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BETWEEN BERLIN AND SLOBODKA: THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF YOSEF ZEV LIPOVITZ

The life of Rabbi Yosef Zev Lipovitz is a story of hidden righteousness, suppressed biographical information, and genuine pathos. The writing of Rabbi Lipovitz is a treasure that almost never came to be, a tale of unique balance and integration. Not well known, his life and writing demonstrate the tricks which fate plays with reputations and the truism that great artists and thinkers—Vincent Van Gogh, Giambattista Vico, Dam Julian—are often prophets without honor, their originality and power undiscovered or unappreciated until after their time on earth has come to its end. Rabbi Lipovitz (1889–1966), like other once-forgotten figures, has much to give. He was a pietist who was not intellectually closed, an intellectual who was not emotionally dry, a Zionist who did not disdain the old world, a searcher who did not fear the new. Rabbi Lipovitz bridged many worlds—Berlin and Slobodka, Europe and Palestine, business and scholarship—but the total configuration was a whole greater than the sum of its parts. The story begins not with Rabbi Lipovitz himself but with the two divergent seedbeds of 20th-century Orthodox Judaism which he sought to harmonize and blend into an approach that contained yet transcended them both.

I

Appropriately enough, on the day that I began to prepare this article, there arrived in the mail a book by Donald L. Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany*.¹ “Weimar,” of course, refers to Germany’s abortive 14-year experiment with democracy, from the Treaty of Versailles in

1919 to the election of Hitler in 1933. A glance through this book on the Jews of Weimar reveals virtually nothing about Orthodoxy.² This is more than an insignificant omission since it was primarily in this period that Orthodoxy underwent its transformation from an intellectually self-enclosed, self-sufficient configuration to a modern ideology fraught with the tensions and the creativities of cross-cultural encounter. A search of the index of *The Jews in Weimar Germany* reveals no entries under: Soloveitchik, Heller, Birnbaum, Kaplan, Hutner, Schneerson—or Lipovitz. The omission by Niewyk is not uniquely egregious; a number of volumes by Peter Gay, Walter Laqueur, Frederick Grunfeld, and others on the same or similar subjects reveal the same deficiency.³ And the fault, perhaps, is not theirs at all, for if Orthodox Jews do not show an interest in writing their own history, why should they expect others to do it for them?

To the historian wishing to identify the origins of Orthodoxy as a twentieth-century ideology, two names tower above all others: Rabbi Nathan Zvi Finkel, “the Saba (Elder) of Slobodka,” and Rabbi Hayyim Heller, founder of an unusual rabbinical academy, Bet Midrash Elyon, in Weimar Berlin. The Saba of Slobodka founded what became the most high-level and influential talmudic academy after the closure of the Volozhin yeshiva in 1892.⁴ On a subterranean level Slobodka carried on the ideal of cross-cultural encounter of Rabbi Israel Salanter, father of the Musar movement and mentor of the teacher of the Saba.⁵ Ostensibly a traditional academy with neither curriculum nor sympathy for secular studies, Slobodka both nurtured a strain of cross-cultural confrontation and undertook the recruitment of the most intellectually exuberant Lithuanian Jewish youth, be they Communist or traditional. Slobodka generated the most diverse intellectual offshoots, frequently of the highest quality. For example, out of Slobodka came, respectively, talmudic, pietistic, halakhic-judicial, and scholarly giants such as Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Rabbi Yaakov M. Lessin,⁶ Rabbi Dr. Yehiel Y. Weinberg, and Professor Harry A. Wolfson.

Unlike the Saba of Slobodka, Rabbi Hayyim Heller nurtured not implicit or subterranean encounter with Western culture but an open and explicit one. Under Rabbi Heller’s aegis, a group of young and extraordinary Orthodox East European talmudic scholars gathered in Weimar Berlin to struggle directly—explicitly—with the intellectual challenges which Western culture posed for Orthodox Judaism. Rabbi Heller both fostered and cushioned the struggle.

The historian can never reach a fully adequate explanation of why genuinely creative epochs emerge when they do. Why did Rabbis Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Yitzhak Hutner, Menachem Schneerson, Yosef Zev Lipovits, Shmuel Bialoblocki and other East European Jews

come together from different cities under one roof in Western Europe in a certain brief period just at the turn of the first quarter of the century? There were, of course, the necessities and drives of their own lives, but there had to be more, for biography can explain the quandary and the search only of the individual. The convergence of many destinies, the coming together of a whole pool of questing young men—so alike, so different—must find its explanation in realms reaching beyond the biographical even as it includes it. And then, what if they had all come to Berlin, for whatever reasons, but Rabbi Hayyim Heller—the mentor, the pathbreaker, the model—had not been there? Clearly, more was at work than traceable causal connections in the coalescing of modern Orthodox ideology in Germany in the 1920s. Grace as well as the personally impelled search, Providence as well as the dynamic of social and economic necessity, nurtured and sustained “Berlin” as a term rich with connotations for modern Orthodox Jews no less than for the disciples and fellow travelers of Rosenzweig and Buber, of Scholem and Altmann,⁸ of Musham and Lasker-Schuler, of Einstein and Planck, or of Hugenberg and Hitler. It is the aim of this article to reclaim one element in that connotation of “Berlin” which has meant so much to a certain segment of the eternal people—a segment which conceives itself to be the bearer of the message of the Divine in language which the troubled and tortured modern Jew can understand.

Rabbi Hayyim Heller, born in Bialystok in 1878, rabbi in Lomz, Poland, in 1910, and publisher of a critical edition (based on manuscript translations of the Arabic and on the original Arabic itself) of Maimonides’s *Sefer ha-Mitsvot* (*Book of Commandments*) in 1914⁹—this scholarly, quiet, inarticulate, unlikely leader of future intellectual giants moved to Berlin in 1917 and opened Bet Midrash Elyon in 1922. In less than a decade he was gone, off to New York, then Palestine, then Chicago and again New York. In the short span of his residence in Berlin, young but already ripened talmudic scholars of Eastern Europe found that his combination of Lithuanian talmudic learning and modern critical scholarship commanded their respect, impelled their search, and softened its effects. Rabbi Soloveitchik (age 22) arrived in 1925; a few years later the present Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, came. Both studied for a brief period under Rabbi Heller simultaneously, whence their enduring friendship. Others came—the brilliant young prodigy from Warsaw and Hebron, Yitzhak Hutner,¹⁰ the future critical rabbinic scholar, Shmuel Bialoblocki, and the unique bearer of the Salanterian musar tradition, Yosef Zev Lipovitz.

Yosef Zev Lipovitz is the least known of the illustrious group which gathered around Rabbi Heller, and this for two reasons. First, as we shall see, Rabbi Lipovitz was in certain respects a retiring

figure, and the circumstances in Palestine were less hospitable to modern Orthodoxy than they were in the West. Second, Rabbi Lipovits was in a sense least affected by his stay in Berlin. He reacted differently than, say, Rabbi Soloveitchik; he reached his own *modus vivendi* half-way between the Berlin tradition which he entered and the Slobodka yeshiva whence he came.

It was not that Rabbi Lipovitz was less learned or intellectually curious than his comrades. Rather, he was less self-reflective. The degree of self-consciousness in his use of philosophic and scholarly terminology was low. The development of his "position" was hardly explicit. He struggled successfully with the greatest challenge facing any Jewish intellectual coming out of a world of intensive piety and talmudic learning. This challenge is to absorb new knowledge without letting that knowledge destroy one's sense of naive affirmation, of wholehearted and natural faith, of organic commitment. The supreme challenge in synthesizing talmudic and Western knowledge is not the development of an intellectually honest *Weltanschauung* which remains faithful to Jewish Orthodox tradition. That, to be certain, is most difficult, but an even greater challenge is to reach an integrated intellectual position without letting the long months and years of intellectual struggle transform one's living relationship with God—one's naive response to the Divine command—into a self-conscious, self-reflective commitment which puts decision before the promptings of the heart and embodies a compartmentalization of intellect and emotion. What made Rabbi Lipovitz unique is not sheer intellectual power but the ability to integrate not only philosophic and Jewish *ideas*, but philosophic ideas and Jewish *being*.¹¹

In reading Rabbi Lipovitz's writings, the introduction of philosophic or secular notions is always unobtrusive and natural. The explicit philosophic-talmudic confrontation which characterizes Rabbi Soloveitchik's corpus, the great effort at camouflaging philosophic notions which characterizes Rabbi Hutner's corpus, the overt scholarly methodology of Professor Bialobocki's works—all this is missing in the writings of Rabbi Lipovitz. Ideas from the outside have been scrutinized and then selectively absorbed into his whole being so harmoniously that his thought remains fundamentally undisturbed in its naive affirmation of God and the commandments; and if his readers are not sensitive to Western ideas to begin with, his readers can pass them right by.

To say that philosophic or secular notions are not prominent in Rabbi Lipovitz's writings is not the same as to say that he absorbed them by virtue of living in a certain "climate of opinion" or *zeitgeist*. Concerning Rabbi Abraham Issac Kuk, another twentieth-century Orthodox thinker whose writings reveal and yet conceal the influence

of various ideas of Western origin, scholars search for his Western sources on the assumption that Rabbi Kuk himself might never have identified them because they impinged upon him through channels almost intangible and unidentifiable—through the “spirit” or the “climate” of his age.¹² Unlike Rabbi Kuk, Rabbi Lipovitz spent about one-and-a-half years in Berlin (though this fact is omitted from the only published biographical material on him);¹³ he read and heard directly the ideas with which he grappled. More important, he was introduced to bibliography and a scholarly agenda which served as a source of topical and methodological challenge in the years to come. Hence, his selective absorption of Western ideas into his whole being, his ability to keep philosophic ideas from rendering the style and content of his thought self-consciously critical and analytical, is all the more remarkable.

Rabbi Lipovitz’s life and thought embodied one side of the fundamental two-fold typology of the Orthodox ideal which emerged from the thinking of East European talmudic scholars who studied in Berlin. One side of the typology asserts the supreme value of harmony and wholeness; the other side, of disharmony and existential anguish. Tracing the typology to its origins, the proponent of harmony was Rabbi Israel Salanter, generally known as the founder of the Musar movement, but also the first of the first-rank East European talmudic scholars who went to Berlin;¹⁴ while the proponent of disharmony is Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. For Rabbi Israel, the ideal, in his terms, is the whole man, the person in whom religious struggle neither contradicts nor effaces spiritual tranquility; while for Rabbi Soloveitchik, the ideal, in his terms, is the oscillating man, the person for whom struggle is supreme, and tranquility but a sign of either superficiality or the inability to face the essentially disjunct but equally valid secular and covenantal challenges which God sets before man.¹⁵

It is crucial that this typology—the dispute between harmony and disharmony—not be mistakenly cast as a dispute between the ideal of pietistic self-enclosure conducive to inner harmony, and between the ideal of openness to the secular world—a stance conducive to irresolvable conflict. The inner harmony which Rabbi Israel Salanter advocated, and which Rabbi Lipovitz embodied, was to be achieved in a context of intellectual and programmatic openness. What Rabbi Israel opposed was not confrontation with new ideas but the absorption of those ideas in such a way that Jewish being became split, one’s mind separating from other levels of being, one’s ultimate intellectual synthesis flowing from a self-consciousness divested of organic wholeness, one’s integration of intellectual commitment and of observance reflecting a juxtaposition of differentiated segments of self. It was not intellectual openness *per se* which worried Rabbi

Israel, but the shattering of the wholehearted love of man and God which intellectual struggle with secular ideas and ideals could entail.

Rabbi Lipovitz, as a thinker and a person who carried on Rabbi Israel's tradition of both explicit confrontation with Western ideas and the harmonious integration of those ideas with one's whole being, was, to the best of my knowledge, the most authentic transmitter of Rabbi Israel's musar tradition. The Novorodok musar school clearly narrowed the tradition of intellectual encounter; the Slobodka musar school carried on the tradition underground; the Kelm musar school carried on the ideal in theory, but most Kelm disciples veered either to a genuine and profound but self-enclosed piety or to the conflicts of self-consciousness. In Rabbi Yosef Zev Lipovitz, Salanterian musar in its most profound form lived and breathed. To be evident this must be witnessed not just in his writings but in his life. Which bring us to the final reason for his obscurity—his personality and life in Palestine.

II

Yosef Zev Lipovitz was born in 1889 in a small town near Bialystok, Poland, to parents who were Kotsker *hasidim*.¹⁶ When Yosef was 16 or 17 he learned of the Slobodka yeshiva from students who passed through town. After enrolling in Slobodka it became clear that he was gifted in both intellect and sensibility. He became close to Slobodka's renowned dean of talmudic studies, Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Epstein. Rabbi Epstein asked the young student to take his place in delivering the daily lecture for Slobodka's talmudic study circle (*hevra shas*) when he was out of town. The preeminent scholar, Rabbi Meir Simhah of Dvinsk, author of *Or Same'ah*, visited Slobodka in 1912, met Lipovitz, and generously praised his talmudic learning. Rabbi Epstein wanted him to become his son-in-law, but the Saba of Slobodka discourage the match apparently because he felt that the young man did not have sufficient talent to administer the Slobodka yeshiva (the expected future task of a son-in-law of the yeshiva dean).

Rabbi Lipovitz married a girl of indistinguished lineage in 1912, settled in Rituva, Lithuania, and opened a leather store with the help of his father-in-law. Mostly his wife ran the store, while he spent most of his time teaching Talmud in a yeshiva which he had founded and then administered. He served without pay. Each year he returned to the Slobodka yeshiva for the month of Elul and the high holidays. Sometime before 1924, he spent one-and-a-half years in Rabbi Hayyim Heller's Bet Midrash Elyon, and at the University of Berlin. In 1924,

the Lipovitz's closed their business, "went up" to Israel, and settled in Tel Aviv.

While at this time two Slobodka yeshiva graduates—Rabbis Avraham E. Kaplan and Yehiel Y. Weinberg—were, in Berlin, the first to teach Talmud in the East European manner in German, Rabbi Lipovitz was perhaps the first in Tel Aviv to teach Talmud in the East European manner in Hebrew, at the Tahkemoni school. The ideology of this Mizrachi school was close to his heart. His religious Zionism reached deeper than a love for the Land of Israel and a willingness to dedicate his life to rebuilding it. Part of his intellectual achievement was something unusual for one with deep roots in the modern Musar tradition. It was a particular kind of expansion of horizons, a consideration of the possibilities not only of individual but of communal growth. The Musar movement had been neither Zionist nor anti-Zionist; it was pre-Zionist, its major focus was the individual, its major lines of thinking laid down before the Zionist movement arose.¹⁸ What Rabbi Lipovitz did was not to transgress the Musar movement's interest in the individual, but to broaden that interest to include the community, not simply as an aggregate of individuals, but as a collectivity, an entity unto itself, worthy of a pietist's attention and subject to political and social (not just psychological) analysis. Notwithstanding his comprehensive religious Zionism, Rabbi Lipovitz was fired from his teaching position with the Tahkemoni school shortly after he assumed it, and for the following reason.

A Western woman had immigrated to Palestine and sent her young son—unruly, undisciplined—to Tahkemoni. No one could handle him. Rabbi Lipovitz took an interest in him but he failed, too. When Elul arrived he took the boy to the Slobodka branch in Hebron, Palestine (it was before the massacre of 1929). There the boy acclimated, so Rabbi Lipovitz left him there. When he returned to Tel Aviv without the boy, the officials at the school fired him since he had helped the "enemy" by "stealing" a student from a modern religious Zionist school and transferring him to a traditional yeshiva. Rabbi Lipovitz's concern had had nothing to do with the politics of the two different educational institutions, and he himself was a confirmed religious Zionist. His concern was with the student, who, in one place, had stumbled, and, in another, had succeeded. Some years later in the streets of Tel Aviv Rabbi Lipovitz took another young man, an orphan, under his wing, made him religious, but concluded that he would succeed in neither a modern nor a traditional yeshiva, and advised him to study medicine. The first boy grew to be the father of eminent talmudic scholars in Israel; the second boy grew to be a respected lung surgeon. Rabbi Lipovitz did not let his commitments—to Zionism, to

Slobodka, to his own job—stand in the way of counseling individuals according to what was best for them. But in Palestine then (as in Israel today) this had a price—a price he paid but did not talk about. (The boy who stayed in Hebron never did learn why Rabbi Lipovitz had been fired. Rabbi Lipovitz told the story to one person, who told it to me.)

After leaving Tahkemoni, Rabbi Lipovitz taught with Rabbis Meir Bar-Ilan and E. D. Berkovski at Yeshivat Tel Aviv. The classes were in Hebrew; the curriculum was a combination of secular and sacred studies. For health reasons he resigned in 1935, becoming the uncrowned *maggid* (preacher) of Tel Aviv, giving as many as five talks in five different synagogues on Shabbat—all without pay, all to large audiences, both religious and nonreligious. He also delivered musar talks in Yeshivat Or Zore'ah, then one of two post-high school yeshivot in Tel Aviv (the other was the Novorodok yeshiva, founded by students from Mezrich, Poland, one of the five centers of Novorodok musar in interbellum Poland.)

Like many other early settlers in Palestine, the Lipovitzes lost their savings in abortive investment schemes. In their case it was worthless land in Afula, then touted as “the next Tel Aviv.” To make a living, the Lipovitzes opened a small restaurant in 1935 on Lilienblum Street just off the main thoroughfare, Allenby Street. A short stroll down Lilienblum in front of what was once the Lipovitz home brings one to two large banks, United Mizrachi and Hapoalim. Across the street is a replica of the Lipovitz home, a small two-story building, a last remnant of what Tel Aviv once was. The home, its porch beams exposed and rusted, its cement finish peeling away, its wooden shutters rotting, now witnesses pot-bellied middle-aged men in T-shirts arguing about prices and stock options. A brand new white Volvo sits on the sidewalk; signs—“Wrangler”; “Daniella Confection”—protrude; Sneh Insurance Building, 15 stories high, towers above; people rush, walk, scurry by, alight from buses, buy and sell. Sunlight barely squeaks between the buildings; a cool, clean breeze from the nearby Mediterranean moves nimbly through the spaces as if in compensation.

Here, 50 years ago, this site became one of the very few kosher restaurants in the new Palestinian city, “Hill of Spring”—effervescent, confident, coarse, and driving forward. It was hardly the site from which to launch a uniquely integrated ideology of modern Orthodoxy. And yet, with Rabbi Tarfon, if Rabbi Lipovitz could never complete the task, he was not thereby exempt from undertaking it. In this little restaurant for the next quarter century, yeshiva deans, workers, literary figures, factory owners, young and old, weak and hearty, occupied the Lipovitzes, she bringing the food while he brought the Torah—irrepressibly, continually, as an unstoppable fountain, “opening new

worlds,” “making the biblical figures come alive,” “bringing the Patriarchs close,” “enabling us to see them unmediated, intimately, personally.” Around the restaurant table any subject of discussion was transformed into a lens through which to refract a lesson of Torah. “Nothing was foreign to him”; “his thirst for knowledge was unquenchable”; “he spoke to those living ‘in the world’”; “even after the *Shalom* and *lehitra’ot* he had another word, another point.” He was joyful, giving, and expansive, at peace with his study of Torah and teaching of Torah. For him, Torah was everything: Bible, Talmud, politics, ideas, new agricultural schemes in Palestine. “He was the very opposite of narrowness.” But he could narrow his range to listen to another person. He shared in others’ happiness, and in their trouble—many a bitter soul poured out his heart to him. “I do not know what it is that attracted me to him, but I could not let go.”¹⁹ In the new city, Hill of Spring: a small restaurant, a bursting community, a noble *talmid hakham* who lived “in the world.”

Besides the informal lectures in the restaurant and the formal ones in the synagogues (and, later, in his home), Rabbi Lipovitz undertook communal responsibilities. He gathered together the nucleus of what, in 1931, became the first *kolel*, or institute of higher rabbinic studies, in Tel Aviv (“Heikhal ha-Talmud,” which recently celebrated its 50th anniversary). He later administered much of the finances of the Ponevezh yeshiva. His informal teaching and communal responsibilities (both undertaken without pay), and the restaurant, occupied him until the late 1950’s.

From then until his death, he was confined to his home with heart disease. At this time his friends and followers urged him, *pressured* him, to publish. They brought a tape recorder to the lectures which he now gave in his home, and which continued unabated notwithstanding his pain and suffering until two weeks before he died. There were unique overtones to the pressure. It was not just that a respected friend and teacher had never published. The Lipovitzes were childless. His friends wanted something of their remarkably modest colleague and teacher to be left after him (his posthumous volumes, entitled *Nahalat Yosef*, would be the only “heritage of Yosef”). When he died in 1966, his wife eulogized him, saying that the orphans whom he had left behind were all of the words of the talmudic sages which he had not yet interpreted (*kamma divrei Hazal hisharta meyuttamim*). Baylah Lipovitz died in 1978 after selling virtually everything she owned—down to her wedding ring—to finance the publication of her husband’s transcripts.

Only one volume issued from Rabbi Lipovitz’s pen during the years he was confined to his home. This was the short, masterful commentary on the book of Ruth, *Megillat Rut*. After his death, his

wife urged his friends, primarily Rabbi Hayyim Z. Finkel (grandson of the Saba of Slobodka and son of the longtime dean of the Mir yeshiva), to transcribe, edit, and publish the tape recordings of the lectures delivered during the years Rabbi Lipovitz was confined to his home. Three volumes (*Nahalat Yosef*) issued: volume 1 (1966), including both short and extensive essays on the biblical portions (*parashiyyot ha-shavu'a*); volume 2 (1969), short essays on the holidays, the Prophets, the Writings, and a number of other topics such as prophecy, prayer, philosophy of history, political theory, and the like; and volume 3 (1972), short essays on the biblical portions, mostly in Genesis and Exodus. A fourth volume of *Nahalat Yosef* (1972) consists of novellae on the Talmud and Maimonides's code, *Mishneh Torah*.

Two of the three tributes to Rabbi Lipovitz which are prefaced to Volume 1, and his own comments in volume 3, assert that while much commentary which passes for the true meaning of Torah actually uses scriptural verses as props, or prooftexts, for the author's own idea, the method of the musar masters generally and of Rabbi Lipovitz particularly is to begin and end with the text, to read meaning out of it rather than into it. Remarks of this sort will naturally make the critical reader wary (and, in fact, Rabbi Israel himself explicitly suggests that some of his homiletics might be eisegesis),²⁰ but Rabbi Lipovitz's writings really do probe the text carefully. In fact, if one were unsympathetic to his writings, it would be because they are too literal, too closely tied to the text in what it does or does not say or imply, and not because they are fanciful.

The methodological starting point of modern musar's treatment of aggadah and midrash, starting with Rabbi Israel himself and stretching particularly through the Saba of Slobodka down to Rabbi Lipovitz, is that just as halakhic texts are of a piece, so are aggadic and midrashic texts. Just as Halakhah is, at least potentially, a tightly interwoven and unified corpus, so are aggadah and midrash. Consequently, Rabbi Lipovitz examines not just the ideas or the upshot of aggadah and midrash, but their terminology, word for word. Some of his ideas, such as those on prophecy, stem from the perception of significance in a seemingly superfluous word.²¹ He applies the technique of searching for inclusions and exclusions in the phraseology of halakhic texts to aggadic and midrashic texts. Some of Rabbi Lipovitz's ideas, on the other hand, emerge only after the sustained interweaving of numerous texts into a central theme. Still other ideas, such as his interpretation of the biblical Abraham, combine a number of separately developed themes (all rooted in aggadah and midrash) into a sweeping essay which surveys the personality of a biblical figure as a whole.²² In the first three volumes of *Nahalat Yosef*, the movement from the microscopic to the macroscopic follows no dis-

