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# Mitteilungen



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# **The Hirsch Chumash, Shabbos Morning, and Partners in Torah**

*Dr. Yitzchok Levine\**

## **Introduction**

I am a mathematician by training, not a Rav. I have little to offer by way of Torah insights into the monumental writings of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, ZT"l, of which his commentary on the Chumash should perhaps be considered the capstone. It then occurred to me that given who I am, I can do something that others might not do; namely, give a view of the new English edition of the Hirsch Chumash from the standpoint of a layman.

## **My Background**

In order for the reader to understand where I am coming from, let me draw a brief sketch of myself. I am a second generation American born Jew. My grandparents on both sides came to this country from Russia during the early part of the twentieth century, so I have no direct connection to German Orthodoxy. My "encounter" with German Orthodoxy came in the late sixties as a result of spending several summers at a place called Sackett Lake Country Club, located near Monticello, NY.

For those in the know, this most certainly was not a country club! It consisted of nineteen bungalows, all occupied by families who resided in Washington Heights, save for me. It was in Sackett Lake where I first learned about German minhogim, and saw the beautiful legacy of Rav Hirsch steadfastly preserved and practiced. There is no question that my life was changed by having spent a few summers living with people from Khal Adath Jeshurun.

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At this time I lived in Elizabeth, NJ, where Reb Yosef Schwab, one of Rav Shimon Schwab's, זי"ל, sons, also resided. We quickly became friends. From time to time Rav Schwab would come to Elizabeth to visit with his son, his wife, and his grandchildren. It was on such a visit when I happened to stop by Yosef's home, for I no longer recall what. Yosef introduced me to his father, and I was immediately impressed with the specialness of this man. He was friendly, warm and open, and at the same time dignified. I sensed that I was in the presence of greatness, and my instincts were not wrong.

From time to time I would call Rav Schwab with various halachic questions. He always listened patiently and seemed to know instinctively when to ask for more information. He would then clearly and carefully explain his answer. If I had questions about his reply, he would expand upon it, again with patience and clarity. In short, he knew how to deal with Ba'alei Batim and how to phrase things in a format that was both meaningful and to the point. These interactions with Rav Schwab served to further strengthen my ties to KAJ. Indeed, I developed an appreciation for the Hirschian "style" of Orthodoxy which continues to grow.

### **The New Chumash**

In light of the above, it was only natural that I should become interested in the writings of Rav Hirsch. I bought the original English translation that was published between 1959 and 1966. However, I found it difficult to comprehend and only occasionally referred to it.

Hence, when I received a letter from KAJ announcing a new translation of Rav Hirsch's commentary on Sefer Vayikra, I quickly sent in my order. I subsequently ordered the other volumes as they became available.

I have found this new translation especially readable and comprehensible. Indeed, this is what has led me to include the words "Shabbos Morning" in the title of this article. Allow me to explain.

I am an early riser (one of the joys of getting older!). It has become my custom to study the new translation of the Hirsch Chumash before

davening on Shabbos morning. Time and again I find this commentary both enlightening and insightful. I have quipped to others, “Rav Hirsch knew how to read, and I know how to read. However, he sees things in the pesukim that I completely miss. And, they are clearly there, if you look at things through his eyes.”

But the commentary is more than just an explanation of the Torah! It is filled with gems that explain what Torah Judaism really is or, at least, should be. Let me give you just one example.

On verse 19:2 of Vayikra

***“Speak to the entire community of the Children of Israel and say to them: Be holy, for I, G-d, your G-d, am holy.”***

Rav Hirsch writes:

Self-mastery is the highest art a man can practice. Self-mastery does not mean neglecting, stunting, killing, or destroying any of one’s powers or faculties. In and of themselves, the powers and faculties — from the most spiritual to the most sensual — that have been given to man are neither good nor bad. They all have been given to us for exalted purposes — that we may use them to do G-d’s Will on earth. The Torah sets for each of them a positive purpose and negative limits. In the service of that purpose and within those limits, all is holy and good. But where a person strays from that purpose and exceeds those limits, coarseness and evil begin.

As in any other art, virtuosity in this, the highest moral art can be attained only through practice — training one’s moral willpower to master the inclinations of the heart. But this training is not to be undertaken in the realm of the expressly forbidden, where any slip would result in wrongdoing. Rather, moral resolve must be tested and strengthened in the realm of the permitted. By learning to overcome inclinations that are permitted but related to the forbidden, one gains the power of self-mastery and thus makes all his powers and faculties subservient to the fulfillment

of G-d's Will. Each person, according to his own unique qualities, should work on his inner self; and he should train *quietly*, in a manner *known only to himself*.

When I read this selection, I was again impressed by how relevant Rav Hirsch's writings are to our times. (I say again, because this sort of thing happens with regularity, namely, I read something in his commentary and marvel at how relevant it is.) In my opinion, we live in a time where there is too much emphasis on externalities at the expense of commitment to the quiet, private practice of Judaism. Our society is obsessed with packaging at the expense of substance, and, sadly, some have been duped into thinking that this is also true when it comes to their Yiddishkeit.

Furthermore, Rav Breuer writes: Genuine Chassidic Jewishness strives for Chassiduth which in itself is a lofty achievement on the ethical ladder which the Yehudi must attempt to climb. This is demonstrated for us by R. Pinchas ben Yair (Abodah Zarah 20b): Our highest duty is Torah and its study; this leads to carefulness which in turn leads to active striving; to guiltlessness; to purity; to holiness; to modesty; to the fear of sin; and finally, to Chassiduth. Accordingly, a Chassid is a Jew who gives himself in limitless love to the Divine Will and its realization and to whom the welfare of his fellowmen constitutes the highest source of satisfaction (see Hirsch, Chovev, Ch. 14). Thus, in the Talmudic era, the title "Chassid" was a mark of highest distinction and this is what it should be today.

The so-called Chassid who confines his Avodah to prayer does not deserve this title if this "Avodah of the heart" does not call him to the Avodah of life where he must practice and apply the precepts of Chassidus.

He does not deserve the title if he is particular regarding the Kashruth of his food but fails to apply the precepts of conscientiousness and honesty to his business dealings.

He does not deserve this title if his social life is not permeated by

love and the deep interest in the welfare of his fellow men; if he does not shun quarreling, envy or even abominable lashon hora; if he does not earnestly strive to acquire those midoth for which Rav Hirsch (in his Chovev) calls so eloquently.

Certainly the mere exhibition of a certain type of clothing or the type of beard worn or even the adornment of long sideburns do not entitle the bearer to the title of honor - Chassid. These may be marks of distinction - but they must be earned to be deserved. (Rav Breuer, *His Life and His Legacy* pages 227 – 228)

### **My Partner in Torah**

About three years ago I contacted **Partners in Torah** indicating that I was interested in participating in their program as a mentor. “**Partners in Torah** matches Jewish adults who want to know more about their heritage with a friendly, knowledgeable mentor for an hour a week of Jewish study and discussion.” (<http://www.partnersintorah.org/>) Shortly thereafter I got a call telling me that Dan S was interested in participating. I was told that Dan had a limited background, was not a Sabbath observer, and wanted to study Chumash.

I called Dan and suggested that we begin with a translation of Rashi’s commentary on Chumash Bereishis. He was not particularly taken with this idea, saying he wanted to study Chumash in a “different manner,” although not knowing what that manner was. I suggested that he go to a Jewish bookstore and talk to the proprietor. Fortunately, the bookstore owner was able to convince Dan that the place to start was with Chumash and Rashi.

Over the course of our studying together Dan has gone through the entire commentary of Rashi on all of the Chumashim save for Vayikra. He was not interested in Vayikra, because of its emphasis on sacrifices. From time to time I would mention some things that Rav Hirsch said about issues he had raised. This eventually led to Dan reading Rav Hirsch’s **Horeb**. It took him some time, but he went through the **Horeb** from cover to cover.

Dan eventually added the study of *Mishnayos*, using volume 1 of the English translation of R. Pinchas Kehati's commentary on the *Mishnyos* in Bava Kamma and Bava Metzia. He prepares one *Mishna* a week, asks me about anything that he feels needs clarification, and reads the *Mishna* to me.

Dan began to read the English translation of the Ramban's *perush* on Bereishis when it first appeared. After completing Bereishis, he started on Shemos. Again, from time to time he would raise issues, and I would relate to him things that Rav Hirsch said. One week he asked me three questions, and I read to him selections from the commentary of Rav Hirsh that answered two of his questions directly. I told him that the answer to his third question was also dealt with by Rav Hirsch, but that the explanation was somewhat long. Then I said to him, "The new translation of Rav Hirsch's commentary on Shemos has just been made available to the public, you should buy it." And this is what he did!

Dan has found this commentary to be invaluable. He cannot read or understand most of the Hebrew, but he still gets a great deal out of the rest of the commentary. When he completed Shemos, he told me that he was going to wait until Bamidbar became available. He felt that he would not get much out of the commentary on Vayikra, which had just appeared. I told him that, on the contrary, he would gain much from reading Rav Hirsch's commentary on Vayikra.

Dan listened to me and has been going through Rav Hirsch's commentary on Vayikra. He is getting a great deal out of what he reads. In fact, in May before he went on a vacation to Europe he said to me, "I hope that I will have room for this Chumash in my luggage." "The Hirsch Chumash has really changed my life. I have learned things that I never knew before, and my level of observance has increased. I now look at things in a different light!"

The influence of Rav Hirsch clearly continues to shine forth!

## **Conclusion**

The new English translation of Rav Hirsch's commentary on the Chumash took twelve long years to complete. Nonetheless, the time and resources expended to accomplish this are well worth it. The result is a readily understandable commentary that is invaluable to all Jews - from novice to expert Torah scholar. I am certain that it will enrich the study of Chumash for thousands for many, many years to come.