization which they did not even venture to call a congregation, but modestly styled a society, "Israelitische Religions Gesellschaft."¹ These eleven timidly and hesitatingly sent a request to the Chief Rabbi of Moravia and Silesia to be their guide and adviser, hoping that his well-known Jewish enthusiasm, and his financial position, which permitted him to be independent, would, *perhaps*, induce him to accept their call. And he accepted it. The recognized head of Judaism in two great provinces, clothed with state authority, loved and honored by his congregations, laid down his brilliant and lucrative position in order to accept a questionable place as Rabbi of a small group in a great city, where the Jewish community at large was thoroughly organized under other, and hostile, leadership. It was a wise and far-seeing step. Hirsch recognized that here in the heart of Germany was the spot where the best and most substantial work could be done for Judaism, for, if he

¹ Israelitish Society for Religion.

could materially elevate the cause of conservatism in Germany, it would inevitably be productive of the most beneficial results in all those neighboring regions which look up to Germany as the model of culture and enlightenment.

His work in Germany was blessed to a degree far beyond what he could have anticipated.

Little by little, through hard, unceasing toil and struggle, he succeeded in developing new Jewish life, and in organizing a model orthodox congregation, numbering some five hundred of the best Jewish families of the place, and provided with all necessary institutions in the most splendid manner. Nor did he confine his efforts to the synagogue; he succeeded in organizing two schools, "Bürgerschule" and "Realschule," in which a thorough Jewish training goes hand in hand with the secular education demanded by the age, thereby securing the youth and thoroughly preparing them to take the place in the congregation occupied by their parents. As conscientious and careful teacher, as eloquent and brilliant preacher,

he labored for the advancement of his own congregation, as learned and instructive writer for Judaism in general. As writer his efforts were distributed between contributions to the columns of the "Jeshurun," established in 1854, and independent works. In the twelve years from 1866 to 1878 he published his masterly "Translation of the Pentateuch with Commentary."¹ The leading principle of this great work is to prove the historical unity of Judaism, that it can not be divided into different forms and distinct periods of development, but that its latest manifestations are the logical and necessary postulates of Biblical revelation. During all these years he was battling for liberty of conscience to secure the abrogation of the law, designed in the interests of order and system, but iniquitous in its undesigned consequences, compelling Israelites to remain contributing members of the local congregations, even when these latter had departed from the standards of religious duty. These efforts were finally crowned with success

¹ Uebersetzung und Erklärung des Pentateuch.

when the bill introduced by Lasker in the German Parliament, permitting Israelites to sever their connection with the congregation without leaving Judaism, became a law on the 28th of July, 1876. Hirsch was forced to this step by the unreasonable actions of the reform Jewish communal authorities of Frankfort, who refused his congregation absolutely necessary privileges, even after it had swelled to hundreds of families. On this subject he wrote two essays, "The Principle of Religious Liberty,"¹ 1874, and "On Leaving the Congregation,"² 1876.

He did not find universal approval of this step, however, even among the orthodox. His most notable opponent was Rabbi S. B. Bamberger, of Würzburg, with whom he had a warm controversy, and a large section of the orthodox Jews under leadership of Dr. Hurwitz remained in connection with the main body of the Frankfort community. In 1882 appeared his "Translation and Explana-

¹ Das Princip der Gewissensfreiheit.

² Der Austritt aus der Gemeinde.

tion of the Psalms."¹ This work is carried out in accordance with his established views, and is distinguished by elegance of rendering, a painstaking attempt to penetrate the innermost meaning of each psalm, and a scrupulous adherence to the received text. His effort to find symbolical meanings in the enigmatical superscriptions can not, however, be considered particularly successful. In 1884 he published an essay "On the relations of the Talmud to Judaism,"² to defend the Talmudic literature against the vile slanders which anti-Semitic writers were then already beginning to circulate. After this he did but little, the state of his health precluding active literary or ministerial work. He left, however, in manuscript a translation and explanation of the prayer-book, which has since been published. In this connection it is interesting to note, as an illustration of the high repute in which he stood among the vast body of his co-religionists in the Russian empire, that shortly after

¹ Uebersetzung und Erklärung der Psalmen.

² Ueber die Beziehungen des Talmuds zum Judenthum.

his death a translation of the "Nineteen Letters" into classic Hebrew by M. S. Aronsohn appeared in Wilna, and within a few months several editions were exhausted. He died with the dying year, quietly and painlessly, December 31, 1888. Such was the life and such the work of one who was undoubtedly one of the most remarkable figures in Israel's gallery of great men during the present century. Like all great men he had his faults. He was an extremist, but only extremists achieve success. The undecided and weak-kneed compromisers can never control, but are always controlled by their surroundings; but he was a master-mind who led his contemporaries, and his was a powerful and unyielding will, which stamped upon his time the impress of his ideas and convictions. The secret of his success lay, in addition to his own personality, in the absolute consistency of his religious system. His doctrine of consistent obedience to the will of God and the ceremonial law, as a part of that will, in order thereby to accomplish the mission of Israel, was convincing to

the minds of thousands, and inspired them with enthusiasm and devotion.

He covered orthodox Judaism with glory by demonstrating that the old synagogue ritual, so bitterly attacked and decried, not only best expressed the true spirit of Judaism, but could be carried out in a highly dignified, impressive, and æsthetic manner. He has been accused by advocates of the so-called Radical Judaism of making the synagogue service an antiquarian show. This accusation is, however, utterly superficial. Whatever of the antique his synagogue service presented was due, not to his inception, but to the laws which, as a true Israelite, he was bound to hold sacred and to obey. The service in radical temples is undoubtedly not at all antiquarian. It is modern, but because it is a purely modern conventional arrangement, with very much of the nineteenth century in it, but very little of Judaism and its sacred heritage of inviolable law. The credit of having boldly taken his standpoint within, not without, Judaism, and having elevated and glorified it by demon-

strating its intrinsic beauty and merit, and its own native adequacy for every spiritual want of humanity, will forever belong to Samson Raphael Hirsch, and his name will live imperishable in the history of Israel as one who was in every fiber of his being a Jew, an idealist, and a true friend of mankind.

THE TRANSLATOR.