

RAV BREUER

His Life and His Legacy

A BIOGRAPHY OF
RAV DR. JOSEPH BREUER

by

Dr. David Kranzler

and

Rabbi Dovid Landesman



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a guiding light for those among whom she was dispersed without having their values or ideals corrupt her own. The Torah was her protection, her guide and the symbol of her unique identity. Her loyalty to the Torah was the guarantee that not only would she survive the Diaspora experience, but she could prosper within it and serve as a living *kiddush Hashem*.

A perusal of his writings makes it abundantly clear that R. Hirsch held that *Torah im Derech Eretz* was never intended as a temporary measure introduced because of a specific problem during a specific historical period and in a specific geographic area. On the contrary, R. Hirsch held that *Torah im Derech Eretz* was not only a valid Torah *hashkafah* ; it was the lifestyle of choice. Thus, in his Commentary to the Torah¹⁶ he writes:

Only in using the mind and the freedom of will which God has given us in the earthly sphere to which he has appointed us, in the most complete faithfulness to God, with deliberation and the clearest human insight, do we ourselves attain the height of human perfection and our earthly management of life gains the holiness that makes us worthy of the nearness to God.

If anything, in R. Hirsch's view, the choice of following a Torah-only agenda, as per the decision of the Eastern European *rabbanim*, was a *hora'as sha'a*, for it was an unnatural scheme called for because of the impossibility of life in the ghetto. Although justified by harsh reality, it could not be seen as the optimal way for the Jew to live, for it denied him the opportunity to use his life to serve as a *kiddush Hashem*.

Rav Breuer also decried the decision of his contemporaries to deny the validity of *Torah im Derech Eretz* as the path of choice for the Jew in the modern era, writing:

16. See *Bereishis* 9:27.

We welcome the flourishing yeshivos. We are less happy that most of the yeshivos reject the Torah im Derech Eretz approach for their bachurim; indeed, they forbid it. The Torah im Derech Eretz approach requires that one “stay in learning” as does the so-called “yeshivishe world”. Yet those who have learned in the yeshivos and wish to take up an אומנות or מדע are then separated from the “yeshivishe world” and are required to find justification on their own for their course of action.

R. Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, last head of the Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin and a product of the Eastern European yeshivòs, was perhaps one of the few *roshei yeshiva* who truly understood the underlying philosophy of *Torah im Derech Eretz*. In an essay published in a Hebrew work¹⁷ that delineates the Hirsch approach, he writes:

The Torah, in the view of R. Hirsch, is the force that gives form; in the Aristotelian view [form] is the essence,¹⁸ whereas derech eretz is the matter upon which the Torah acts.

If *Derech Eretz* was meant to be completely shunned, would there be a purpose for giving the Torah to man? Was not the Torah specifically given so that man might use it to govern his life in the material world?

Just as the Torah confronts the Jew with the contemplation of Heaven and earth and with the spectacle of human history and teaches him the truth both by the greatness of God and the nothingness of all self-centered human endeavor, so must you lead your child into the realms of nature and history so that he will understand his Jewish task the better and learn to love it.¹⁹

Rav Breuer made it abundantly clear that *Torah im Derech Eretz* remained relevant in America. Moreover, he felt that the failure

17. רש"ר הירש, משנתו ושיטתו.

18. Compare to *Rambam, Hilchos Yessodai ha-Torah* 2:3.

19. חורב, מצות חינוך.

of the majority of observant Jewry to accept this path might in no small part be the reason for the ongoing tension that exists between those who remain loyal to Torah and those who seek to reestablish Jewish statehood.

In the afore-mentioned essay on *Torah im Derech Eretz* Rav Breuer wrote:

The number of Torah-true people who follow the Torah im Derech Eretz approach on the holy soil is not large. In general, those who are Torah-true in the Holy Land are in the minority and they are forced to wage a hard fight to protect their life's sacred treasures. It was the will of God to let His people experience the great miracle of the Six Day War. If the many yeshivos of the country would have prepared young men gifted in leadership and with the will to lead in the spirit of Torah im Derech Eretz and if, in that hour of victory, they would have brought the message of Torah im Derech Eretz to their brothers and sisters, perhaps they too would have been granted a victory to win over the masses to build the Torah State. But, the great opportunity was lost.

Consistently and without compromise, Rav Breuer taught that *Austritt* – separation – was an integral part of *Torah im Derech Eretz*. The idea that there might be room within Judaism for movements that denied *Torah min ha-Shamayim* or the unique authority of the Sages of the Talmud to establish the rules and regulations of Jewish life would justify a philosophy that could contend that the Torah itself had to be adjusted to the changes in *derech eretz* that were brought about by advances in technology or changes in the historical relationship of Israel and the nations. This too was an absurdity, for it denied the eternal truth of Torah – the very foundation of Jewish belief.

Many otherwise serious students of R. Hirsch's philosophy have developed the mistaken notion that his clearly stated opposition to the *Chovivei Tzion* – the nascent Zionist movement of his era – and his refusal to become part of the *Alliance* indicate that he

viewed Jews in the aftermath of the Destruction as practitioners of a religion rather than as a people.²⁰ According to this view, the emergence of the State of Israel would serve as historical proof that his worldview had been proven wrong and that he was perhaps too taken by his Prussian loyalty and attachment to German culture to recognize what was transpiring. Again, we turn to R. Weinberg, who writes:

The complaint against Hirsch that he negated the national ideal of the Jewish people is absurd. A religious philosophy which places the people of Israel in the center of its thought and which sees Israel as the axis around which world history revolves – could there be any nationalism greater than this? Hirsch was certainly opposed to secular nationalism based on the hollow and empty foundation of race and common suffering. Such a nationalism is alien to the Jewish spirit, for it is borrowed from the language of other nations and it falsifies our unique historical ideal. The nationalism of Hirsch is religious and ethical; such a nationalism is not concerned with hatred and conquest . . .

The thought runs like a thread through all of Hirsch's writings that the Jews can not be a secular people like all others; because of Divine command they are obliged to be a prophetic people helping to secure the domination of the material by the Divine.

Similarly, some observers mistakenly place Rav Breuer within the anti-Zionist camp of Satmar and *Neturai Karta*, pointing to his oft expressed disappointment with the State. The fact that he never visited Israel coupled with his emphasis on providing his congregants with the means to live full Jewish lives in the Diaspora is erroneously assumed to indicate that he was totally opposed to the idea of Jewish nationhood. As his written testimony indicates, this is not the case.

The creation of the Jewish State in Eretz Yisroel is a world historic event deeply affecting our people in all its parts as well as the nations of

20. E.g., E. Jelenko's biography of R. Hirsch in *Great Jewish Personalities*.

the world. What is the attitude that we, as Torah-true Yehudim, are to take in relation to this event?

We have expressed it repeatedly in all clarity and intensity: this State will have a future only if and as long as it is organized as a Jewish State; i.e., a State of God rising on sacred soil. It will be a State of God if it proclaims the Torah as the fundamental law of its constitution and propagates its practical realization in the life of our people.

In his article describing R. Hirsch,²¹ R. Weinberg concludes with a moving testimony that is true of Rav Breuer as well:

It is possible at this decisive hour to build a bridge to establish contact with the perplexed and confused of our people. Religious youth must stand in the breach and show the way, and my advice to them is to imbibe the teaching of a great master who faced a similar task and succeeded brilliantly.

He rescued his own generation and his methods and ideas can serve as an anchor for our own and future generations.

21. *The Living Hirschian Legacy*, pgs. 112-115