Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's View of Secular Studies in the Thought of Rabbi Joseph Elias: Some Critical Observations

By: BARUCH PELTA

R' Joseph Elias is a Talmudic scholar par excellence. He is thoroughly versed in Hirschian literature as well as the literature of other schools of Jewish thought, especially that of the Mussar school as developed by his teacher R' Eliyahu Dessler. He has been described as "a leading spokesman of Agudah of the Hirschian school"[1] and despite being one of the oldest living Agudists today he has continued to be quite active in his support for the organization. It is not for naught that the descendants of R' Hirsch's community and those that have joined it chose R' Elias to become principal of the Rika Breuer Teachers Seminary and the Beth Jacob High School of Yeshivah Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. R' Elias's age and experience help him in his role as an educator. His Talmudic expertise allows him to endow future generations with the great gift of Israel's Torah, and his familiarity with schools of Jewish thought besides the Hirschian one would seem to qualify him to offer a broad vision of Judaism through a Hirschian lens as well as to compare and contrast the Hirschian school accurately with other schools.

R' Elias brought these qualities to his exposition of R' Hirsch's philosophy in his commentary to *The Nineteen Letters*.[2] As R' Elias wrote, he hoped to "clarify and convey correctly the author's [R'

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1 Lawrence Kaplan, "Rabbi Isaac Hutner's 'Daat Torah' Perspective' on the Holocaust: A Critical Analysis" *Tradition* 18.3 (1980): 245.

2 Samson Raphael Hirsch, "The World of Rabbi S. R. Hirsch: The Nineteen Letters," Ed. Joseph Elias, Trans. Karin Paritzky (New York: Feldheim, 1995).

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Hirsch's] system of thought. Thereby, it is hoped, the reader will arrive at a proper understanding of the author's teachings, will be able to compare them with other approaches to Torah and draw informed conclusions."[3]

One of the aspects of this clarification is to show how R' Hirsch would have disputed other, more liberal approaches. R' Elias attacks Professor Noah Rosenbloom for his "*mistakes and distortions*… Professor Rosenbloom develops his thesis without any attention to Rabbi S. R. Hirsch's…major scholarly works."[4] R' Elias also attempts to show how R' Norman Lamm's philosophy of *Torah Umadda* is *flawed* and R' Hirsch's philosophy must be shown to be *distinct* from the former.[5] Finally, R' Elias notes that, in spite of the claim that R' Hirsch was a pioneer of Modern Orthodoxy "as espoused by Dr. Rackman and other leaders, Rabbi S. R. Hirsch must be viewed as its *determined and uncompromising opponent*"[6] (emphasis mine).

Of course, when perusing such a commentary which views itself as the true guiding light to a person's worldview, the reader must ask himself whether or not the commentator meets his own standards. Does R' Elias's thesis demonstrate a thorough familiarity with all of the sources on the topics he addresses? Are there major distinctions between Judaism as expressed in R' Elias's commentary and Judaism as taught by R' Hirsch? Finally, in regard to the view of Judaism expressed in this commentary, should R' Hirsch not "be viewed as its determined and uncompromising opponent?"[7] With these questions in mind, I would like to examine R' Elias's approach towards secular

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3 *Letters*, xxvi.

4 Ibid., xxiv.

5 Ibid., 315.

6 Ibid., xxiv.

7 One might wish to respond to these last two questions that while R' Hirsch may have had a different philosophy than R' Elias, in response to today's issues, he would adopt R' Elias's *Weltanschauung*. This is a patently unsatisfactory answer. If one adopts the view that R' Hirsch would be so turned off by today's secular culture that he would change his worldview, for all we know today R' Hirsch would find the Satmar or Breslov paths more appealing.

studies according to the Hirschian school of *Torah im Derech Eretz* expressed in his lengthy "editor's note" on the topic.[8]

The Hirschian Approach: No Synthesis?

R' Elias begins by describing the Hirschian school. While a Jew's primary tasks are the learning and fulfillment of Torah, "general knowledge… also should be pursued [as an auxiliary]… these studies should not be viewed as mere concessions to the exigencies of life for they are needed to help us shape the world according to God's will."[9] However, "we cannot measure Torah by standards or values derived from the outside world… or permit such outside influences to disturb or water down our Torah values."[10] This is certainly an accurate description.[11]

R' Elias then claims that R' Hirsch did not advocate a synthesis of Torah studies and general studies, but that his view of general studies was actually much more minimalist than many think. The most obvious sources from which one could possibly draw a contrary conclusion are the essays included with the annual reports which R' Hirsch submitted to the government on a yearly basis. Hence, R' Leo Levi has written:

> Rabbi Hirsch never tired of pointing out that the study of science and history is necessary for a deeper understanding of the ways of God and the Torah's message… In one annual report of the high school he founded (perhaps the first Yeshiva High School in history), he demonstrates in considerable detail, using tens of

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8 *Letters*, pp. 308-328, n. 34. R' Shelomoh E. Danziger in "Rediscovering the Hirschian Legacy," *Jewish Action* 56.4 (1996): 21-24 has already pointed out many of the errors in R' Elias's formulation of R' Hirsch, but he does not hone his critique on R' Elias's understanding of R' Hirsch's view of secular studies specifically and I believe this aspect of R' Hirsch's thinking is so important as to deserve further analysis.

9 *Letters*, p. 310.

10 Ibid. p. 312.

11 Interestingly enough, to R' Hirsch, the very flaw of Maimonides' approach was that "his trend of thought was Arab-Greek, as was his concept of life. Approaching Judaism from without, he brought to it views that he had gained elsewhere, and these he reconciled with Judaism (p. 265)."

> examples, how the study of natural science and world history contributes to the student's understanding of the Torah and its message. In the previous year's report, he discusses the impact that Torah study has on our understanding of general secular concepts: "These two elements [general and special Jewish education] are in truth nothing but the two complementary and closely related parts of a complete and homogeneous education." These quotations should suffice to dispel any suggestion that "[Rabbi] Hirsch posited a coexistence, not a synthesis."[12]

But R' Elias dismisses such claims:

> These essays seem to project a more equal role for these two areas of study [than quotes about R' Hirsch from R' Jacob Jehiel Weinberg and R' Isaac Breuer which R' Elias has favorably quoted], calling as they do for "the same earnest attention" to both. However, in the introductory note to one of these articles… Rabbi Dr. Joseph Breuer explains that the presentation, both in style and content, was influenced by the fact that these essays were meant for a wider, largely non-Jewish public (presumably including government circles), to acquaint them with the nature of a Jewish school. This non-Jewish audience, as well as Jewish circles that were suspicious of traditional Jewish education, had to be reassured that general studies would not be neglected… But this attention to general studies did not in any way mean to convey or imply a change of thinking on the part of Rabbi S. R. Hirsch.[13]

According to R' Elias, R' Breuer's introduction tempers the import of these essays because "the presentation… was influenced." In actuality, R' Breuer's introduction has the absolute opposite effect. Here is the relevant section in its entirety:

> The somewhat unusual title, as well as the author's presentation with regard to style and content, reflect the purpose of these graduation day essays: to acquaint a wider, non-Jewish public with the nature of Jewish day school and of other Jewish institutions. Though this essay was written over six decades ago, it should stimulate thought and discussion among thinking Jewish readers today. *This essay should precipitate a reassessment of opinions that fail to do*

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12 Leo Levi, "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch—Myth and Fact" *Tradition* 31.3 (1997): 7. See also his "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch: Torah Leadership for Our Times," *Jewish Action* 69.1: 19-20.

13 *Letters*, p. 313.

> *justice to the importance of the Jewish day school in the present day and to its function in training Jewish youth to meet the demands of modern life* [emphasis mine].[14]

R' Breuer's introduction very clearly clarifies that he believes that the message of the essay he is introducing is actually of such *primary* import to the Hirschian school that it should lead to us reassessing the role of the Jewish day school in regards to "its function in training Jewish youth to meet the demands of modern life." In the words of Dr. Elliott Bondi, R' Breuer's grandson and the senior editor of the authorized translation of R' Hirsch's collected writings, "Rabbi Breuer's words are explicit: the essay is of *particular* significance and a valid reflection of Rabbi Hirsch's teachings [emphasis mine]."[15]

R' Elias also claims support from the teachings of R' Jehiel Jacob Weinberg and R' Isaac Breuer for his view that R' Hirsch did not wish for a synthesis. To claim the former as a support for this view is extremely strange, considering that R' Weinberg himself explicitly wrote that R' Hirsch wanted "a synthesis of Torah and worldly studies (*derech eretz*) in the broadest sense of that term."[16] It is true that R' Elias's view of R' Hirsch finds precedent in R' Isaac Breuer's view and in all fairness, the view that R' Hirsch did not posit a synthesis also finds precedent in the writings of other students of the *Torah im Derech Eretz* philosophy.[17] A case may be made for the idea that R' Hirsch did not advocate a synthesis. Still, R' Elias has failed to make that case convincingly and instead two of three scholars quoted

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14 Joseph Breuer's introduction to Samson Raphael Hirsch, "The Educational Value of Judaism" in eds. Elliott Bondi and David Bechhofer, *The Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*, vol. 7, trans. Gertrude Hirschler (New York: Feldheim, 1992), p. 245.

15 Elliott Bondi, "Letter From Dr. Elliott Bondi (Grandson of Rav Breuer) Regarding Rabbi Joseph Elias' Articles" *Zoo Torah*. <http://www.zootorah.com/controversy/Rabbi Nisson Wolpin.doc>

16 Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg, *She'elot Uteshuvot Seridei Esh*, vol. 4 (Jerusalem, 1969), p. 366 quoted and translated in Judith Bleich, "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch: Ish al Ha'edah," *Jewish Action* 56.4: 28

17 One example is R' Bernard Drachman quoting R' Isaac Breuer's view approvingly in the former's introduction to Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters on Judaism*, Trans. and Ed. Bernard Drachman (New York: Feldheim, 1960), pp. 10-15.

by him in this regard—R' Joseph Breuer and R' Jehiel Jacob Weinberg—reached conclusions which were the opposite of the ones he had attributed to them. These "mistakes and distortions" should not go unnoticed.

Rabbi Joseph Elias, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, and Science

R' Elias proceeds to analyze supposed differences between the *Weltanschauungs* of R' Norman Lamm and R' S. R. Hirsch, *Torah Umadda* and the Hirschian school of *Torah im Derech Eretz*, respectively. He critiques R' Lamm's view of science and chastises him for not realizing that, "philosophy and science… cannot produce results as legitimate as the teachings of the Torah."[18] R' Elias's understanding of R' Hirsch's view of science deserves to be expounded on. His view of evolution is especially pertinent.

Elsewhere R' Elias writes that it's "obvious" that R' Hirsch would *only* accept evolution if "the theory provides for the role of the Divine Creator, and… it can be incontrovertibly demonstrated as true."[19] The implication is that R' Hirsch would apply these criteria to all discussions of accepting modern science. R' Elias writes that *vis-à-vis* evolution, neither of these criteria has been met,[20] and therefore evolution is to be considered "incompatible with Torah teachings."[21] It is therefore incumbent to examine R' Hirsch's discussion of evolution's possible validity in its entirety. In writing about evolution, R' Hirsch writes that while it is important to Judaism to retain the notion that all of science works according to G-d's will, Jewish theology does not have a quarrel with science. R' Hirsch continues:

> This will never change, not even if the latest scientific notion that the genesis of all the multitude of organic forms on earth can be

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18 *Letters*, p. 315. This is a very vague statement and it is not clear to me exactly what R' Elias means to convey by the word "legitimate;" it is therefore impossible for me to properly assess his critique of R' Lamm.

19 "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Evolution—The View From His Commentary: Setting the Record Straight on a Widely Publicized Misinterpretation" *Jewish Observer* (2007).

20 *Letters*, p. 44.

21 Ibid., p. 317.

> traced back to one single, most primitive, primeval form of life should ever appear to be anything more than what it is today, a vague hypothesis still unsupported by fact. Even if this notion were ever to gain complete acceptance by the scientific world, Jewish thought, unlike the reasoning of the high priest of that nation, would nonetheless never summon us to revere a still extant representative of this primal form [an ape] as the supposed ancestor of us all. Rather, Judaism in that case would call upon its adherents to give even greater reverence than ever before to the one, sole God Who, in His boundless creative wisdom and eternal omnipotence, needed to bring into existence no more than one single, amorphous nucleus, and one single law of "adaptation and heredity" in order to bring forth, from what seemed chaos but was in fact a very definite order, the infinite variety of species we know today, each with its unique characteristics that sets it apart from all other creatures.[22]

R' Hirsch never wrote that the theory of evolution must provide room for the Divine to be considered compatible with Torah, nor did he write that Judaism could only adopt the teachings of evolution if the latter were proven beyond the shadow of a doubt. Instead, R' Hirsch's point was that *even* were evolution as preached during his time be proven to be "anything more than… a vague hypothesis unsupported by fact… [and] to gain complete acceptance by the scientific world"—events which many thought would be problematic for classic Judeo-Christian theology—Judaism would remain unscathed.[23] R' Elias's formulation of R' Hirsch's view of science is based on a misreading and therefore flawed. It is R' Elias's view of R' Hirsch's opinion on science that is flawed, not necessarily R' Lamm's.[24]

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22 Samson Raphael Hirsch, "The Educational Value of Judaism" in eds. Elliott Bondi and David Bechhofer, ***The Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch***, vol. 7, trans. Gertrude Hirschler (New York: Feldheim,1992), pp. 263-264.

23 Cf. Natan Slifkin, "Letter From Rabbi Slifkin Regarding Rabbi Joseph Elias' Article" *Zoo Torah*. < http://www.zootorah.com/controversy/-LetterToJOHirsch.pdf>.

24 See n. 18 of this essay.

"Torah Only" and *Torah im Derech Eretz*

At the end of his lengthy footnote, R' Elias contrasts the "Torah Only" school and the *Torah im Derech Eretz* school. Here again, R' Elias distorts *Torah im Derech Eretz*. After describing several perceived problems with implementing that ideal today, R' Elias writes that R' Hirsch would probably still feel that his philosophy could be implemented. According to R' Elias, one reason for this is that:

> …granting the nature of the civilization within which we live, a much more critical attitude toward it can and should be developed, empirical and practical, rather than enthusiastic and ideological…. (We need only think of the technological inventions that have produced the various programs for Torah study by phone.)[25]

This is most certainly *not* R' Hirsch's philosophy. R' Hirsch was of the belief that:

> …any supporter of education and culture should deplore the fact that when these secular studies are evaluated in terms of their usefulness to the young, too much stress is often placed on so-called practical utility and necessity. Under such circumstances, the young are in danger of losing the pure joy of acquiring knowledge for its own sake, so that they will no longer take pleasure in the moral and spiritual benefits to be obtained from study.[26]

In R' Hirsch's formulation, secular knowledge is to be acquired for its own sake and it should be "deplored" when it is acquired only for "empirical and practical" purposes as wanted by R' Elias. This is a key component of the Hirschian worldview which Hirsch himself mentions more than once. Hence, he writes elsewhere:

> The more the Jew is a Jew, the more universalist will be his views and aspirations, the less alien will he be to anything that is noble and good, true and upright in the arts and sciences, in civilization and culture… The more the Jew is a Jew, the more gladly will he give himself to all that is true progress in civilization and culture –

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25 *Letters*, 326.

26 Samson Raphael Hirsch, "The Relevance of Secular Studies to Jewish Education" in eds. Elliott Bondi and David Bechhofer, *The Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*, vol. 7, trans. Gertrude Hirschler (New York: Feldheim, 1992), p. 88.

> provided that in this new circumstance he will not only maintain his Judaism, but will be able to bring it to ever more glorious fulfillment.[27]

It is obvious from a reading of the above two statements of R' Hirsch that R' Hirsch must actually be viewed as a "determined and uncompromising opponent" of the philosophy which R' Elias ascribes to him.

Conclusion

I believe I have sufficiently demonstrated that R' Elias is guilty of the very faults he attributes to others. He developed theses about how R' Hirsch's system was not a synthesis based on "mistakes and distortions" in his misreading of the writings of certain interpreters of R' Hirsch, such as R' Joseph Breuer and R' Jacob Jehiel Weinberg. He does not convince that R' Lamm's view of science is distinct from R' Hirsch's but instead R' Elias misunderstands R' Hirsch's view of science. Finally, and most importantly, as far as R' Elias's pragmatic-utilitarian view of secular studies is concerned, R' Hirsch must be viewed "as its determined and uncompromising opponent."

The German Orthodox community has long dropped many of its classical Hirschian values. German Orthodox Jewry perceived various dangers inherent in secular culture and was wary; also, being taken from their homeland and being placed amongst a larger and more isolationist Orthodoxy led to their assimilation within that latter group.[28]

Recently, the German Orthodox community celebrated R' Hirsch's 200th birthday at their major synagogue in Washington Heights, Khal Adath Jeshurun. R' Hirsch's great-great-grandson Samson Bechhofer, a lawyer by profession, lamented the community's detachment from its roots: "If the goal of our *kehilla* and yeshiva is to have all of our sons and daughters end up in Lakewood—and I use Lakewood as a metaphor—then I submit that

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[27] Samson Raphael Hirsch, "Religion Allied with Progress" in eds. Elliott Bondi and David Bechhofer, *The Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*, vol. 6, trans. Gertrude Hirschler (New York: Feldheim,1992), p. 123.

[28] I am indebted to Marc Shapiro for these observations.

we are not being faithful to our founder's philosophy or *Weltanschauung*, nor are we doing the future of our *kehilla* any great favors." At this, the associate rabbi of the synagogue, R' Yisroel Mantel, stood up and left the room. When he came back, he fumed that it would not be "grandchildren and lawyers" who would decide how to implement *Torah im Derech Eretz*. Instead, according to R' Mantel, this worldview is today unable to be implemented. Many of the attendees of this event were understandably upset and Dr. Eric Erlbach, the president of the synagogue for over two decades, soon resigned.[29]

The community truly has two choices. They can either embrace *Torah im Derech Eretz* as recommended by Bechhofer or they can choose to continue rejecting it as R' Mantel and R' Elias would have it.

I say as R' Elias would have it because the actualization of his philosophy would result in the German Orthodox community giving up its own unique heritage in order to transform itself into what is more or less a copy of the Eastern European model as instituted in present day America.

One is struck by the similarity of this situation to that of post-World War I German Orthodox Jewry. After the war, the youth largely saw culture as irrelevant and this disillusionment only increased with the coming to power of the Nazi regime. They were moved to seek meaning elsewhere: Religious Zionism, the yeshiva world, and Mussar school.[30] Considering that, perhaps it is proper to conclude this piece by quoting one espouser of *Torah im Derech Eretz* from that time period, Dr. Maximilian Landau:[31]

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29 Elliot Resnick, "Controversial Moments at Rav S. R. Hirsch Memorial Celebration" *Jewish Press*. <http://www.jewishpress.com/displaycontent_new.cfm?contentid=33512&contentname=Controversial Moments At Rav S. R. Hirsch Memorial Celebrati&sectionid=14&mode=a&recnum=0>

30 See Marc B. Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg 1884-1966* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization: 2002): chapters 4 and 6.

31 Landau was a Professor of History at the Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin from 1936 until the Seminary's closing. He tragically perished in the Holocaust. Little biographical information is available. For the little which is known see: Marc Shapiro, "Torah im Derekh Erez in the Shadow of Hitler" *Torah U-Madda Journal* 14 (2007), pp. 86-87.

> What is the source of this changed attitude towards Samson Raphael Hirsch among the German Orthodox? This attitude has not arisen by chance, but is the result of a lengthy spiritual process. Its final cause is that of a lack of inner confidence that was found in German Orthodoxy in the decades after the [First] World War. The encounter with the world of East European Jewry and the intensive involvement with the Jewish spiritual problem undermined the prior confidence and calm consciousness of German Orthodoxy that it was on the proper path…
>
> That the German Jews have finally learnt to look with envy upon the vitality of the Judaism of the East is certainly pleasing. But they must make clear to themselves that all this [i. e., East European Judaism] grew slowly out of special conditions, and it cannot be transferred in finished form to another milieu. If German Jewry truly wants to attain a level and density of Judaism that is *comparable* to that of the East, it will not be attained by simply *copying* the East. German Jewry must try to develop this from *its own* historical and psychological premises, from *its own* disposition, in *its own style*, so that it develops in an independent and original fashion, which can run parallel to the other line of development, but not coincide. (The expressions Eastern and German Jewry are not geographic descriptions, but rather refer to different outlooks, without any relevance attached to where on the globe its advocates are found.) Certainly, all is not perfect with German Jewry. Yet the cure is not in abandoning and destroying its own foundations, but in their preservation and strengthening through sensible, intellectual, vigorous, and rational development. The cure is not in turning away from the teachings of Samson Raphael Hirsch, but in emphatically heeding these teachings and developing them so that they are up-to-date.[32] ☙

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32 Ibid. pp. 88 and 92

* Many have assisted me with this essay. The initial rough draft addressed many disparate topics, but Steve Brizel and a rabbi who would like to remain anonymous both advised me to narrow the focus. Marc Shapiro was kind enough to answer many of my historical questions and Yitzhak Levine's personal collection of source literature was invaluable. Although I originally offered the essay to the *Tradition Seforim* blog, the editor Dan Rabinowitz allowed me to submit it to *Hakirah* instead. Henry Abramson and R' Ira Bedzow both dedicated time to debating and discussing the essay's contents with me. Perhaps most importantly, R' Aaron Elias challenged various arguments I had presented in an

earlier draft and one of said arguments forced me to significantly modify the essay. Finally, I am indebted to the editor of this publication for his patience in allowing me to fix the problem pointed out by R' Elias. I have not necessarily taken all of the advice of any of the aforementioned people, and it should go without saying that any and all errors should be attributed to me alone.