

Rav Hildesheimer's Response to Ultra-Orthodoxy

By: GIL STUDENT

Rabbi Dr. Azriel¹ Hildesheimer was a Torah giant, a master of secular wisdom and a leader of Hungarian and German Jewry as it confronted modernity. His response to the pronouncements of the nascent Ultra-Orthodox/Chareidi movement offers an alternative approach to resisting deviationist trends.

R. Hildesheimer was born in Halberstadt, Germany in 1820 and studied under Chacham Isaac Bernays and R. Yaakov Ettlinger.² He also studied at the University of Berlin and then at the University of Halle, earning a doctorate in Jewish studies. In 1851, R. Hildesheimer was appointed chief rabbi of Eisenstadt, in what effectively was Hungary (although today it is part of Austria). In Eisenstadt, R. Hildesheimer opened the first yeshivah high school to include secular studies. In 1869, R. Hildesheimer left Hungary for Berlin, where he led a separatist congregation and established a rabbinical seminary that trained Orthodox rabbis who could compete with their Reform counterparts for the hearts and minds of German Jews. The seminary taught academic Jewish studies from an Orthodox

¹ Variant spellings on his first name include Esriel and Israel. I use Azriel, which more closely matches his Hebrew name.

² Chacham Isaac Bernays (1792–1849) was a child prodigy who served as chief rabbi of Hamburg. Learned in philosophy, arguably he was the first Modern Orthodox rabbi. R. Yaakov Ettlinger (1798–1871) served as chief rabbi of Altona and is now remembered most for his Talmudic commentary *Aruch La-Ner*. Both attended university, although R. Ettlinger was forced to leave before completing his studies due to anti-Semitic riots. For more on these two figures, see R. Shnayer Leiman, “Rabbinic Openness to General Culture in the Early Modern Period” in R. Jacob Schacter ed., *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures* (Northvale, NJ, 1997), pp. 166–179.

Gil Student is the publisher and editor-in-chief of TorahMusings.com. His latest book is *Search Engine: Finding Meaning in Jewish Texts*. He writes frequently in Jewish newspapers and magazines, serving as a regular contributor to *Jewish Action*, *The Jewish Link of New Jersey*, *The Jewish Echo*, and *The Vues*. Rabbi Student serves on the Executive Committee of the Rabbinical Council of America, on the Editorial Board of the Orthodox Union's *Jewish Action* magazine, and as the magazine's book editor.