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Rabbi David Zevi Hoffmann on Torah and *Wissenschaft*

Rabbi David Zevi Hoffmann stands out as one of the leading advocates of the *Torah u-Madda* philosophy. Born in Slovakia in 1843, he studied under R. Moses Schick and later journeyed to Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer's yeshiva in Eisenstadt. It was there that he was exposed to the combination of Torah and secular studies which Hildesheimer so strongly advocated. He later studied at the universities of Vienna and Berlin, writing his doctoral dissertation, *Mar Samuel* (Leipzig, 1873), at the latter institution. When Hildesheimer established his rabbinical seminary in Berlin, Hoffmann joined the faculty where his great knowledge in Talmud, Halakhah, and Bible was soon obvious to all. Hoffmann continued his association with the Seminary, becoming its rector in 1899, until his death in 1921.

By the turn of the century, Hoffmann was widely regarded as the leading halakhic authority in Germany and his opinion was sought by members of all the various trends in German Orthodoxy. However, Hoffmann was also a leading scholar in other areas, and his breadth of knowledge and scholarly output is almost without equal in modern times. In fact, he is the only *gadol be-Yisrael* who has ever been recognized as an outstanding practitioner of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. There have been a number of *gedolim* who were somewhat involved with it and were usually regarded as less than fully scholarly by their peers, but Hoffmann was recognized by all as a leader in the field. His studies on the Mishnah, in particular, were widely acknowledged as ground-breaking.¹

The wide range of Hoffmann's halakhic and scholarly interest can

be seen in the large bibliography of his publications which appears in the *Festschrift* published in his honor.² Particularly worthy of mention, especially since they are entirely forgotten in our day, are his German translations of the Mishnaic orders *Nezikin* (Berlin, 1893-1898) and *Toharot*, part one (Berlin, 1910). Each of these volumes are accompanied by Hoffmann's clear and learned notes, and represent probably the only translation of a rabbinic text into the vernacular carried out by a recognized *gadol be-Yisrael*.

Hoffmann's commentaries on Leviticus and Deuteronomy and his refutation of Wellhausen showed his mastery of modern biblical studies,³ much as his many talmudic writings showed his mastery of that field. As far as Halakhah is concerned, his volume of responsa, *Melammed le-Ho'il* (Frankfurt am Main, 1926-1932), is a classic and one of the most cited halakhic works of this century.⁴ Finally, Hoffmann did not shy away from apologetics, and he authored an entire work in defense of the Jewish attitude towards Gentiles.⁵ It is truly a wonder that such an important figure in recent Jewish intellectual history has not been the subject of extended research, and a comprehensive biography of him remains a major desideratum.⁶

The essay translated here, which was a lecture delivered at the opening of the Rabbinical Seminary's 1919 winter semester, originally appeared in *Jeschurun* 7 (1920): 497-504. It gives some insight into Hoffmann's own understanding of the interaction of Jewish and secular culture in general, and Torah and academic Jewish studies in particular.

Torah and Wissenschaft

As of today, our institution begins its 48th year of activity. The year, which corresponds numerically with the word **לח**, should remind us of the verse in Psalms: "Through God we shall do valiantly (**לח**)" (60:14, 108:14). But also, "with God do we intend to occupy ourselves in the year **לח**." Gentlemen, let our work be done for the sake of Heaven, for then the assistance of Heaven will always be on our side. Each of you should bear in mind that God gives you the power to become prosperous (**לח**).⁷ A verse in next week's Torah portion serves as a guiding principle for us. Herein the second progenitor of the human race (i. e., Noah), through the *ruah ha-kodesh* which rested upon him, prophesies the fate of all peoples and nations. It is the sentence, "God enlarge Japhet, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be their servant."⁸ We add to this the meaningful explanation of the Talmud which states: "Let the chief beauty of Japhet be in the tents of Shem."⁹

I

Even if the passage just quoted is understood to include first of all only the translation of the Torah of Israel, the descendants of Shem, into the language of the Greeks, the descendants of Japhet, this does not exclude the fact that our Sages also intended through their statement to allow entry of the entire range of culture and learning, insofar as they ennoble humanity, into the tents of Shem, i. e., the Jewish houses of study. This has always been the approach of the great men of Israel. Jewish law and belief wish for and expect, not the stupefaction but the enlightenment of their true believers and adherents. Only the *enlightened* spirit is susceptible to the wisdom of Jewish teaching. Only the noble soul finds pleasure in the purity and sincerity of the Jewish moral law. Only an intellect which has been perfected by [secular] learning finds its satisfaction in the sublimity of the Jewish belief in the one and only Creator of the entire universe, in the omnipotent One who controls the fate of people, and in the all-good nourisher and sustainer of the beings created by Him. Judaism joyfully welcomes every victory and every achievement of *true* learning, because it sees in them the triumph of truth over falsehood, of clarity over delusion and wandering astray; the overcoming of all those dark powers which have always persecuted and oppressed the Jews.

This principle was passionately described with these outstanding words spoken by our late rector immediately upon the founding of our school.

We are proud of the "sanctification of God's name" which ensued from the fact that the Jews are present in all areas of learning in numbers far out of proportion. To retain this national glory and take part in it ourselves, is something we regard as absolutely necessary and we extend to the fields of learning the same love that is given to other fields, for they all contribute to the glorification of God's name. Since the last century there has been both an entirely new outpouring of Jewish *Wissenschaft*, as well as the need to explore areas of Jewish studies cultivated from time immemorial, such as biblical exegesis and history, from new points of view and with the use of unfathomed new sources. We will incorporate these disciplines into our circle of things taught and deal with them with love and full scientific seriousness."

These are the words of Rabbi Dr. Esriel Hildesheimer of blessed memory.¹⁰

We do not have much to add to this and wish only to stress that the opinion just expressed is firmly opposed to the outlook which,

although it recommends that contemporary rabbis occupy themselves with *Wissenschaft*, regards it as a necessary evil, because such activity is erroneously believed to hinder and disturb the study of Torah. In truth, this is not the case. Through serious scientific research carried out *le-shem shamayim*, Torah study can only be promoted and enriched. All concepts will be grasped with scientific clarity, much which is unclear will be illuminated by research, and numerous mistakes will be eradicated. The revealed truth cannot be in contradiction to the truths which have been researched by means of the human spirit, assuming these latter truths are truths of reality and not just hunches and suppositions. Rather, the former [revealed truth] will be supported by the latter [discovered truth], and lead to full clarity and complete understanding.

"Let the chief beauty of Japhet be in the tents of Shem." Our Sages spell this out in various prescriptions. "This is my God and I will adorn him [Exodus 15:2]; i. e., adorn thyself before Him in [the fulfillment of] *mitzvot*."¹¹ We should perform all the precepts of our Law in an appealing and beautiful fashion. Everywhere we are reminded to take account of the sense of beauty and propriety. When the word of God is proclaimed, it should be done in a beautiful manner, so that heart and spirit will open to it, and when we sing our songs of praise and thanks to the Father in heaven, the song should be harmonious so that we honor God not merely with our possessions (*מדות*),¹² but also with exclamations of cheer and the melodious sound of our voice (*מרוק*).¹³

"God enlarge Japhet, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem." Japhet should be received as a brother and welcome guest in the tents of Shem, so that both of them, brotherly united, will work together for the homage of the only One. Through both, the name of God will be praised and glorified so that both together will loudly proclaim: Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem. His kingdom should continuously expand, His law should rule all human activity, and to establish His will should be the goal and aspiration of all beings.

II

"Let the chief beauty of Japhet be in the tents of Shem." This, however, states emphatically that *the tents are those of Shem*, and Japhet is only a co-inhabitant of these tents. Shem must be, and remain, the owner and ruler of these tents. The spirit of the Semitic teaching of God, the dictate of the Semitic divine law, builds the basis and provides the standard for the rule and activity in the tents and for the essence and contents of the teaching which emanates from these

tents. The God of Shem must remain the master and ruler in *his house*. This elementary maxim, which is so self-evident, has, in recent times, often been neglected, since people thought it advisable to change the Jewish religion and Jewish religious life. When the Jews were finally permitted to enter into civil society, many believed that they could only make themselves worthy of this kindness by transferring, in the most excessive manner, the mores, ways of life, and outlook of their non-Jewish co-citizens to the realm of Judaism. Judaism was no longer master in its own house, but [felt] it had to have its laws prescribed by the foreign co-inhabitant. When one believed that the modern Hellenism called for a certain reform, one did not inquire of Jewish law. The reform was carried out against the voices of the representatives of Jewish law, and subsequently such reforms were even sanctioned through a mocking distortion of the laws.

Even more nasty tricks were carried out upon the *teaching* of Judaism than upon the practical elements of the law. Nothing remained holy and untouchable. The traditional revealed doctrine had to be pushed aside for all sorts of positions which one took to be infallible scholarship. Only those principles of belief which did not contradict the falsehood and illusion of established learning were granted the right to exist. A hypothesis discovered through study was enough to remodel almost two thousand year-old prayers and to rob from them their inherent doctrines of belief.

Thus the tents of Shem had become the tents of Japhet. Japhet was ruler and master in the tents of Shem, and Shem had to be content if he was *tolerated* in a dark corner of these rooms.

Is this state of affairs justified? Is it really necessary for the doctrine of Shem to allow the ideas of Japhet to prescribe the conditions of existence in its own territories? The answer to this is given by the last sentence of the prophecy of the Patriarch, "and let Canaan be their servant." With this, the brothers Shem and Japhet received permission to overcome Canaan, take the leadership from him, and make him a servant. Therefore, one will have to give priority to the brother who contributes most to fulfill the mission to humiliate Canaan and rid humanity of his influence. Canaan is the personification of brutality, inconsiderate egoism, and crass materialism which aims only for possessions and pleasure. In order to reach its goal, it neglects family ties, knows no feeling of humanity, and without pity steps over fields of corpses.

Now, although the Hellenic culture, where it found its entrance, did eradicate this crudeness and ennoble humanity, making it susceptible for the beautiful and good, and awakening in it a desire for learning and knowledge, it did not succeed in establishing all-encom-

passing justice, love, truth, and purity of morals as the foundation of life for individuals, families, and states. This alone is able to bring about the salvation of all of humanity in this world. Indeed, Hellenism must have realized that in the time of its degeneration it, too, was debased so as to become a servant of Canaan in that education and science were only valued insofar as they contributed to the attaining and securing of material goals and the obtaining of possessions and pleasure.

It was reserved for the Semitic teaching to call out the name of the One and Only, to explain that the world and humanity are the creation of an all-wise, all-powerful, all-just, eternal, and all-holy Divinity which humanity, in God's image and acting out of free will, is to serve and follow, to proclaim to mankind the commandment: be holy and morally pure as God is; be true, just, and loving as God is; live so that God will be pleased. Then God will live in your midst and give to you eternal salvation.

These sentences alone can completely defeat the Canaanite view of life. The Canaanite drives and inclinations found within humans will be placed in the service of the ideal and the holy. Canaan reaches his goal by being a servant to Shem and Japhet.

The Jews put this example to the test during medieval times. Excluded from all outside culture, through their own strength the Jews were always able to overcome the Canaanite crudeness and lack of morals. With pride and enthusiasm we look back to our grandparents and forefathers, to their pure family life, their self-control, their faith and trust in God, their unlimited selflessness and charity, their numerous virtues which we are painfully missing in our time. Granted, our ancestors had their faults, but one of our greatest rabbis correctly claims: "All shortcomings of *our* ancestors in medieval times were due to their era and all advantages from the people themselves. All advantages of *our* time are consequences of the era and all shortcomings are attributable to the people." And from where did these advantages of our ancestors arise? Only from the faithful adherence to God's teaching and living a life according to God's laws. This is a phenomenon which lasted for more than one and a half millennia and which therefore cannot be accidental.

With certainty we can claim that it is the divine teaching of Shem which especially overcomes and suppresses Canaan. Should this doctrine then allow itself to be constrained and confined by the education and science of Japhet? Should it remain in its own tent as merely a tolerated stranger?

This cannot and must not be! With this goal in mind our late rector, at the opening of our Seminary, set out the following as the *first*

postulate: "To promote and raise up Jewish religious life and an outlook true to tradition." "We want," so he said,

to inspire Orthodoxy among the young men who visit the halls of our institution and to acquaint them with our religious laws and directives through our own example of a practical religious life which is in conformity with these duties. We wish to inspire a similar example among these future leaders of the community. We want to protect them, through admonishment and teaching, from forsaking these paths and from assuming an attitude of mere external reverence, an attitude we decisively oppose. We want to reveal to them the sublime ideas about God, the Torah, and Israel's past and future which should fill them with noble pride to be participants in this great mission of the spiritual salvation of humanity and which should lead them to enthusiasm for their religious duty and happiness about faithfully fulfilling these duties.¹⁴

We say this with the following words: In Shem's tents a permanent sanctum should be erected for Jewish law. It should not again be desecrated by foreign customs or be reviled and made contemptible through calumnies and attacks from enemies both without and within. Only in Jewish law is complete salvation to be found, for it ties all thoughts and feelings, all temptations and pleasures, all movements and actions to the one idea of God from which alone they must receive direction and regulation.

Such a life in obedience to the Law must be accompanied by an appropriate doctrine and way of thinking. Only a divinely revealed law can claim eternal, complete validity and count on eternal existence. When, in the tents of Shem, human learning [i. e., biblical criticism] presumes to negate God's revelation of the doctrine of Shem, this is none other than the displacement of Shem's divine doctrine and law out of its very own house, which we must decisively reject. But can we erase all doubt with this simple rejection? Is not a thorough disproof of the assumptions of this [human] learning necessary? Certainly, we do not wish to be exempted from the duty of refutation. However, true faith must maintain its skepticism [of human learning] even in the absence of such a refutation.

In other words: the God proclaimed to the world by the descendants of Shem must be the owner and absolute ruler of the tents of Shem, which, according to the Midrash, are the synagogues and study halls of Israel.¹⁵ In this spirit did R. Esriel Hildesheimer, of blessed memory, found our Seminary, and this spirit should also accompany us in this new year and in the future so that in us the saying is fulfilled: *באלקים משה חיל*. Amen!

NOTES

1. See, in particular, his *Die erste Mischna und die Controversen der Tannaim* (Berlin, 1882). For an analysis of Hoffmann's views, see Charles Primus, "David Hoffmann's The First Mishnah," in Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Modern Study of the Mishnah* (Leiden, 1973), 122-34.
2. Simon Eppenstein, et al., eds., *Festschrift zum Stehzigsten Geburtstage David Hoffmann's* (Berlin, 1914), vi-xxiv.
3. See his *Die wichtigsten Instanzen gegen die Graf-Welthausensche Hypothese* (Berlin, 1904), *Das Buch Leviticus* (Berlin 1906), *Das Buch Deuteronomium* (Berlin, 1913). A translation, by Asher Wassereil, of Hoffmann's notes to Genesis has also been published (Bnei Brak, 1969, 1971).
4. In his introduction, Hoffmann's son, Moses, claims that a fourth volume of responsa was lost. According to Alexander Marx, Hoffmann's son-in-law, the fourth volume was stolen shortly after Hoffmann's death (*Essays in Jewish Biography* [Philadelphia, 1947], 218). As far as I know, the only responsum from Hoffmann's pen which has appeared in print since the publication of *Me'ammed le-Ho'il* was published by me in *Ha-Ma'ayan* 34 (Tever, 5754): 10-12. (When I published the responsum, I was not sure of its date. However, from Isaac Demba, *Ha-Sheftah u-Vedukah* [Warsaw, 1896], 25-26, it is obvious that the responsum should be dated 1893-1894.) Other writings from Hoffmann are found in R. David Zevi Hoffmann, *Ner H-Menahem* (Petah Tikvah, 1967), 1-5; and Liepman Philip Prins, *Parnes le-Dora*, ed. Mayer Herskovic (Hoboken, 1992), 380-84.
5. *Der Schulchan Aruch und die Rabbinen über das Verhältnis der Juden zu Andersgläubigen* (2nd ed., Berlin, 1894). This is a very interesting book and deserves careful study. In an earlier article, I pointed out that Hoffmann is sometimes led to unfounded conclusions; see my "Islam and the Halakhah," *Judaism* 42 (Summer, 1993): 340, n. 23. Since then, I have read Gustaf Dalman's *Jüdisches Fremdenrecht* (Karlsruhe, 1886), which shows clearly that, in many ways, Hoffmann's book is not an accurate portrayal of Jewish sources, and, indeed, could only have been written by a scholar of Hoffmann's standing in an era rife with Gentile assaults on Jewish texts. What needs to be determined is whether Hoffmann's misrepresentations are intentional or simply reflect his honestly held belief that Jewish sources have a strongly favorable view of Christianity and its adherents. Although Dalman is careful to point out that he does not believe that Hoffmann intentionally misrepresented any sources, this is exactly what Michael L. Rodkinson claims in his *Le-Vaker Mishpat* (Berlin, 1884) and his *Der Schulchan Aruch und seine Beziehungen zu den Juden und Nichtjuden* (Vienna, 1884). My own view, which I believe can be established fairly conclusively, is that Hoffmann was well aware that his presentation of Jewish sources was not complete, and often not even accurate. However, he was following a well-trodden path of Jewish apologists, which I discuss in my forthcoming article on Jewish apologetics in early modern Germany.
6. Yehoshua Markowitz wrote a masters dissertation on Hoffmann (Bar Ilan University, 1968). However, the most useful section of this work is the important documents published in the appendix. I am aware of two good articles and one thought-provoking doctoral dissertation devoted to Hoffmann which have appeared in recent years: David Ellenson and Richard Jacobs, "Scholarship and Faith: David Hoffmann [sic] and his relationship to *Wissenschaft des Judentums*," *Modern Judaism* 8 (February, 1988): 27-40; Daniel H. Gordis, "David Hoffmann on Civil Marriage," *Modern Judaism* 10 (February, 1990): 85-103; *idem*, "Dialectics of Community, Continuity, and Compassion: The Legal Writings of Rabbi David Zevi Hoffmann and Their Philosophical Foundations," (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California, 1992).
7. [Cf. Deuteronomy 8:18.]
8. [Genesis 9:27.]
9. [Megillah 9b.] For the following, cf. S. R. Hirsch, "Der Hellenismus und das

- Judentum," *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main, 1912), II, 24ff [= "Hellenism and Judaism," *Collected Writings of Samson Raphael Hirsch* (New York, 1985), 199ff].
10. ["Rede zur Eröffnung des Rabbiner-Seminars," in *Jahres-Bericht des Rabbiner-Seminars für das orthodoxe Judentum pro 5684 (1873-74)* (Berlin, no date), 87-88. Hoffmann's quotation of Hildesheimer is not exact.]
 11. [*Shabbat* 133b and parallels. See also R. Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, *Seridet Esh* (Jerusalem, 1977), IV, 369.]
 12. [See Proverbs 3:9.]
 13. [The word דָּבָר is applied to speech in Psalms 45:3, Proverbs 22:11, and Ecclesiastes 10:12.]
 14. ["Rede zur Eröffnung des Rabbiner-Seminars," 85. Once again, Hoffmann's citation is not exact.]
 15. [*Genesis Rabbah* 63:10]