

With the passing of Rabbi Yechiel Weinberg 5"צו, world Jewry has lost one of its foremost sages and leaders, who, while living in relative obscurity, was acknowledged as one of the most creative halakhic scholars of our age. This essay, intended by its author as a personal tribute to the memory of a revered teacher, was contributed by Professor Berkovits, Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at the Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, Illinois, and a distinguished member of TRADITION's Editorial Board.

## RABBI YECHIEL YAKOB WEINBERG 5"צו

### MY TEACHER AND MASTER

It is too early yet to attempt to evaluate the significance and influence of the late Rabbi Dr. Yechiel Yakob Weinberg 5"צו, the unique genius whose earthly career came to a close several months ago in his last "exile," Switzerland. At this time, and especially if one is a disciple, one dare only reminisce nostalgically with an aching, yet grateful heart, trying to recall what one has seen and witnessed, what one has known and loved.

Prior to my entering the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary, I studied at European *Yeshivot*. When in the fall of 1928 I left for Berlin, one of my teachers thought that I had already acquired the right kind of *Derekh Halimud* (methodology). He felt I required no further concentration on *Charifut* (development of dialectical acumen); what I needed was the acquisition of vast *Bekiut* (erudition). He was certainly right as to the need for *Bekiut*; he was sadly wrong about *Charifut* and the *Derekh Halimud*. When I arrived in Berlin, whatever I had learned at the *Yeshivot* became only preparation to enable me to be a student and become a disciple of the one who in God's

great kindness toward me was to become the Rabbi of my life. Ever since those late fall days of 1928, when I became his *Talmid* (disciple), the term *Derekh Halimud* for me has been identical with Rabbi Weinberg ר'צ"י.

What is the *Derekh Halimud* we have learned from him? One might perhaps say that it is a combination of clarity, simplicity, and depth. The three are related to each other in a definite order. The Talmud teaches with the help of "cases" and examples. The process of clarification consists in distilling the principle from the case or the example. Clarification is conceptualization, logical definition and formulation of the principle. In this sense, Rabbi Weinberg ר'צ"י was a master of clarification. It was an intellectual adventure to witness how every clarification led to simplification and how the depth of learning was revealed in the simplicity discovered. Through clarification to simplicity; through simplicity to the depth of truth—it was the way. All this, however, was not at all simple. It required supreme intellectual effort and struggle with the material. The simplicity and depth of the truth were the triumphant outcome of the search and the endeavor.

This *Derekh* is, of course, anti-pilpulistic. *Pilpul* is no way; it is intellectual juggling and mental acrobatics. In his *Sheurim* (lectures) this master of simplifying clarification spoke out against the *Pilpul*, quoting the numerous *Geonim* (authorities) who opposed it. In reality, there was no need for his strictures against the method of the *Pilpul*. His own *Derekh* was the most powerful intrinsic rejection of the *Pilpul*. No one may consider himself his *Talmid* in whom an encounter with *Pilpul* does not cause a measure of intellectual discomfort. It was an essential requirement of Rabbi Weinberg's *Derekh Halimud* that in his *Sheurim* he should have concentrated on the interpretation of the *Shitah* (opinion) of the *Rishonim*. The concise style of the latter, the misleadingly effortless way in which they interpret some of the most intricate Talmudic principles, gave Rabbi Weinberg his opportunity to show the depth of penetration that hides in a few "simple" words of a *Rishon* (early authority). While he had unbounded respect for the *Rishonim*, he felt free to disagree with the greatest among the *Acharonim* (later au-

thorities). Indeed, not only did he feel free to do so, one might say that he felt obligated to accept or to reject their ideas in accordance with what he himself found to be true or false. In the process of learning, beyond the realm of the *Rishonim*, there must be no consideration of person in our search for the truth. He made frequent use of the well-known *Acharonim*, whose words are normally studied in the *Yeshivot*. Often he would use them only to illustrate the complexity of a problem by rejecting their solutions. In the end, the answer would be found by returning to the "simple" words of one or the other *Rishon*, or even to the text of the *Gemara* itself and its immediate commentaries, showing us that what we have been seeking all the time has been, as it were, staring us in the face from the very beginning. All that was needed was to pay a little better attention to the text. Those were moments of intellectual triumph and exaltation in his *Sheurim*.

The Gaon of Vilna was the only one among the *Acharonim* whom Rabbi Weinberg ה"צ׳׳ treated like a *Rishon*. A great deal of his energies he invested in the interpretation of the *Girsa* (textual reading) of the Gaon of Vilna. Very often he showed how his textual emendations led to a better understanding of the various differences of opinion among the *Rishonim*. It was in his investigation of the *Girsaot* that his greatness in Talmudic learning and his university research training found their most creative harmonization. I doubt there was anyone among the Talmudical authorities of his generation who spent so much effort in establishing a correct reading, and who was able to solve as many problems by ascertaining the right *Girsa*. Characteristic of his attitude was a story about the Gaon and great scholar, Professor David Hofman ה"צ׳׳. I heard it first from Dr. Wohlgemuth ה"צ׳׳, but again and again from the lips of Rabbi Weinberg ה"צ׳׳ himself. Professor Hofman was spending a summer vacation in one of the resorts in Germany which was also frequented by numerous Rabbis from eastern Europe, among them many *Gedolei Torah* (Torah authorities). One morning he was asked for the explanation of a difficult passage in *Rashi*. Professor Hofman looked at it and answered simply that there was a misprint in the text which caused all the dif-

difficulty. The questioner remained unconvinced. He did not feel that it was proper to explain a difficulty by a misprint. He called on one of the *Gedolei Hatorah* from eastern Europe who — interpreting the difficulty—proceeded to construct a proposition of the *Gag-al-Gag* type and thus solved the problem. The questioner, however, could not withstand the temptation of telling that eastern European *Gadol* the answer which Professor Hofman gave him. When the two happened to meet, Professor Hofman listened with respect to the *Gadol's* interpretation. When the latter finished, Professor Hofman said to him: “Do you know what the difference is between you and me? In one-hundred twenty years we shall both come to the *Olam Ha'emet*. When I enter and they announce that I have arrived, the saintly *Rashi* will come to greet me. The printers distorted his meaning; I have restored it. Out of gratitude, *Rashi* will bid me welcome. But when you arrive and will be announced, who will come to greet you? The printers! You have explained and justified them extremely well.” Rabbi Weinberg relished this story. It illustrated his own attitude to both *Pilpul* and the fundamental importance which he attached to the correct *Girsa*. One might say that, in general, his *Derekh Halimud* represented a unique harmonization of the modern methods of research, which he acquired in the university, and the best in the Lithuanian *Derekh*, which came to him so naturally, as one of the *Iluyim* (prodigies) in Slobodka. Some of the fruits of this harmony are found in his volume *Mechkarim Be-Talmud*.

It is important to note that, notwithstanding the intellectualism of his *Derekh*, Rabbi Weinberg never relied on theory (*sevara*) alone. One had to show a *yesod*, some proof, some strong foundation. I still recall most vividly a personal experience. It was my privilege occasionally to be drawn into some halakhic work in which he was engaged. This happened especially in the case of his great *Teshuvah* (responsum) on the question of *Shechitah* after the animal is rendered unconscious by an electric shock. Among other things, he asked me to work on the problem of *Nefulah*, which might be involved when the animal collapses. The *Beit Yosef* in *Yoreh Deah*, par. 58, quotes the *Sefer Haterumah* and finds that it contradicts the *Gemara*.

He resolves the contradiction and the result is a new *Din*, which found its place in the *Shulchan Arukh*. Because of the importance of the work, Rabbi Weinberg demanded that I check every quotation in the *Beit Yosef* in the original source. When I checked the *Sefer Haterumah*, the style led me to believe that there was a misprint in it which accounted for the contradiction with the *Gemara*. I went to Rabbi Weinberg's room in the Seminary and argued my point for several hours. He did not accept it. The next morning, on the way to the Seminary, I met him. With his typical smile he said to me: "Do you know? There is a misprint in the *Sefer Haterumah*!" One may imagine my astonishment. Still smiling he explained: "You speculated, but I have proofs." (The final outcome of this discussion one may find in his *Seridei Esh*, Vol. I, 4,3; and the conclusion of Vol. III.). This lesson remained with me. A little over a year ago I was examining the *Sefer Haterumah* in connection with another subject on which I was working. Again, but this time only myself, I found a contradiction with the *Gemara*. Examining the original, again I was sure that there was a misprint. But now I remembered the method of proofs that Rabbi Weinberg showed me so many years ago. I checked accordingly and found without a shadow of doubt that the text contained a misprint.

Rabbi Weinberg ר"צ׳׳׳, was one of the great *Poskim* (legal authorities) of his generation. There is a direct connection between his *Derekh Halimud* and his stature as a *Posek*, but there is also a difference in approach between that of the *Lamdan* (scholar) and that of the *Posek*. His greatness as a *Posek* is partly due to his *Derekh Halimud*. It is the direct result of his rejection of the *Pilpul*. We have learned from him that no one has the right to decide *Halakhah* on the basis of *Pilpul*, however mighty and powerful. On the other hand, if one reaches the truth through continuous recourse to the sources, clarifies through conceptualization, and discovers ever anew the identity between the simplicity of the truth and its depth, he has the authority of the *Posek*.

Yet there was a great difference between Rabbi Weinberg's boldness as a *Lamdan* and his caution as a *Posek*. As a *Lamdan* he was intellectually independent; as a *Posek* he would treat

with the greatest respect not only the *Gedolei Ha'Acharonim* (later authorities) but even the *Gedolim* of his own generation. Many of his *Teshuvot* end with the remark that he felt it was not for him to decide finally without the approval of his colleagues. A personal experience comes to mind most vividly. In the year 1938, as a young rabbi in Berlin, a very serious halakhic problem was brought to me. I worked out a *Teshuvah* on the subject and submitted it to my teacher, asking him for his decision. He went over it and said to me that he could not take upon himself the responsibility of giving a *Pesak* (decision). He would submit the matter, with my *Teshuvah*, to Rabbi Hayim Ozer ז"ר, of Vilna, on his forthcoming visit to Poland (which he did, and brought back the *Pesak*). This too was an experience that one can never forget. (I was deeply moved to find, to my great surprise, that he included my *Teshuvah* in his great work of responsa).\*

Rabbi Weinberg was not only the *Gaon* as a *Lamdan* and a *Posek*; he was no less great as a *Darshan* (preacher). His work, *Li'Prakim*, testifies to his mastery of homiletics. But here we touch upon the nature of the man. One "learns" with one's head; one is a *Darshan* with one's whole being, with the fulness of one's insight and life experience. The depth of his homilies was due to a powerful intellect combined with a heart that knew sorrow and frustration, disappointment and loneliness. He possessed great psychological insight into human motivation. He was wise in his understanding of the human situation. All this entered into his *Derush* (homiletics) and characterized it. Rabbi Weinberg was not a person to show his emotions. Yet, strangely enough, I once heard him explain the sin of Moses at *Mei Merivah* with tears in his voice which he could not control. Obviously, in some hidden way, he was speaking about a personal experience. Great *Derush* is always a personal confession. The great *Darshan* always interprets his own life. The originality of

\* See *Seridei Esh*, III, 35. For the sake of the record, may I correct the date of the *Teshuvah*. I submitted it to him in the Summer of 5698 and not in that of 5699 as he indicates. This may be important because of his and Rabbi Chayim Ozer's *Pesak* in the matter, the circumstances of which he was no longer able to recall, but which I still remember word for word.

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Rabbi Weinberg's thought as a *Darshan* flowed from the depth of his personal life experience. What kind of man was he? In the course of the eleven or so years of our very close association in Berlin I never heard him say a single word about his own personal history. Only on one occasion did he come close to a personal confession. We knew about the tragedy of his marriage. At one time, the Seminary leadership with Rabbi Weinberg's own most active encouragement made a suggestion to me that was in fact the the exact replica of the situation in which he himself found himself in his youth. But whereas he had given in to the urging of his teacher, I refused. Some time later he said to me: "When you refused our suggestion, I thought at first that you acted very foolishly. Now I see that you were right. I was foolish." And the familiar smile of ambiguity appeared on his face, which I often observed on him whenever he was hiding more than he revealed.

He was a man of truth, who was literally sickened by all sham and pretense. He could not tolerate anything phony. His criticism was often violent and devastating. He could tell you the truth without mercy, but he would stand by you in time of need without reservation. His loyalty was an essential part of his truthfulness. Concern and loyalty were the characteristic marks of his attitude to his *talmidim* (students). He was generous in recognition and praise when deserved. In this regard, one incident has remained indelibly impressed on my mind. One of the students at the Seminary was a young man from Poland by the name of Saul Weingorth. One day Rabbi Weinberg said to me: "Do you realize what a wonderful human being Weingorth is? Have you any idea what a *ba'al midot* (virtuous person) he is?" And he told me this story. Weingorth had been helping Rabbi Weinberg in the writing of some of his works. I believe that Weingorth used to take down his teacher's dictation. Every afternoon at a certain time, Weingorth would excuse himself and leave, only to return after a short while and continue in his work. To the questioning of Rabbi Weinberg he would only answer that he had to take care of something. Rabbi Weinberg became curious and made inquiries. He found that every afternoon Weingorth went down to the synagogue of the *Adath Yis-*

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*rael*, which was in the same building as the Seminary, in order to pray *Minchah* with a *minyan*. "Why didn't he tell me that?" asked Rabbi Weinberg. "Because" he answered, "I did not go down to pray and remained in my room and prayed by myself." Weingorth realized that had he told me the reason for his interrupting the work, it would have sounded as if he were criticizing me for not being *medakdek* (careful) about *Tefillah bezibbur* (praying with a *minyan*, public worship). We had known the nobility of Weingorth's personality even without that story. In the light of it, Weingorth grew into greatness before my eyes. But not only the greatness of the disciple, but also that of his master was revealed to me at that moment. This was a story which the master told against himself. And to whom? To one of his students. He was honoring you by taking you into his confidence. At the same time, he was teaching, showing you the way. It was truthfulness toward himself, generous recognition where it was due, and influencing a third person by admitting him into the intimacy of a personal confession. There was unforgettable beauty and greatness in that moment.

One recalls with an aching heart the end of the relationship between Rabbi Weinberg and Weingorth. The disciple, as Rabbi Weingorth, became the son-in-law of Rabbi Botchko ר'צ׳, of Montreux and was one of the *Roshei Hayeshivah* in Montreux. After the war, it was Rabbi Weingorth who made a home for Rabbi Weinberg in Montreux. However, a few years later, Rabbi Weingorth ר'צ׳, in the prime of his life, died in an accident. It was one of the many tragedies in the life of Rabbi Weinberg. He wrote to me about it with the bleeding heart of a father. In his powerful Hebrew style, he described his own condition after the tragedy in only a very few words which — whenever I recall the event — still ring in my ear as if I had heard them from his own lips.

Rabbi Weinberg was not a party man. An adequate understanding of his non-affiliation with any of the Jewish parties, political or religious, will have to wait until a definitive biography is written. Such a biography will have to show the complexity of his character, the inner struggles, the tensions within the man, the tragedy and loneliness of his life. It is there also



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that one will find the reason of his fear of either settling in or even visiting Israel. We mentioned earlier the difference in the bold intellectual independence of the *Lamdan* and the extreme caution of the *Posek*. Was it justified caution or over-anxious hesitancy? Was there a *Derekh* in that or was it again a fear that had its root in some aspect of his personality? I may mention it since I occasionally argued the point with him in our Berlin years and had again occasion to write to him about the need for boldness in *Pesak* several times in the past few years. He never explained, he never answered. He was silent on that point. But usually he would do something that would show that he was willing to listen.

He criticized the Zionists freely, yet he published articles in *Ha'olam*. He could poke fun at German Jewry's neo-orthodoxy, yet held in high regard both Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh ר"צ and Rabbi Ezriel Hildesheimer ר"צ. He was not impressed with the *Mizrachi*, yet Rabbi Meir Berlin ר"צ was among his close friends. He did not take the *Agudat Yisrael* terribly seriously, yet was personally friendly with many of its leaders. He found his friends and exercised his influence in all camps, the orthodox as well as the non-orthodox. But of none did he demand stricter honesty of motivation and sincerity of purpose than of those who acted and spoke on behalf of Orthodox Judaism. I recall how often he pointed out to us the psychological pitfalls around which especially the religious Jew had to pick his way. A "word" which I heard from him many years ago has been gaining more and more contemporary significance with every year that passes. I believe it was not his own. If I am not mistaken, he told it to us in the name of his teacher, Rabbi Nathan Zvi Finkel ר"צ, the *Mashgiach* of Slobodka. It was based on the well-known Talmudical saying: "Jerusalem was destroyed because they based their words on the words of the Torah." The Talmud, of course, asks the question: "But what else should they have done?" How can the basing of one's word on the Torah be considered a sin so grievous that, because of it, Jerusalem was destroyed? The Talmud does give an answer. But the *Mashgiach* of Slobodka explained it differently. He emphasized the expression *divreihem* in the original. *Davar* is not only "word" in Hebrew, but also

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“thing”, “interest”, etc. *Divreihem* were their interests, matters that concerned them personally, their *own* affairs. The people of Jerusalem based their own personal interest on the words of the Torah; they justified their own selfish pursuits with the words of the Torah; they identified their own concerns with the concerns of the Torah. They said Torah, but meant themselves. This, explained Rabbi Weinberg, is the greatest of all sins: the falsification of the truth; the disguise of the lie in the garb of the truth. This is the greatest sin against the Torah. It well deserved the greatest punishment, the destruction of Jerusalem.

He was critical of all party groupings in Jewry and within Judaism. His personal sympathies were with the simple, the lowly, and the materially as well as spiritually unpretentious. All his years in Berlin, even as *Rektor* of the Rabbinical Seminary, he lived in one rented furnished room in the midst of his books and manuscripts. I understand that his way of life did not change to the very end.

People die. But one's teacher and master lives on as long as God grants one life. The intimacy of the relationship that existed in Berlin from the Fall of 1928 till the tragic Spring of separation in 1939 was not impaired by the distance of the miseries of the war years, which Rabbi Weinberg  $\text{ה'צ"ט}$  endured in Nazi prisons and concentration camps, nor by the continental expanses that stood between us in the post-war period of his life. Once one has found a teacher and master one lives with him, no matter where one may be in space or time. So it has been ever since our Berlin years. So it is — now.