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Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer's Program of Torah u-Madda

Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer (1820-1899) was, together with Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the pioneer of *Torah im Derekh Erez* in modern times. Although each of them understood this concept differently, with Hildesheimer advocating Orthodox *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, they both were insistent that for Orthodox Jews living in the west, there was no possibility to segregate oneself behind ghetto walls. On the contrary, modern Jewish education, they argued, must teach Jews how best to confront and deal with modernity in all of its aspects.¹

Hildesheimer's approach was to establish a rabbinical seminary, for he believed that Orthodoxy would only survive in modern times if there were spiritual leaders who were thoroughly conversant with the era they were living in. Originally he intended to establish this seminary in Hungary, where he had earlier founded a yeshivah that incorporated secular studies, but the opposition of the Orthodox rabbinate there was too much to overcome. It was only after he came to Berlin that, in 1873, he was able to realize his goal of founding the first Orthodox rabbinical seminary.

Hildesheimer's seminary was the only institution under Orthodox auspices in which students were required to have a significant secular education before they were admitted. It was expected that they would also continue their general education at the university level.² Furthermore, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* was a central element of the curricu-

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lum, and was taught by some of the greatest names in German-Jewish scholarship.³ Although the training of rabbis was central to the Berlin seminary's *raison d'être*, Hildesheimer made clear in his address at the inauguration of the institution, translated below, that he did not intend to create a "rabbi factory." Rather, in addition to rabbinic training, he hoped to make the Berlin seminary the center of an Orthodox intelligentsia, consisting of merchants, theologians, lawyers, and doctors.⁴ In this, he was at least partly successful.⁵

In terms of commitment to the academic study of Judaism, there was little difference between the faculty of Hildesheimer's seminary and its counterparts at the non-Orthodox seminaries of Abraham Geiger (*Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*) and Zechariah Frankel (*Jüdisches-Theologisches Seminar*). Indeed, Hildesheimer was always quick to defend the high academic standards at his institution.⁶ The Orthodox scholars who were associated with the Berlin seminary, even those who were uncompromising separatists in matters of Jewish communal politics, had no difficulty involving themselves in scholarly pursuits with the non-Orthodox. One of their prime motivations for engaging in *Wissenschaft* was quite similar to that of the non-Orthodox scholars, with Hildesheimer speaking of the glorification of God's name which would accompany Orthodox successes in Jewish scholarship.⁷

The only real difference between the scholars at the Berlin seminary and their non-Orthodox colleagues was in the realm of dogma, which was an important factor in biblical studies and in the history of halakhah. In fact, as Mordechai Breuer has pointed out, Orthodox scholarship in these areas was looked down upon for its lack of impartiality.⁸ Nevertheless, even though the Berlin seminary scholars were candid about their dogmatic assumptions, they believed that their scholarship, which upheld traditional views, was not based on dogma but was the result of an impartial examination of the evidence.⁹ Whereas many of the Orthodox, in particular the students of Hirsch, ignored the works of non-traditional scholars and even rejected the fundamentals of modern scholarship, the instruction at the seminary, which accepted the assumptions and methodology of university scholarship, could not ignore the biblical criticism of scholars such as Julius Wellhausen. They needed to disprove these heretical views. Hildesheimer and his successors believed that it was essential in modern times to confront head-on the views opposed to tradition. Any attempt to avoid this task would be self-defeating, since the students would inevitably be exposed to the modern scholarly trends.¹⁰

The seminary leadership was convinced that it was no longer possible to ensure theological conformity through the traditional arguments which had been advanced by men such as Judah Halevi. It was also impossible to advocate a theology based on faith alone, when this theology was in dispute with modern scholarship. Rather, the students had to be convinced that the traditional view was also in accord with the highest standards of scholarship. With great confidence, indeed over-confidence, the seminary faculty believed that the conclusions of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and modern biblical studies need not oppose traditional Jewish dogma, but could even be used to provide scholarly support for the traditional approach. Therefore, as noted above, the seminary's academic study of the Bible was intent on showing the scholarly weaknesses of biblical criticism. Before graduation, all seminary students were to be made aware of how to present the traditional approach in a convincing, i. e., scholarly, manner.¹¹

Until its closure by the Nazis in November 1938, the Berlin Rabbinical Seminary carried on the vision of its founder and was one of German Orthodoxy's central educational institutions. The following is a translation of Hildesheimer's flowery inaugural address, delivered at the opening of the Berlin Rabbinical Seminary.¹²

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Text of Rabbi Hildesheimer's Address

אתה חונן לאדם דעת ומלמד לאנוש בינה, חננו מאתך דעה בינה והשכל.

God, who graciously endows man with wisdom and teaches the frail mortal the use of his mind, endow me graciously with Your wisdom, insight, and understanding. Inspire my deeply moved heart with the right word in order to celebrate this hour, which is of such far-reaching importance, in the dignified way it deserves. Amen.

Highly esteemed gentlemen, honored friends!

An ancient Greek wise man in early historic times was saved by a philosophical sentence. This sentence is: "Everything that I own, I carry with me."¹³ There is another personality, however, which does not belong to the mythic mists, nor to the historical dawn, but which is bright and clearly visible on the horizon of historical development, which has made

the *omnia mea mecum porto* [everything that I own, I carry with me] the essence of its life, the slogan of its world-struggle, the guiding sentence of its cultural mission. This person is none other than Judaism itself, the eternal Jew, the undying Jewish race. Neither land-ownership nor physical possessions have given meaning to this question mark of history, or inscribed their signature onto Judaism. How long ago was it that Jews were first permitted to purchase property? In Austria-Hungary, for example, it is hardly more than a decade, and in not a few countries, even on our continent, this is still withheld from them. If anyone has been prevented from attaching himself to the soil of his homeland, it is certainly the Jew. This was due to the envy of his enemies and their power over the legislature. This was very unfortunate, but not absolute. The scorned, sold and mortgaged Jewish servant, who has been driven out at the whim of others, was continuously reminded, again and again, that his only true belonging was that which he carried with him constantly, which no one could separate him from. A talmudic sage from Babylonia stated: "Blessing rests only on a thing which is hidden from sight"¹⁴ This passage, as was pointed out by an ingenious commentator on the Aggadah three and a half centuries ago, does not merely intend to impart transcendental secrets about the evil eye and the like. Rather, it also postulates that the only blessing is that which is invisible, that is, of the spirit and the idea.¹⁵ And so it was, and is, and will remain until the end of days.

Since we have set out to speak about these matters in this celebrated sacred hour, we ask, what do we want? Our answer focuses on the longing for and the actions taken to participate in this blessing and to have the largest possible share of it. We feel, however, that this answer would say too much, and therefore would say nothing. Since we always, and never more so than in this very moment, strive not only to honor the truth but also clarity, we want to explain in some more detail.

ראשית דבר יראת ד'. The first word which Israel speaks to all the world, the first word that it spoke at its memorable inauguration at Mount Sinai is fear of God, religion, religious deeds, *na'aseh*.¹⁶ Just as the aesthetic nature inscribed itself on the character of the ancient Greeks, just as politics and warfare made the Roman a Roman, religion became flesh and blood to the Jew and made him what he has become in history. This [Jewish] religion is, therefore, peculiar in that its focal point is not found in philosophical or theological doctrines that are, at best, secondary to it. It is, in the first place, law, a definite and detailed law, resting on two sources of equal antiquity: the written and oral law.

It has power over the life of those who profess it, it dominates it [life] and lays down norms for conduct under regular and exceptional circumstances. This is our concept of orthodoxy in Judaism, which therefore differs in essence from orthodoxy in other denominations. We profess this Orthodox Judaism, and to it we have dedicated this seminary.¹⁷ We want to encourage young men who come to the halls of our institution to seek loyalty to the law and to acquaint them with the wide structure of our religious laws and regulations through our own example of a uniform, practical religious life. 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 heights of 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 fulfilling this duty. These are the sure results of truthful, loving, fatherly, and brotherly, but also of serious, intensive, and continuous education. We will seek to further and heighten religious life and an outlook loyal to tradition

The great expression, honored guests, which was uttered on that immortal sixth of Sivan, has remained the slogan of Jewish life from generation to generation, from century to century, from millennium to millennium: *na'aseh ve-nishma*—doing and understanding, religious action and Jewish knowledge peacefully side by side, inseparable one from the other, each standing in for the other, the latter filling the first with the warming breath of consciousness and conviction. This pair [doing and understanding] has existed since the Jewish people was chosen, and has remained part of an undivided life. The old, unchangeable, eternally new Judaism knows no opposition between priests and laymen as such; between the transubstantially blessed and those excluded from grace, or between other such opposites, no matter how the opposites may be called, the starting point of whose search is from the exterior. There is none of this. The leveling of these opposites, however, is not postulated but is inferred. The postulate is that all branches of Jewish knowledge are the property of the entire nation. There are religious organizations in which the original religious sources are only available to the spiritual leaders, and removed from the hands of the rest; indeed, they were and are forbidden. Others believe in great liberalism, but stop at the limits of what is allowed. With us it is completely different. It is a

holy and religious duty for every Israelite, without exception, to research the book of God and the oral tradition which supplements it. Concerning this, Maimonides writes the following in his giant work, which records the codified law: “Every Israelite is under an obligation to study Torah, whether he is poor or rich, in sound health or ailing, in the rigor of youth or very old and feeble. Even a man so poor that he is maintained by charity or goes begging from door to door, as also a man with a wife and children to support, is under the obligation to set aside a definite period during the day and at night for the study of the Torah.”¹⁸ The citizens of this republic of scholars were well aware of this up until the most recent times, and this can be seen in their incredible idealism, according to which there was no greater blasphemy, no greater insult, than to be called a simpleton (*am ha-arez*).

Nowadays, however, everything is different. “Nobody gets ill over it,” to use the words of Scripture;¹⁹ the Hebrew phrase [*am ha-arez*] has been erased from the vocabulary of the ill, if it is understood today at all. But what great state of mind and soul it is that can look proudly and sympathetically upon another—the betrayed peddler—when this one suffered and nearly succumbed under the pressure of his heavy burden, the disfavor of the most unfortunate legislation and the fury of a misguided crowd. He bore all these unspeakable humiliations not only patiently, but also proudly, for he knew that his child at home was making good progress in the study of Torah. Everyone did his utmost in order to pave the way for his son to perhaps become a beacon in Israel. Each woman sought and found her pride knowing that her son was with the teachers and scholars of the Talmud. A thinking individual will have no doubt as to whether that time—in which one did not count the Jews according to biblical law, for their worth not their number was what was important—brings more honor to Judaism and the ideal of mankind, or this time, in which ever so often, if not to say always, the most humiliating measurements are used to define high and low, large and small. That time of conscious or unconscious scholarly ideals stands shinningly in front of us and we are filled with urgent desire for it. We look back to this time as to a lost paradise and in our minds we still see the craftsman before us who, standing in his workshop, corrects the rabbi’s ritual disquisition; the merchant who with great learning is able to review a rabbinical decision; the man whose field is the arts and sciences and is at home in the pages of the Talmud and codes.

The second part of the duty we have assumed is to retrieve this universality of the pursuit of Jewish literacy. We want to remain in the service

of the Jewish past and, as much as possible, make it a common good. We do not want to have the old Jewish treasures “pay their way,” nor to found a rabbi-factory, but to build a site for the fundamental and total knowledge [of Torah], and we therefore call upon the future rabbi as well as the craftsman, the future professor as well as the merchant, the theologian as well as the lawyer and the physician. Everyone who is attracted by our atmosphere, who has the desire for Jewish wisdom and longs to dedicate his spirit and his life to loyalty before the law, and who is also willing to devote the necessary amount of time to it, is welcome. “The [divine] teaching is like a forest,” so say our teachers, “and just as the forest is accessible to everyone, so is the teaching.”²⁰

Already the famous Roman orator and philosopher [Cicero] expressed how all the fields of knowledge are engaged in dialogue, that they all are related to each other.²¹ This statement is true; it does not, however, tell the whole truth. It needs to be supplemented that not only the various fields of knowledge find themselves in this situation, but also the essence of knowledge itself, that is the receptivity of actual or moral persons for the different branches of learning. “Nothing truly human is foreign to me,”²² says a Roman classical writer. We must see this as the supplement to the above-mentioned statement. If we now claim this truth for the moral person of the Jewish race, we are not at a loss for proofs; we must rather be careful not to reveal the whole truth in order not to be accused of arrogance and pride. This much, however, we state, that precisely this Jewish race has, from the time it was allowed to compete, established a record far out of proportion to its numbers. What is the secret of this great human-psychological phenomenon? We are not in doubt about the solution; we have already found it. It is impossible that the desire for knowledge in one field of learning should not bridge the gap to other branches of knowledge, and since, as we say in our evening prayers, Jewish knowledge constitutes “our life and the length of our days,” it would be impossible that this idealism should not also throw its anchors into other waters of the intellectual ocean.

We are proud, very proud of this “sanctification of God’s name,” and it is most pleasing when all feel and experience completely every such occurrence of true national glory. To maintain this glory and to participate in it, is the third and last of our postulates. Of course, he who wants to achieve great things must restrict himself, as the great German poet said.²³ This applies not only to one who claims greatness, but also to one who seeks greatness. Therefore, we have neither ambition nor desire for things foreign. Our time is focused on Talmud study

and ritual practice so we must limit ourselves to the most urgent matters [in secular pursuits]. These we regard as the most important, and approach all of these areas with the same love as with all of the other [Jewish] ones, for they are all undertaken in order to sanctify the holy name. Since the last half-century there has been both an entirely new outpouring of Jewish *Wissenschaft*, as well as the need to explore other areas cultivated from time immemorial, such as biblical exegesis, from new points of view and with the use of unfathomed new sources. We will incorporate these disciplines into our curriculum and embrace them with love and full scientific seriousness, and thus serve truth and only the truth. Should we be more apologetic due to the nature of our point of view, we will never dishonor our holy cause by setting forth the phrase instead of the thought, the subjective opinion instead of the established proof. This state of mind, as I described it to you just now, is the basic element of the building we are establishing; these should be the mark-stones within which we move.

Now, my dear audience, have you nothing more from me than the promise, given easily, which is just like the fleeting word—*midrash*—which counts for nothing when compared with action—*ma'aseh*? I feel that I have to fill in here, and therefore I overcome my great shyness, to bring myself into the discussion. I owe this to my dear friends, the members of the central committee who honored me and placed their trust in me by requesting that I be the principal. I also owe this to all the honored sponsors, who made this present hour of dedication possible with their generous gifts, and who with silent trust have handed over the realization of this project to the central committee. Indeed, this occupation has been for a quarter of a century the central focus of my professional life, and with the exception of very rare and extremely urgent matters, I regard all else as being of secondary importance which must always give way to this duty. Because of this love I painfully left my beloved German homeland, in order to spread this branch of cultural striving in a country [Hungary] that had only been cultivated in a small way. There I succeeded, having begun *ab ovo*, to see the rabbinical school which had about one hundred students elevated to the rank of a semi-public institution. Dear tunes from the German motherland and repeated cries of fear and inner distress from students who pursued a rabbinical career brought about my decision to return home and to gather a circle of students around me, in whom I had found joy previously, and I hope that this delight and joy will grow and prosper. My guiding principle, which was there in far-away Hungary where I did not

shy away from fighting against the scorn of the sciences nor against the crass nihilism, is the same that I follow here and will continue to follow, the same that I described to you today clearly and forthrightly.

Dearest Gentlemen! According to a talmudic passage, if a man has clung to truth for more than half of his life, as a rule he will remain this way for the remainder of his life.²⁴ Well, I have, due to God's mercy, lived not only this half but also crossed [over into] the oldest of the rows of years mentioned in *Ethics of the Fathers* [5:21]. These are the guarantees which I offer you.

And you, benevolent Father in heaven, give me and my colleagues the power and enlightenment to be worthy and able to fulfill our great task, and accept my deepest and heartfelt thanks that You brought to fruition my life's deepest wish.

Thanks to the special agents of God on earth, the representatives of government, for the essential support which they showed our institution, and for their presence here today which also contributes to the glory of our institution. Thanks also to all the generous brethren, the joyfully sacrificing admirers of the holy halls of religion and wisdom. Thanks be to you, honored central-committee, for the special sacrifice of time and effort by which this happy evening was accelerated. May its effects be worthy of our friends, may it be for the promotion of our holy religion and Jewish scholarship, for the honor of Judaism and the sanctification of God's name! Amen!

Notes

1. The most recent treatment of Hildesheimer is Shnayer Z. Leiman, "Rabbinic Openness to General Culture in the Early Modern Period in Western and Central Europe," in Gerald J. Blidstein, David Berger, Shnayer Z. Leiman, and Aharon Lichtenstein, *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?* ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Northvale, NJ, 1997), 201-11.
2. Whether Hildesheimer believed that secular studies were of inherent worth, as did Hirsch, or merely of pragmatic value is not entirely clear, as there is some ambiguity in Hildesheimer's work. However, most scholars agree that on the whole he leaned to the second alternative. See Mordechai Breuer, *Jüdische Orthodoxie im Deutschen Reich 1871-1918* (Frankfurt, 1986), 125-6; Eliezer Stern, *Ishim ve-Kivvunim: Perakim be-Toledot ha-Ide'al ha-Hinukhi shel Torah im Derekh Erez* (Ramat Gan, 1987), 91ff; Mordechai Eliav, "Gishot Shonot le-Torah im Derekh Erez," in Mordechai Breuer (ed.), *Torah im Derekh Erez* (Ramat Gan, 1987), 50-1; Azriel Hildesheimer, "Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer ve-Hashkafato al Torah im Derekh Erez," *ibid.*, 75-82; Kalman Kahana, "Ha-Gaon Rabbi Ezriel Hildesheimer u-Beit Midrasho," *Ha-Ma'ayan*

- 29 (Tammuz 5749): 6; David Ellenson, *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the Creation of a Modern Jewish Orthodoxy* (Tuscaloosa, 1990), 120ff.
3. For student interest in *Wissenschaft* see the booklet *Unser Dibbuk* (Berlin, 1899), vi-xii.
 4. "Rede zur Eröffnung des Rabbiner-Seminars," in *Jahres-Bericht des Rabbiner-Seminars für das orthodoxe Judentum pro 5684 (1873-74)* (Berlin, [1874]), 87.
 5. See, e. g., *Jahres-Bericht des Rabbiner-Seminars zu Berlin für 1924* (Berlin, 1925), 10ff.
 6. See, e. g., Mordechai Eliav (ed.), *Rabbiner Esriel Hildesheimer Briefe* (Jerusalem, 1965), letter 57 (German section).
 7. See Breuer, *Jüdische Orthodoxie*, 174-5.
 8. See *Rabbiner Esriel Hildesheimer Briefe*, 134 (German section); Breuer, *Jüdische Orthodoxie*, 186.
 9. See, e. g., Hoffmann's introductory remarks in his commentary to *Leviticus* (Berlin, 1905).
 10. This is a common theme in Seminary literature. See e. g., S. Grünberg's comments in *Zum hundertjährigen Geburtstage des Rabbiners und Seminardirektors Dr. Israel Hildesheimer* (Berlin, 1920), 14-15. See also Abraham A. Fraenkel, *Lebenskreise* (Stuttgart, 1967), 117; Joseph Abraham Wolf, *Ha-Tekufah u-Ba'ayoteha* (Bnei Brak, 1965), 111. For the opposing view of the Hirschians, see Jacob Rosenheim, *Das Bildungsideal S. R. Hirschs und die Gegenwart* (Frankfurt, 1935), 25-7.
 11. See *Studien und Prüfungsordnung des Rabbiner-Seminars zu Berlin* (Berlin, 1928), 5.
 12. "Rede zur Eröffnung des Rabbiner-Seminars," in *Jahres-Bericht des Rabbiner-Seminars für das orthodoxe Judentum pro 5684 (1873-74)*, 84-89. I would like to thank Karin Grundler and Dr. Michael A. Meyer for their invaluable assistance in translating this essay. (Ms. Grundler prepared a preliminary translation which I have thoroughly revised.)
 13. See Cicero, *Paradoxa Stoicorum* i, 8; Phaedrus, *Fables*, iv, 23; Seneca, *De Constantia*, v, 6.
 14. *Bava Mezi'a* 42a and parallels.
 15. This idea is found in R. Isaac Arama (ca. 1420-1494), *Akedat Yizḥak* (Pressburg, 1849), *Parashat Emor*, 113b-114a. However, he does not fit Hildesheimer's chronology.
 16. *Exodus* 19:8.
 17. The translation of the preceding four sentences is taken from Mordechai Breuer, *Modernity Within Tradition*, trans. by Elizabeth Petuchowski (New York, 1992), 135.
 18. *Mishneh Torah*, *Talmud Torah* 1:8. Hildesheimer's quotation is not exact, and I have therefore corrected it.
 19. Undoubtedly a reference to I *Samuel* 22:8: ואין חלה מכם (comment of Professor Bernard Septimus).
 20. Cf. *Tanḥuma*, *Parashat Va-Yakhel*, 8:8: ולמה נתנה התורה במדבר לומר מה המדבר מופקר לכל בני אדם אף דברי תורה מופקרין לכל מי שירצה ללמוד.
 21. See Thomas N. Mitchell, *Cicero: The Senior Statesman* (New Haven, 1991), 19.
 22. Terence, *Heauton Timorumenos*, 77: "Homu sum; humani nil a me alienum puto."

23. Friedrich von Schiller, "Breite und Tiefe,"

*Wer etwas Trefliches leisten will,
Hätt' gerne was Grosses geboren,
Der sammle still, und unerschlaft
Im kleinsten Punkte die höchste Kraft.*

He who strives after a great career,
Burns to do something well,
The best of his powers with all their weight
On the smallest details must concentrate.

24. Cf. *Yoma* 38b: כיון שיצאו רוב שנותיו של אדם ולא חטא שוב לא יחטא.