

# GIANTS OF TRADITION

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The historian must adopt a definite perspective in his recording of history. Our "Giant of Tradition," Isaac Halevy, insisted on this and claimed that the writers of Jewish history dare not ignore the perspectives suggested by the development of Halakhah. The author of this essay, Dr. O. Asher Reichel, rabbi of the West Side Institutional Synagogue in New York City, has been gathering material on the life and works of Isaac Halevy for the past two decades. —S.R.

## ISAAC HALEVY — ORTHODOX JEWISH HISTORIAN

The history of Orthodox Jewry at the turn of the twentieth century has been deeply enriched by the indelible imprint of Isaac Halevy. His accomplishment in spearheading a religiously oriented Jewish scholarship goes beyond the projection of his *magnum opus*, the *Dorot Ha-Rishonim*, a polemical work on Jewish history (of which five volumes covering the Biblical, Talmudic, and Gaonic eras have been published) in which he took up the cudgels in defense of the traditional Orthodox viewpoint. It is regrettable that Isaac Halevy's role as a champion of Orthodox Judaism in modern times has not been adequately recorded for posterity.

A recently discovered collection of Halevy's correspondence<sup>1</sup> reveals hitherto unknown aspects of his dynamic leadership in Jewish scholarly circles and in Orthodox organizational movements, especially outlining his role as father of the *Judisch-Lit-erarische Gesellschaft* and architect of the Agudath Israel.

### I

Isaac Halevy Rabinowitz was born in the year 1847 in Iwenec, Province of Minsk, Russia. On his paternal side he was a de-

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scendant of Rabbi Samuel ben Avigdor (died 1791), the renowned last occupant of the position of head of the *Bet Din* of Vilna. On his maternal side he was the grandson of Rabbi Mordecai Eliezer Kovner whose comments on the tractate *Shabbat* were published in the Vilna edition of 1885 (5645).

Halevy was fifteen years old when his family settled in Vilna. In his youth he was a Talmudic prodigy (*illui*) and a favorite of Rabbi Joseph Duber Soloveitchik of Brisk. In due course Halevy made his mark in rabbinic circles. He was appointed *manhig* of the famous Volozhin Yeshiva when he was twenty-one. Subsequently he was signally honored by being designated its first *gabbai*, the equivalent of an Advisory Board member. Only four dignitaries held this distinction.

Halevy witnessed the closing of the Volozhin Yeshiva by the Russian government as a result of the relentless efforts of the *maskilim*. This distressing experience undoubtedly contributed to the vituperation in his writings against the *Haskalah* elements throughout his life.

Halevy was on intimate terms with the foremost Russian rabbinical personalities of his time, and they leaned heavily upon his advice in communal affairs. When confronted with weighty problems all looked to Halevy to come forward with the necessary weapons in defense of Torah.

When an Orthodox press was launched in the early 1870's, Halevy was in the forefront of the movement. He wrote many forceful articles, upholding the Orthodox viewpoint in the Hebrew journal, *Ha-Levanon*, which was published in Mayence. Halevy's reputation was by then well established as witnessed by the publisher of the *Ha-Levanon*, Jehiel Brill, who, in a post-script to one of Halevy's articles,<sup>2</sup> noted with regret that the author, "one of the renowned personalities in whom Torah, knowledge, faith, and wisdom have been well combined," did not permit him to reveal his identity.

Unfortunately the failure of his business forced Halevy to leave Russia in 1895. This ultimately turned out to be a blessing in disguise. In the course of his travels in various parts of Europe, including Germany, Rumania, Austria, and France, he arranged for the publication of Volumes II and III of the *Dorot*

*Ha-Rishonim*. Volume III was published in 1897 with the aid of Chief Rabbi Zadoc Kahn of Paris and the Alliance Israelite Universelle in France, and Volume II in 1901 with the help of Baron Wilhelm Carl de Rothschild of Frankfurt. It may be noted that his studies in Jewish history were published in reverse chronological order — the Gaonic period being his first volume in print.

Halevy's wanderings ended when he became a *Klausrabbiner* in Hamburg, Germany, in 1902. In that position he was able to devote all his time to historical research and to involvement in pressing communal affairs.

## II

In a letter written in 1887 to Dr. Jehuda Lob Kantor, editor of the journal, *Ben Ami*, Halevy revealed his reason for delving into Jewish history and for re-examining the historicity of the prevalent Jewish scholarship. He pointed out that he was concerned with defending traditional Judaism with historical and literary instruments in the face of the Russian *Haskalah* literature and German Jewish scholarship of his day, both of which he considered destructive and misleading. He was appalled by the deep inroads into Jewish life made by the Russian *maskilim* who, following in the footsteps of the German scholars, falsified Jewish history and ensnared the youth.

The defense of tradition in Jewish scholarship became Halevy's holy mission. Following the publication of his first volume of the *Dorot Ha-Rishonim*, he wrote to Rabbi Salomon Breuer of Frankfurt in 1900 that he considered his work a step in the restoration of the sanctity of Jewish history. He zealously pursued this ideology in his published writings and in his correspondence.

The historian, Wolf Jawitz,<sup>3</sup> in his exposition of Halevy's historical method observed that scholars like Graetz did not approach the study of Jewish history with reverence for the sacred elements of tradition. Where any historical source differed from the accepted traditional viewpoint, there was no question where the loyalty of these Jewish scholars lay. They

were more concerned with fitting Jewish historical events and values into the framework of higher criticism and other prevalent philosophies of history than in reconstructing the history of the Jews in terms of its inner spiritual core.

Markus Elias<sup>4</sup> likewise noted that nineteenth century Jewish historians based their views on the philosophical outlook of their times. It was Halevy who fought against this approach to Jewish history. Halevy saw the crystallization of the Oral Law as a unique historic process that suggested a special perspective for its interpretation.

It is in this light that Elias<sup>5</sup> discerned Halevy's preoccupation matter of Volume III of the *Dorot Ha-Rishonim*, which wrote first. Contradicting the prevalent views of Jewish historians, Halevy stressed the vital role of the Saboraim and the Gaonim in the preservation and transmission of the Oral Law. It was precisely the affirmation of the *elan vital* of the Oral Law and the Halakhah as finalized by the redactors of the Talmud that prompted Halevy to begin his writing of Jewish history in reverse chronological order with the closing of the Talmudic era.

In the annals of Jewish history, Halevy was not the first to take up the cudgel in defense of an uncompromising traditional viewpoint. Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) is known for his polemics against Graetz, Frankel, and others. Another work defending the sanctity of the Oral Law was published in Frankfurt in 1861 by Tzvi Binyamin Auerbach entitled, *Ha-Tzofeh Al Darkei ha-Mishnah*. A later work, published in two parts (1907 and 1910), which was concerned primarily with refuting I. H. Weiss's views on the Biblical era and the Oral Law, is the *Dor Yesharim* by Jehuda Lipschitz.

It is the historian Halevy, however, who has been considered one of the foremost spokesmen of the traditional school of Jewish history in modern times.<sup>6</sup>

Among the noted historians who were the targets of his polemics were Zacharias Frankel, Abraham Geiger, Heinrich Graetz, Nachman Krochmal, Isaac Weiss and Julius Wellhausen. Halevy noted even in his later work<sup>7</sup> that he was continuing his policy of refuting the outstanding spokesmen of that literature just as he had done in his previous works. It should not

be implied, however, that everything which was written by the "German scholars" was objectionable to Halevy. He frequently referred to Graetz or Schurer,<sup>8</sup> for example, in the course of some subject that he was expounding.

Halevy's methodology in Jewish history was delineated in a letter that he wrote to Rabbi Abraham I. Kook<sup>9</sup> as being a serious attempt to understand the source materials objectively, rather than a "new approach" *per se*. He was convinced that even the *Rishonim* such as Rashi and Maimonides would have been pleased with his historical studies. Halevy also revealed in this letter the fundamental principle which guided him whenever a number of questions are raised concerning some subject, the historian must find the master key which will solve all of them as a whole, rather than answer each point singly. Halevy expressed a similar viewpoint in regard to the proper understanding of the Talmud.<sup>10</sup>

In the study of the Oral Law, particularly, Halevy stressed the necessity of applying the inductive method of careful analysis of the source materials in contrast to the deductive (inferential) method prevalent among historians.<sup>11</sup> Halevy's method of incorporating the primary sources into the text was quite different from the general method of the time of merely citing references which Halevy pointed out did not always support the claims that were made in the text.

To Halevy the keys which open the way to an understanding of the Biblical and post-Biblical eras were the halakhic sources in the Talmud.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, he was wary of the aggadic sources and opposed the viewpoint of Rabbi Abraham I. Kook, who in his correspondence with Halevy,<sup>14</sup> came to the defense of the Aggadah and stressed the dual roots of Halakhah and Aggadah in Jewish life.<sup>15</sup>

Halevy's forte was his mastery of Jewish sources coupled with a capacity for penetrating analysis of Roman and Greek primary sources. To him Jewish tradition had a valid basis which must have a place in the arena of historical fact. He went to great lengths to reconcile talmudic sources with Josephus as well as the Greek and Roman historians.<sup>16</sup> He quoted ex-

tensively from the works that he criticized and from the primary sources.

There is another aspect of his historical methodology which he clarified in one of his letters to a scholar<sup>17</sup> who had asked for his references on a particular subject. He noted that his work was not written according to the chronology of personalities. It was meant rather to be a history of the Jewish people and of the main streams wherein the personalities and events flowed. Halevy also called attention in his *Dorot Ha-Rishonim*<sup>18</sup> to the conceptual approach which he employed in his historical studies (*birur inyan ha-Talmud le'divrei yemei Yisrael*<sup>19</sup>).

Halevy's writings consist primarily of critical studies and polemics on varied topics as well as reinterpretations of the related subject matter, from the viewpoint of a Talmud-devotee. It may be that his philosophy of purpose had affected him to the point that he could write in no other manner.

Halevy's volumes of the *Dorot Ha-Rishonim* were not intended for popular reading, but rather for scholarly circles. His admirer, Rabbi Aaron Hyman who referred constantly to Halevy in his own encyclopedic work, *Toledot Tannaim Ve'Amoraim*, observed<sup>20</sup> that Halevy's subject matter is not easy to comprehend. This may account for the fact that neither Halevy's name nor his ideas are generally known.

Halevy related to Jacob Rosenheim<sup>21</sup> that he would prepare his manuscript during the daytime relying mainly on his photographic memory when referring to the primary sources. Evenings he would check his manuscript with the original texts. Rosenheim noted that Halevy's phenomenal knowledge made possible his unique creative writings.

Hermann L. Strack<sup>22</sup> commented that "in his all too sharp polemics against H. Graetz, Frankel, and Weiss, Halevy is often materially in the right . . . He has adherents and opponents equally passionate."

Wolf Jawitz was also an admirer of Halevy. In a letter to Halevy, he expressed his regrets that he could not incorporate Halevy's contributions to Jewish history in those volumes which he had already published.<sup>23</sup> In the introduction to the sixth volume of his history, dated Tammuz, 5665 (1905), Jawitz lauded

Halevy's historical defense of traditional Judaism. Beginning with Volume VI, which embraces Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakai, through Volume X, which covers the Gaonim, Jawitz referred constantly to the *Dorot Ha-Rishonim* in his footnotes. Jawitz was likewise overflowing with praise for Halevy in his article in the *Jahrbuch der Judisch-Literarischen Gesellschaft*,<sup>24</sup> in which he concluded that the new historical discoveries which Halevy made were in themselves an important historical event.

The list of scholarly works that touch upon the *Dorot Ha-Rishonim* is growing steadily. A number of Jewish history text books lean upon Halevy's views.<sup>25</sup> Markus Elias has reviewed the high points of the *Dorot Ha-Rishonim* in a Hebrew essay.<sup>26</sup>

It is interesting to note that Halevy's polemical approach to the controversial subject of the Sadducees in section Ic of the *Dorot Ha-Rishonim* is being adopted by contemporary writers on Jewish history. Thus, the following excerpt from Leo Trepp's *Eternal Faith, Eternal People*, just published, could have been taken from a page of the *Dorot Ha-Rishonim*. "The Sadducees . . . were assimilationists and yielded completely to Greek influences. To them Judaism had to be made in Greek fashion."<sup>27</sup>

Meyer Waxman's concluding remarks in his section<sup>28</sup> on Halevy are worthy of repetition:

Halevy, in the long course of his discussion, corrected a large number of historical details in the works of earlier scholars . . . his extremism may serve as a check against views of scholars who veer in the opposite direction, and endeavor to minimize the force of continued tradition in Jewish history, making the complex Oral Law a result of haphazard causes and imaginary conditions. No new history of the ramified subject of the Oral Law can be written without the work of Halevy.

### III

A short time after Halevy arrived in Germany he attracted a group of young rabbinic scholars who launched a religiously orientated scholarly organization, the *Judisch-Literarische Gesellschaft*, which undertook to sponsor a yearbook (beginning with 1903) as well as other scholarly works. Halevy's views were promulgated in its publications.

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During his early years in Germany he took an active interest in contemporary religious and communal events in Russia, Turkey, and Germany, as well as in the Holy Land. He had a keenly alert and practical approach to such matters as organizing a religious weekly in Russia and the appointment of a Chief Rabbi in Constantinople.

Of significance was his dynamic interest in all phases of religious education in the Holy Land through his official capacity in the Palestine Commission of the *Freie Vereinigung* in Germany, of which Jacob Rosenheim was the executive vice-president. Halevy was in direct contact with the rabbinic authorities in the Holy Land concerning this educational work.

Utilizing the *Freie Vereinigung* as a stepping stone, Halevy was able to realize his life-long dream of creating a world-wide Orthodox movement, the Agudath Israel. (This name was suggested by Halevy.) He was not only its founding father but also the mentor of Jacob Rosenheim, its first president. He was the master architect of the Bad Homburg and Kattowitz conferences which led to the organization of the Agudath Israel. It was Halevy's unique personality that brought together the Orthodox Jews of East and West for the first time.<sup>29</sup>

In his autobiography, *Zikhronot*, Rosenheim acknowledged Halevy's steady flow of creative ideas and his encouragement in the educational work of the *Freie Vereinigung* and in the founding of the Agudath Israel. Halevy was very active behind the scenes in this movement until his sudden passing on May 15, 1914.

In Halevy's life we behold a giant of mind and action in both scholarship and piety whose spiritual heritage is an eternal inspiration for his people.

### NOTES

1. Over one hundred letters in the collection were received by Halevy's bosom friend, Dr. Heimann Kottek, the Rabbi of Bad Homburg. One or more letters and drafts were addressed to a number of illustrious rabbinic personalities including Rabbis Salomon Breuer, Haim Ozer Grodzensky, Marcus Horovitz, Abraham I. Kook, and Haim Soloveitchik; Jacob Rosenheim, who

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was to become president of the Agudath Israel; and his son, Dr. Samuel Halevy. These letters will be included in a volume on Halevy's life to be published by the author of this article.

2. Vol. XVI, No. 28 (Februray 13, 1880), p. 227.
3. Introductory essay in Vol. VI of his *Toledot Yisrael*.
4. "R. Yitzhok Isaac Halevy," in *Ishim u-Demuyot Be'chokhmat Yisrael*, edited by S. K. Mirsky, pp. 67-68.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-75.
6. J. L. Fishman (Maimon) underscores Halevy's role as defender of tradition in his introductory essay in the last published volume of the *Dor. Hor.*, Vol. VI.
7. Vol. VI, p. 3, published posthumously.
8. Vol. Ie, p. 14.
9. Tammuz 5668.
10. "Erinnerungen an Isaak Halevy," *Der Israelit*, LV, No. 23 (June 4, 1914), p. 3.
11. Ph. Frankl, "Das neue Jahrbuch der Judisch-Literarischen Gesellschaft," *Der Israelit*, XLVIII, No. 33 (Aug. 15, 1907), pp. 11-12.
12. This subject is discussed in drafts of several letters of Halevy to Rabbi Leopold Landesberg.
13. *Dor. Har.*, Ic, p. 477; Ie, p. 77; M. Elias, "R. Yitzhok Isaac Halevy," *op. cit.*, p. 113; *Entziklopediah Talmudit*, Vol. I, p. 62.
14. *Igrot Hare'iyah*, pp. 122 ff., 184 ff.
15. S. K. Mirsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-37.
16. *Dor. Har.* Vol., Ie, pp. 593 ff.
17. Dr. Isaac Unna. Draft dated 3 Sivan 5663.
18. Vol Ie, pp. 372-73.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
20. *Toledot Tanaim Ve-Amoraim*, Vol. I, Introduction, p. 12.
21. *Kol Yaakov*, p. 80.
22. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, p. 106.
23. Letter lated 12 Adar II, 5665.
24. "Neue judische Geschichtsforschung und einige ihrer wichtigsten Resultate," Vol IV, 1906, pp. 283-292.
25. Moshe Auerbach, *Toledot Am Yisrael*; Yaakov Gutkovsky, *Korot Am Olam*; Heimann Kottek, *Geschichte der Juden*; Meir Shatzrinsky, *Heavar Ha-yisroeli*.
26. *Op. cit.*
27. p. 57-8.
28. *A History of Jewish Literature*, Vol. IV, pp. 720-727.
29. See this author's article in the January-February, 1962, issue of *Jewish Life*, entitled, "Isaac Halevy — Architect of Agudath Israel."