

IN-DEPTH FEATURES

The Unacknowledged Heritage: The Contribution of German Chareidim to the New Yishuv

By M. Chevroni Jan 5, 2005

The yahrtzeit of HaRav Shamshon Rafael Hirsch zt"l falls out this year on Shabbos, parshas Vo'eiro. Although the total history of German Jewry encompasses many gedolim and holy communities, the connection of German Jewry with modern life has become identified with HaRav Hirsch and the ideas and communities that he propounded and inspired. In connection with his yahrtzeit we are presenting this article that is something of a review and appreciation of what German Jewry contributed to modern chareidi life.

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Seven or eight generations, or about 150 years ago, a small but constant trickle of Jews began leaving the German lands to settle in Eretz Yisroel.

Life for the Jews of the German states and the Austro- Hungarian Empire had become fairly comfortable by the mid- nineteenth century when it started. On the whole, those who made the difficult and pioneering move were deeply religious and they came as individuals.

Some were the progenitors of well-known families like the Auerbachs, and Rav Eliezer Bergman zt"l author of *Behar Yeiro'eh* (among whose descendants is HaRav Meir Tzvi Bergman, the son-in-law of HaRav Shach zt"l). As a group, they formed a very important element within the old *yishuv*. Some made their mark in the field of relief and assistance such as Dr. Moshe Wallach z'l, who founded Shaarei Tzedek Hospital (moved to Israel around 5651- 1891; *niftar* 5717-1957).

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Mass emigration from Germany, which was largely, but not completely, secular, only took place after the Nazis *ym'sh* came to power in Germany in 1934 and began persecuting the country's Jews.

The newcomers found themselves in a hot, Middle-Eastern country that was very primitive in comparison to their native land. They were not met with admiration by the local Jews but with smirks, misunderstanding and even a degree of hostility. Their values were derided and a number of jokes were told at their expense. To an extent, this is still what happens when any sizable group of Jews from abroad settles in Eretz Yisroel.

The seventieth anniversary of the mass German immigration (1934-2004) was recently marked in Israel with a series of ceremonies and exhibitions, an international conference and artistic and journalistic tributes. Much was made, for example, of the contribution of German architects to the modernistic international design of a few blocks in central Tel Aviv that were recently designated an international landmark. German immigrants were also lauded for having provided important impetus in the fields of economics, banking, industry, medicine, science, research, culture, diplomacy and politics.

Today one can hardly find them anymore. Their descendants have become Israelis and one can't help feeling that something has been lost in the transformation. Take a man like our children's doctor, Dr. Levi, a *yekke*, a *tzaddik* and a *yirei Shomayim*. He would come whenever called and always had the same repertoire of jokes that he made at the same points in the checkup. Sadly,

the standard of professionalism and *menschlichkeit* that he showed throughout is harder to come by today.

On the other hand, those sterling qualities can still be encountered but in a different kind of setting. Dr. Levi's descendants serve as *maggidei shiur* in the country's finest yeshivos — bringing us to the theme of this article.

When we think about the contribution of German immigrants, we have something different in mind than what the conferences dealt with. We extol another set of values entirely.

I used to think that I knew something about German Jewry. I was acquainted with some of the first immigrants and I admired them for their precision, their punctuality and their orderliness — all so un-Israeli. When I started to find out more about them and their religious heritage however, I was astonished. I am almost certain that readers (except, perhaps, those of German descent) will feel the same way when they learn about the contribution of German Jewry to the Torah world in general and to the modern Torah *yishuv* in Eretz Yisroel in particular.

My guide on this trip of discovery was Rav Binyamin Hamburger, who founded the Institute for Research into German Jewry in Bnei Brak. With his broad knowledge, orderly presentation and attention to detail, Rav Hamburger embodies the thoroughness and the unerring sense of relevance that is so typical of scholars of his background. His portrayal of the Torah heritage of German Jewry was lucid, well-grounded, painstakingly documented and absolutely fascinating.

Sharing a Common Origin

"When the Jews of Germany arrived in Eretz Yisroel, they left behind the *tallis* and *tefillin* that had been part of their heritage," he says. In Israel, a gradual expiry of the traditions of *Yahadus Ashkenaz* — the spiritual, religious and halachic heritage built upon the ancient rulings and customs of the great German *gedolim* — has taken place.

Although the immigrants who arrived seventy years ago opened their own *botei knesses* in Eretz Yisroel — in the nineteen thirties, forties and fifties there were actually a large number of synagogues that followed the German *nusach* and tradition — their number has since dwindled and many of them have closed.

Was there really a need then for special *botei knesses* that followed the German *nusach*? Apparently not.

"We all share the same origins," explains Rav Hamburger. "All of us, meaning all Ashkenazim, come originally from Western Europe — including Eastern European Jewry. Proof of this is Yiddish, which is common to all Ashkenazim and is a dialect of German.

"The Yiddish language's German roots were acknowledged hundreds of years ago. In Spanish rabbinic literature, Yiddish is referred to as *loshon Ashkenaz*, or by the acronym *lamed-alef*. Philological studies have shown that Yiddish has its source in a South German dialect spoken in the state of Bavaria. From there it spread to Austrian Jewry and it continued spreading eastward to Eastern Europe. In the course of usage and with the passage of time it was modified by Jews of different locales, a natural process that any language undergoes.

"All Ashkenazi Jews trace their ancestry to the Jews of Germany. It was during the time that that country was the main center of Ashkenazi Jewry that many of the customs and traditions that unite all Ashkenazim were shaped and institutionalized."

The National Character

YN: What makes German Jewry unique then?

"Their uniqueness lay in their having preserved the various traditions of the German *gedolim*. This conservatism was one of their outstanding traits, which they absorbed from their environment. In *Michtav Mei'Eliyahu*, Rav Dessler *zt'l* gives the following explanation of the differing mentalities of Jewish communities in different parts of the world. 'Any holy influence that is to be found in *chutz la'aretz* arrives via the nations' heavenly princes, meaning [in practical terms], the traits of the particular nation and country where Jews are living. The distinct approach to serving Hashem in a given land also accords with the national characteristic . . . for example . . . the Russians have strong emotions — *chassidus* is the approach to serving Hashem that developed there. The Lithuanians have more subdued feelings and calculating minds; the approach to serving Hashem that developed there is the profound study of Torah and *mussar*. The Germans are most particular about discipline and order; there, an approach of meticulous preservation of tradition and customs took shape. Every center in the Diaspora harnessed the traits and endowments of the nation among whom they dwelt, for the pursuit of holiness' (*Michtav Mei'Eliyahu*, vol. IV, Yerushalayim 5745, pp. 129-30)."

YN: Yet these same conservative German Jews spawned the Reform movement!

"Reform is their less desirable side and is attributable to the assimilatory currents that started agitating within their ranks, not to any inability to preserve their heritage. Besides, there are different regions in Germany with different local characteristics and natures. In the north, people have a more aristocratic bearing while in the south, where there are vineyards, the people are more folksy. Southern Germans are merrier types, who stand on ceremony less than the more reserved, more disciplined, more *yekkish*' Northern Germans.

"Rabbi Yehuda Hechosid, who was one of the great rabbinical leaders in the time of the Rishonim (*niftar* 4977- 1217), states in *Sefer Chassidim (siman #1101)*, 'In most places, the conduct of the Jews reflects that of the local gentiles. If, for example, the gentiles behave morally, the Jewish youth born in that city will be the same.' This might explain the phenomenon of the second [and Israeli-born] generation of the German immigrants, who are not terribly similar to their forbears.

"On the other hand, something of the ancestral character does remain. A second-generation *yekke* might not be as easy to spot as his parents but taking a closer look at him usually reveals the typical thoroughness and precision."

Going Back Beyond Rav Hirsch

"It should be appreciated that Germany was the leading civilization of the Western world in the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century. That was the reason for the high rate of intermarriage among its Jews. The first to be exposed to the impressive culture and values of modern Europe were the Jews of Germany and of France, the countries where the *Haskalah* originated.

"Large numbers of Jews became poets, doctors, lawyers and scientists and they all saw themselves as true Germans. Forty percent of German Nobel prize winners have been Jewish, while the Jews comprised scarcely more than one percent of the general population. The regime was relatively enlightened and Jews felt more and more German outside their homes and less and less Jewish inside them. They had a great love for their homeland and they received a mortal blow when Nazism began spreading. Many of those who had assimilated even preferred to take their own lives. They were incapable of coming to terms with the 'monstrous treachery' of Nazism."

A minority of German Jews retained their ancestral faith and way of life in the big cities. They succeeded in influencing all of German Jewry and their influence spread far beyond it. In the small towns, most of the Jews preserved the ancestral faith and ways.

"Rav Shmshon Rafael Hirsch *zt'l* was a zealot," notes Rav Hamburger, "in separating himself from the slightest taint of heresy. He was a zealot for remaining faithful to *Hakodosh Boruch Hu*."

Rav Hirsch's *Torah im Derech Eretz* ideology saved German Jewry from assimilating. Yet the sharp-witted and self-assured members of the old *yishuv* in Yerushalayim derided the *yekkes* and even held them in contempt. So did the Eastern European Jews who arrived in Eretz Yisroel.

"But that's a travesty of history," protests Rav Hamburger. "People forget that before the most recent period, which certainly was disappointing, there were a thousand years during which Torah centers blossomed in Germany. Rabbenu Gershom, Rav Yaakov bar Yakar, Rashi, the Raavan, the Raavyoh, the Rokei'ach, Maharam MiRotenburg, the Rosh, the Mordechai, the Agudah, the Maharil, MaharY Weil, Maharam Mintz, Maharam Schiff, Avodas Hagershuni, Chavos Yo'ir, Nishal Dovid, Maharsh'shach, Zichron Yosef, Korbon Nesanel, Maharam Barabi, Rav Nossan Adler, the Chasam Sofer, the Oruch LaNer, Nachal Eshkol, Rav Yitzchok Dov Bamberger and Rav Ezriel Hildesheimer — a thousand years of vibrant Jewish life that these names recall — and there are many more such names. Yet all this is forgotten because of the most recent generations."

Did you know that the Yiddish word *teitch* (meaning translation) is actually the word *Deitsch* (German)? Until the nineteenth century they meant the same thing. In Eastern Europe, translating a word into Yiddish — *teitchen* — was *deitschen*, to say it in German. The word *deitsch* only became a degrading term when *Haskalah* started spreading. This is the tragedy of the past one hundred-and-fifty years that have banished all memory of the thousand glorious years that preceded them.

When you mention the Chasam Sofer, people's immediate reaction is that "He was a Hungarian," but that's simply not true. The Chasam Sofer was born in Frankfurt, Germany, and he received his education there. He later built Hungarian Jewry in the image of German Jewry.

When the Chasam Sofer was born, at the end of the eighteenth century, the Frankfurt yeshiva had four hundred *talmidim* and there was no other yeshiva of similar size. By the time he was *niftar* however (in 1800- 1840), the Frankfurt *mikveh* was closed and barred. Within one man's lifetime the *maskilim* had taken control of the Jews and of Jewish continuity. They used force to do so and even invoked the help of the police. They evicted the Orthodox from all communal involvement, using the very worst kind of violence and underhanded tactics.

Then *Hakodosh Boruch Hu* sent along his loyal emissary. HaRav Hirsch, who was born in Hamburg and had been serving as rov of Moravia, returned to Germany to lead a tiny Orthodox community in Frankfurt, which he transformed into a large and influential one. A group of eleven families had decided to secede from the general *kehilloh* with its compromising and concessionary tendencies and to form a new and faithful community of their own: *Khal Adass Yeshurun*. (In passing, the Baron Willie Rothschild was a member of the original group.)

Within its first year, a further hundred families joined the *Adass*. They issued a call to Rav Hirsch, who left his position in Moravia because he had the vision and the belief that it was both possible and necessary to rebuild German Orthodoxy. "Rav Hirsch can be termed the Father of the Modern *teshuvoh* Movement," says Rav Hamburger. "He succeeded in bringing tens of thousands of Jews fully back into the Orthodox fold."

Rav Hirsch's Program

The significance of the *maskilim*, who minimized their own worth compared to that of German culture, shrinks when one considers what happened in Frankfurt. A small group of authentic Jews banded together to stand up for their religion at the unlikeliest time of all, when *Haskalah* and Reform had plunged Jewish life into darkness.

"When Rav Hirsch began rebuilding German Jewry, the yeshiva of his *rebbe*, the Oruch LaNer was still open in Altoona. The Wurtzburger Rov's yeshiva was also operating, in that city. These were the remnants of the glorious German yeshivos that had once existed."

Rav Hirsch worked on two fronts. First, he set about establishing his separate *kehilloh*, in doing which he was following the Chasam Sofer's approach and second, he conceived of perpetuating Jewish heritage by breathing the spirit of Hashem's word into everyday life, within the context of the prevailing culture.

"He planned to employ the care and precision that were part of the national character to achieve complete obedience to *Toras Hashem* and to place the imprint of the mitzvos upon every area of life. He called for seeing Hashem's Hand in all areas of secular study, in the natural world, in history etc. "Know Him in all that you do," was his motto. You, as a Jew, must bring Hashem's word to bear upon yourself, wherever you are. Contemplate Hashem's Providence that is evident in every subject that you study.

This idea of Rav Hirsch's is the basic one that shapes the curriculum of the Bais Yaakov school system today. When studying history, for example, a casual analysis is not considered sufficient. Students learn to recognize the Divine planning within every historical process.

Rabbinical students also studied for a doctorate in those days, with Rav Hirsch's consent. He felt that the younger generation that leaned towards compromise would respect rabbonim and listen to what they had to say if they also had academic degrees and could prove to the youth that despite being fully acquainted with modern culture they still maintained full allegiance to Hashem's word. At the same time though, Rav Hirsch opposed the establishment of the rabbinical seminary in Berlin with all his strength. His opinion was that the place for studying Torah is the yeshiva. There is no place for a new breed of seminary-trained rabbonim.

"Rav Hirsch himself studied in university for less than half a year but he did not receive a degree and was not known as *Doktor*. He felt that he would be able to influence others even without a formal degree. His only purpose in undertaking academic studies was to broaden the sphere of his influence. He studied only as much as was necessary for him, no more than that."

Collective Characteristics

YN: There is a certain prevalent image of German Jews being cool and unemotional. Is this the case?

"They certainly are emotional people but they learned to develop reserve. My great-uncle, Rav Yonah Ansbacher *zt'*, wrote in his *sefer*, *Canfei Yonah* that the German reticence is not an inborn characteristic. He ascribes it to the conscription of Jews into the German army while the country was under Prussian rule. The army trained them to contain their emotions and to obey orders. My great grandfather was a *gaon* and a *mekubal*. He was a rov in Nuremburg and was known for his warm nature and his flowing sense of humor. His son, my grandfather, was a soldier in the German army in the First World War. He kept his emotions reined in."

YN: *Is there such a thing as a yekkish sense of humor?*

"There is anti-*yekkish* humor in this country. Personally, I have not encountered people with a greater sense of humor than German Jews. Take Rav Binyamin Zeev Jacobson *zt'l*, as an example. In his school in Lidinge, Sweden, he restored Jewish girls who had suffered in the war to normality, drawing, amongst other things, on his powerful sense of humor."

In Eretz Yisroel the *yekkes* — the name *yekke* derives from the short jackets (*yekkel* in German) that they used to wear — were perceived as being a little slow on the uptake, a possibly superficial impression when their careful responses and restrained emotions are taken into account. The truth is that on the whole they are open, warm, happy and accepting by nature.

They arrived in this country (Israel) dressed in the finest European attire, with cordial greetings for whomever they met. In the difficult climate and conditions of Eretz Yisroel it all seemed a little irrelevant. Their homes with the large bookcases, heavy furniture, Persian rugs, grand pianos, sparkling crystal and Rosenthal china set them in stark contrast to the prevailing poverty of the times and they elicited little sympathy, through no fault of their own. But at the same time they were honest, capable, punctilious and thrifty. They paid attention to correct speech and to politeness, which went against the grain of the locals however, being perceived instead as haughtiness.

And there was also something annoying about them. Wherever they went, the irreligious German immigrants became the controlling force in their new surroundings. That is what happened in the United States at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The German Jews rose to prominence and tried to create a "new" American Jew, a product of the melting pot. They established organizations like the Joint (Joint Distribution Committee), the UJA (United Jewish Appeal) and others. In their pursuit of full civil rights they founded the Anti-Defamation League.

They gained their objectives in the United States, ultimately at a similar cost to the one that had been paid in Germany — rising intermarriage and assimilation and shrinking of the Jewish population. Here in Eretz Yisroel, the secular *yekkes* played a major role in the divesting the emerging State of all Jewish values, particularly in the legal and academic worlds.

Influence Beyond Germany

Authentic German Orthodoxy, which was rebuilt by Rav Hirsch, had a powerful influence that spread far beyond Germany. "Rav Hirsch managed to reconstruct Orthodoxy throughout Europe," declares Rav Hamburger. This statement left me speechless.

YN: How exactly?

"I assume you've heard of Soroh Schenirer *o'h*." Mrs. Schenirer was a native of Catholic Poland. She arrived in Vienna together with a flood of other Jewish immigrants during the First World War and she lived in an attic that was owned by a Jewish woman. On her first Shabbos in Vienna — it was Shabbos Chanukah — she asked her landlady to direct her to a *beis haknesses* and, following her instructions, she arrived in the *beis haknesses* in Stampfer Gasse. There, Mrs. Schenirer listened to the rof, Rav Dr. Moshe Flesch *z'l*, speaking with pathos about the heroism of the Maccabees. The rabbi called upon his listeners to learn from the Maccabees' example and to fight for themselves and for their Judaism. Impressed by the talk, Mrs. Schenirer approached the rof afterwards and asked him where she could learn more.

"I learned in the Frankfurt Yeshiva," he told her. "The ideas that I quoted in my talk belong to Rav S. R. Hirsch."

Rav Flesch directed the interested seamstress to the writings of Rav Hirsch and of Rabbi Dr. Marcus Lehmann *zt'l*. Henceforth, Mrs. Schenirer would come to the *beis haknesses* every Shabbos to hear the rabbi's talk. Few, if any, other women were there listening. Soroh Schenirer's eventual conclusion was that she had to return to Cracow to teach Jewish girls about their religion.

With the learning that she had absorbed in Vienna she returned to Cracow, gathered a group of Jewish girls and with her vision and burning enthusiasm, laid the foundation for Bais Yaakov. Her scope was limited however and so it remained until she was discovered by the leaders of Agudas Yisroel. Agudas Yisroel, by the way, was founded in neither Poland nor Lithuania and not even in Kattowitz. It was founded in *Germany* by Morenu Yaakov Rosenheim *z'l* and his colleagues.

"Agudas Yisroel actually developed from the Union of Orthodox Jewish Communities in Germany, an organization that was founded by Rav Hirsch," Rav Hamburger notes, setting the record straight.

"Rav Rosenheim was its chairman and he sent Rabbi Dr. Shmuel Deutschlander *z'l* to assist Soroh Schenirer. Dr. Deutschlander provided the impetus for the formation of Bais Yaakov by inviting Orthodox teachers from Germany to come and lend a hand in setting up the movement. Teachers arrived from Berlin, Cologne and Frankfurt. My own aunt," Rav Hamburger recalls, "was one of those pioneering teachers. She taught in the Cracow Seminary and from there she went to Romania, where she opened the Seminary in Czernowicz. My aunt by the way, was the only woman whom the Gerrer Rebbe hosted in his home for an entire Shabbos. It was a sign of his support and encouragement for the new venture.

"In her Seminary in Cracow, Soroh Schenirer taught Rav Hirsch's writings in German. The teachers spoke German and the Polish students learned German. My aunt once spoke to the *gaon* HaRav Meir Shapira *zt'l* of Lublin and he told her, 'If not for your work in educating Jewish daughters, I would have to close my yeshiva in Lublin.'

"That," explains Rav Hamburger, "is how Rav Hirsch saved European Jewry. What would have become of European Jewry without Bais Yaakov? And how can one imagine Bais Yaakov without Rav Hirsch?"

The Power of the Pen

Rav Hirsch and his colleagues were quick to realize the powerful effect of newspapers and literature as a means of influencing the youth. Where else would we find a *rav* and *talmid chochom* of Rav Meir Lehmann's stature occupying himself writing children's books? Only in Germany, where a great void had been left, which Rav Lehmann's books filled, remaining classics for subsequent generations of Jewish youth.

Then there was *Der Israelit*, a German language journal that brought news and ideas of Orthodoxy to both the ordinary folk and the intelligentsia. Each weekly edition of *Israelit* contained articles about the Orthodox outlook, items about events in the various *kehillos*, *divrei Torah* and explanations of the halochah. "It was a quality publication," Rav Hamburger assures me. "There were isolated Jews living in the small villages and towns. They scarcely had a *minyán* to *daven* with and they had no *rav*. They were able to read *Israelit's divrei Torah* on Shabbos and have them read out publicly."

In time, Morenu Yaakov Rosenheim, who served as *Israelit's* editor after Rav Lehmann, turned it into Agudas Yisroel's publication and broadened its distribution. Even the Maharam Shick *zt'l* in Hungary subscribed to *Israelit*.

German Jewry has lost ground in Eretz Yisroel. "The *yekkes* have split up here," Rav Hamburger observes. "One stream wanted to implement the *Torah im derech erez* ideology in Eretz Yisroel as well, with the result that they have moved towards the National Religious camp. The other stream, which understood that historically speaking, *Torah im derech erez* is not *Klal Yisroel's* goal, has joined the yeshiva community."

Rav Hirsch's writings have enjoyed a renaissance over here. *Netzach* publishers are reprinting his books, while his writings are quoted by *mashgichim* in yeshivos and in the columns of newspapers like *Yated Ne'eman*. "Rav Hirsch was the senior speaker on behalf of faithful Jewry in modern times," Rav Hamburger puts it. "As such, he is the father of contemporary chareidi expression. He can be credited with laying the foundations of our daughters' education, with the shape of the movement and with the work with today's *teshuvoh* movement — in short, Rav Hirsch wrought a revolution. That is a historical fact.

"It is good to remember this at least to the same or to an even greater extent than we remember the founders of the *Haskalah*, who gathered in Berlin from all over Europe but the vast majority of whom were not even Germans. It is an amazing fact that on the one hand, the decree of destruction for European Jewry emanated from Berlin, a decree that is thought of as having been "measure for measure." On the other hand however, while ninety percent of Polish and Lithuanian Jewry perished in the Holocaust, only a third of German Jews died. Of course, we have no way of knowing Heaven's reckoning but we ought to recognize and properly value the good of each and every Jewish group and learn from their achievements instead of being obsessed with their shortcomings," concludes Rav Hamburger.