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## R. YEHIEL WEINBERG'S LECTURE ON ACADEMIC JEWISH SCHOLARSHIP

To confront the intellectual challenges of modernity, it has been said, the complete Torah thinker must be conversant with three intellectual styles. First of all, he must be a citizen in the world of Talmudic analysis as cultivated and practiced by the great masters of Eastern Europe. In addition, he should thoroughly understand the world which we inhabit, appreciating the best of the culture while trenchantly criticizing that which must be rejected. Lastly, the fully cultivated mind is familiar with the methods of modern scholarship, literary, historical, bibliographic, as these pertain to the vocation of the *talmid hakham*. He is able to assess the scholarly disciplines and to call upon them for assistance.

If outstanding achievement in all three spheres is indeed the hallmark of intellectual completeness, then R. Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg (1884–1966)<sup>1</sup> may well be the closest our century has come to an *Ish ha-Eshkolot*, a man in whom everything can be found. Educated in the Yeshivot of the East, he took the initiative in importing the Lithuanian method of Talmudic instruction to the Orthodox citadels of Weimar Germany. During his period of public preeminence, from his assumption of the leadership of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin until his job vanished along with the community that sustained it, R. Weinberg served as the major halakhic authority for German Orthodoxy. In this, as in many aspects of his scholarly pursuits, he was fully the heir of his predecessors at the Seminary, R. Esriel Hildesheimer and R. David Zvi Hoffmann.

R. Weinberg was strongly influenced by his youthful sojourn in the Yeshiva of Slobodka, where he was unforgettably exposed to *musar*, as taught by R. Natan Finkel. His championship of *musar* is explicit in his writings,<sup>2</sup> and his engagement with European thinkers like Spinoza and Nietzsche testifies to the *musarnik's* critical eye.

The lecture translated here,<sup>3</sup> however, deals with the appropriation of academic scholarship for the study of Torah. R. Weinberg had received his training in philological method at the University of Giessen,<sup>4</sup> and sustained his interest in classical Biblical translations and Masorah throughout his life. He devoted further attention, among other subjects, to the formation of the Talmudic text and the provenance of editions of the Tosafot. But beyond his own considerable contribution to academic scholarship, R. Weinberg seeks to define the place of such pursuits within the framework of traditional, religiously motivated, Talmud Torah.

Some preliminary comments on the content and background of the lecture, however, before we hear from R. Weinberg directly:

R. Weinberg confronts two different critics. One is the academician, steeped in philology and historical research, the man of "narrow science" for whom traditional Talmudic studies are not worthy of the name of "Science." Against this school, R. Weinberg asserts something that to most of us is obvious, though to ears unfamiliar with rigorous halakhic analysis or easily swayed by fashionable prejudice it may sound polemical. Eastern European Talmud study, at its best, clarifies concepts and works out their implications in a systematic way. This kind of analysis, which begins at the very point where philological investigation ends, is as scientific as any theoretical discipline known to the modern philosopher.

This insight of R. Weinberg's has not remained isolated. Within a decade *maran ha-Rav* Joseph Soloveitchik *shlita*, who had befriended R. Weinberg in Berlin of the late 1920's,<sup>5</sup> was to establish "halakhic man" as an autonomous ideal type with powerful affinities to "scientific man," and was in the midst of drafting his epistemology of *The Halakhic Mind* (as it was to be called when published forty years later). If the analytic approach has not achieved predominance over the philological-historical in the university world of Jewish studies, it has nonetheless penetrated the more conceptually sophisticated world of legal studies, as witness the *Mishpat Ivri* school of jurisprudence.

Yet R. Weinberg does not stop at castigating the *Wissenschaft* that "sliced up the Talmud as if it were a mummified corpse." He goes on to criticize the indifference bordering on hostility which many Orthodox circles habitually exhibit towards modern scholarly methods. The subjects of Halakhic study, he reminds us, are very old books and, "as with any philological investigation, the existence of an authoritative text is the first prerequisite." To discharge this responsibility, understanding of the Torah "from within" is not sufficient; any instruction from scientific Scholarship should be accepted. (It need hardly be stressed that R. Weinberg would not advocate the blind adoption of any currently prevailing approach, without regard to its pertinence and applicability to Torah disciplines.) Therefore R. Weinberg calls upon his students to be confident in the value of their scholarly contribution, to disregard the glib deprecation of the "Yeshiva world."

The year is 1934. The discourse welcomes the students to a new term together, under the shadow of a new German government. In this context R. Weinberg's invitation to intensified study takes on an added poignancy. His wish that "in the not-too-distant future we may happily cry out 'our going in peace!'" takes on an added edge of distress. Early in the Hitler era R. Weinberg hoped to transplant the Hildesheimer Seminary to the Land of Israel, to the intended benefit of the students and the Torah world together. As is well known, these hopes came to naught.<sup>6</sup>

The events that destroyed R. Weinberg's beloved institution spared his life but broke his spirit. Declining offers from more populous Jewish centers, the survivor made his way to Montreux, Switzerland. The manuscripts which were to have brought to life his unique original mind were displaced in the general wreckage, and having lost his prime years of productivity, the old man lacked the vigor to recreate them.

We have in print at least one *tour de force*, the *Kuntres ha-Idit*,<sup>7</sup> and several remarkable essays and responsa illuminating R. Weinberg's pioneering synthesis of traditional *lomdut* and modern academic scholarship. But these are, as the title says, *Seridei Esh*—brands saved from the conflagration. If R. Yehiel Weinberg's contribution lives on, it is because committed *benei Torah* continue to seek his guidance. And if Orthodox Jews with scholarly propensities are to live as committed *benei Torah*, it is because they have the opportunity to heed the words and follow the lead of such men as R. Yehiel Weinberg.<sup>8</sup>

ON THE NECESSITY FOR THE INVESTIGATION  
OF HALAKHIC SOURCES

Honored colleagues, young and dear friends, and distinguished guests:

In the name of the faculty, I extend to you my heartfelt welcome as I open the one hundred and twenty-second semester of our institution. My first "*Barukh ha-ba*" is directed to my honored colleague, Dr. Auerbach, who has returned from his trip to Erets Yisrael, and to Dr. Greenberg, whose return in a few days we await. Our faculty members have used their stay in Erets Yisrael to strengthen with even greater intensity and warmth the everpresent link between us and our Hebrew motherland. Our colleague Dr. Auerbach has barely shaken the dust of Erets Yisrael from his feet. Many groups in Erets Yisrael wish that he would cease doing so; but we who are compelled to remain for the time being shaking dust in the country of our exile must make a more limited demand. We simply extend a heartfelt request that he shake off that dust within the walls of our Bet Midrash so that we might inhale the air of the land of Israel. ("The lives of souls is the air of your land, and myrrh the dust of your earth.") And I know that one request that is shared by me and by our entire institute is that while we now have the opportunity to greet our two colleagues with the blessing "your coming in peace," may it be His will that in the not-too-distant future we may happily cry out "our going in peace!"

Behind us is a winter of serious work and the discharge of obligations. We of the faculty can note with satisfaction that the sedulousness and diligence of the students in our institute not only met our demands, but exceeded them. Almost every day our joy was renewed as we saw that our students utilized the study halls not only during the day, but literally turned "nights into days." The wish to "expand the place of your tent" was aroused in us, that there be many rooms in our house to contain all the students. Therefore we were pleased with the rest granted you during the vacation. We bless you from our hearts and hope that you have gathered new strength, and that this new strength enable you to approach your work with fresh powers and with a will that, now as then, stems from a sense of gravity. In this sense I greet you with a heartfelt "*Bo'akhem le-shalom.*"

Present conditions are such that the number of new students is smaller than it was but a few semesters ago. In any event, it gives us joy that among those who applied to our Bet Midrash we found those

who fulfilled our requirements and were accepted as either regular students or auditors. I hereby welcome them into our community with the strong faith that they, on their part, will preserve the sacred tradition of our Bet Midrash. They should know and recognize the distinction and also the obligations that membership in an institute with a past and goals like that of our Bet Midrash carries with it. Would that they honor and hold dear the motto of our institute: "In all thy ways know Him and He will straighten thy path"—to know and recognize the Creator, may He be blessed, so that He may lead them in the pathways of righteousness. Together with the older students may they become committed to their studies with sedulousness and love and an open heart.

We are all, my young friends, subject to a spiritual travail unknown to our generation, one which even its imagination could not depict. And although we all suffer, the greatest share is borne by our youth! For this reason it is necessary that this youth acquire, through gradual education, that iron will, that capacity to suffer that—as Hebrew history teaches us—never abandoned those who were never oblivious to the "facts of life in Exile," those who did not forget the words of God to the father of the nation: "Thou shalt surely know that thy seed will be strangers in a land not theirs," those who therefore were able to make their way in the travail of the present, though their eyes gazed forward full of yearnings for redemption. Indeed, there is no more secure avenue to the attainment of this power than by connecting oneself to the life of the Israelite spirit through entering into the society of Torah and the community of the Bet Midrash. In times of travail, when Jews were removed from the course of the political events in their environs, they secluded themselves in their essential creative silence. For landless Jews, the return to the old Bet Midrash was not merely a kind of substitute for the lost motherland, but an absolute return to the primary motherland, the birthplace of the Hebrew soul. The Jew's road to freedom is his tie to Torah; his redemption comes via the creative agency of the spirit: "Do not read 'engraved' (*harut*), but rather 'freedom' (*herut*)." Has any nation in the world undergone travail and humiliation like ours? In spite of this, the memorable achievements of our literature were created precisely in these periods of travail.

The goal of our Bet Midrash, my young friends, is to pave the way of freedom and redemption before you. As a symbol and initiation, it is our custom that on the first day of each new term, one of the teachers stands before you to lecture on a question in the *Science of Judaism*, and I, for my part, on a topic in Talmud. In this manner we reveal and make manifest beforehand the two sides of your education. This connection to the spiritual creation of the

previous generations and the anchoring of that which is to be acquired in the investigations of our spiritual giants, precipitates that continuity of a progressively built spiritual edifice, one rooted in the tradition and faith which are the foundation of the life of our institute. If until now I have chosen to deliver only the Talmudic portion of the inaugural lecture, this is merely because this portion, which corresponds particularly to the character of our institute, could not possibly be absent. While I was unable to lecture on both disciplines together, in no manner was I willing to admit that there is a basis or a right to discriminate between a "halakhic" and a "scientific" discourse. To be sure, it has been decided in the school of that narrow science which is cramped into its disciplinary four cubits that an investigation which is based on the halakha and which discusses only the literature of halakha does not count as science and hence should be rejected. They think that such an investigation can be dismissed by the descriptive term "Pilpul" and they regard it as something that has passed and disappeared from the world. It is beyond human comprehension to understand how such a view could develop among us, too, who are bound to the Torah. If the meaning of "scientific investigation" is the clarification of concepts, the extrapolation from cognate ideas of the fundamental concepts and their logical and methodical construction, then it is difficult to grasp precisely why a discourse on Talmudic ideas which presents them in the formal framework of formulated clarified concepts should not be worthy of the name "science." Particularly you, *rabbotai*, insofar as you have the regular opportunity to find yourselves in the smithy of the Halakha, must reject with both hands the claim that the method called "Pilpul" is unscientific.

Yet one accusation must be conceded: Pilpul has transgressed its natural limits. Pilpul was not satisfied to raise and clarify the content of the ideas in the Talmudic debate alone and to note the relations of ideas and their development. Pilpul also entered a field that is not its own and where its employment is impossible, such as the explication of words, difficulties of style, contradictions in the form and the like. Here it is necessary to use completely different modes of investigation, those that are tried and tested in other sciences. To be sure, this requires philological education and a critical sense. Knowledge of antiquity is also a prerequisite. But Pilpul, that native Jewish acuity, did not retreat before any question whatsoever and believed mightily that it could overcome all obstacles in its own way. The form of this method was so enchanting and magically attractive that it aroused enthusiasm and drew many to follow in its footsteps. This will to unbounded power became the source of defects of Pilpul. Then scientific investigation turned to the Talmud and its literature. It

recognized the important value hidden in “this ancient and literary monument” and began to apply to it modern scientific tools, treating it as an historical source or as the basis of religious consciousness or as an ancilla to Biblical interpretation. There was then an immediate collision between “science” and the old Bet Midrash that drew its conclusions from the Talmudic discussion and its style alone.

Given the totally different characters of these two modes of investigation, it was not difficult for the newer one to shove the older method aside as lacking substance and critical quality, as though it were lacking any significance and value. Additionally, it stamped the latter with the jeering label “Pilpul.” But this it did unjustly, for the Talmud is not a collection of aphorisms and debates, but the end result of an enormously powerful investment of Hebrew thought. Centuries of work went into it. The quality of the spirits of the nation that discussed with logical acuity all the relations between man and his neighbor acted upon it. Already David Hoffmann, one of the founders of the science of Talmud, stood up against the attitude of contempt adopted towards Pilpul, noting that the essence of the Talmud, its mode of instruction and proof, is Pilpul. Whoever eschews Pilpul will not escape from the logical conclusion that he must reject the Talmud too.

However, the modern science approached the study of Talmud with the wrong instruments. Not seeking the Talmud’s essential kernel, science busied itself only with the externalities. Like surgeons, they sliced up the Talmud as though it were a mummified corpse. He for whom the Talmud is a source of life, however, cannot be satisfied with this way. The tools of the physician expert in internal diseases who investigates the sufferings of man are not those of the psychoanalyst, the physician of the soul. No! This kind of science will never discover the key that will enable its entry into the enchanted palaces of the Talmud. It has failed to locate the Talmud’s soul and has not recognized that the immanent core of the Talmud is none other than the perpetual striving to clarify fully and exhaustively each and every concept and to enable their future development.

What science has failed to do derives from its failure to deal systematically with these virtually limitless treasures, its failure to translate them into the language of our time, and its failure to formulate them in accordance with modes of thought which have meanwhile changed. It was not lack of good will that was responsible for this neglect, but rather the lack of ability. The tools and methods of modern science are not sufficient. It is necessary to enter the Bet Midrash of the perpetually maligned Pilpul in order to attain this ability. In order to do this, it is necessary to sit at the feet of the Geonim and the Rishonim and those elders who are bound to the

living tradition and have been granted insight into the spirit of the Gemara.

It is therefore the reverse approach that is more appropriate. In the future, there is every reason to deal with Talmudic and halakhic questions according to the principles that have been accepted and well tested in the laboratory of educated thought. Here, too, any influence and instruction from precise science should be accepted. For insofar as the subjects of Talmudic-Halakhic investigation are very old books, we find that, as with any philological investigation, the existence of an authoritative text is the first prerequisite. The philologist does not begin to discuss the meaning of a particular word or the interpretation of a sentence or the elucidation of difficulties of content and language until he has first clarified the text, the words, in their original form. Yet critical scholarship of this nature is completely lacking for the literature of Halakha. *Aharonim* accepted without any inquiry the texts as they were transmitted to their predecessors. These scholars did not worry whether their predecessors were mistaken; or if the text discovered a contradiction to other sources or to the Talmud itself, he did not consider whether the fault is that of an incorrect text, but rather attempted to resolve the contradiction, i.e., to bring the text into accord with the sources through various ways of *Pilpul*. I should like to cite some noteworthy examples, merely from among those that have recently attracted my attention. In this case, as in others, it would be necessary from the beginning to return to the primary source and to see if indeed this is what it states and is in the form that it is quoted. How natural it is that errors befell the text easily and often without deliberation! To be sure, the copyists were, as we know, exceedingly careful and knowledgeable; but they were rarely working from the original manuscript, and an error in writing or reading should not be the object of wonder. To our sorrow, we have hardly any original manuscripts of halakhic works; even to have several copies of the same book is highly unusual. Thus that clarification which would be the most plausible and most easily done, the setting of the texts side by side, is almost always impossible. Nevertheless, there are today several other methods, but these are based upon a critical evaluation and an intuitive sense for the correct text. One also requires a knowledge of literary connections, the interdependence of the works being investigated and the mutual relations between the authors. When suspicion arises, one must immediately inquire into citations from that work in other contemporaneous books where one might anticipate that something is recorded. I intend to devote a separate essay to examples taken from the rich halakhic literature which would offer support to my statements and which would also illustrate the need to

investigate the primary sources of Halakha, to check citations and compare texts. Here I wish to indicate this need in general and to warn about the damage in neglecting the inquiry into sources, as has become established even among the best and most outstanding of us.

I was able to discuss today only one of the questions that concern the modern scholar, i.e., the scientific preparation of texts with a Talmudic or halakhic content. There are many others and, were I merely to name them, I should be forced to go beyond the scope of this lecture.

I would like to add just a few more words, a request and demand of you, our students. Would that you directed yourselves to the vocation that I have outlined in general terms. This great merit will be vouchsafed to those students who have devoted their lives to the study of Torah; we do not wish to transmit it to those who have not penetrated deeply into our literature and particularly not to those who are not consumed by love and commitment to it. It is precisely the role of our institute to achieve its uniqueness by filling this obvious lacuna among the yeshivot, whose importance otherwise we appreciate and esteem.

Do not let anyone frighten you with the deprecation of the "world of *lomdim*," or let yourselves be deflected from fulfilling this ambition. It is in your power to call upon the names of such model personalities as R. Esriel Hildesheimer and R. David Hoffmann, may the memory of the righteous be blessed, who walked with the greatest of their generation and who were highly respected by them at the same time that they were among the founders of this new science. Thus a double vocation rests upon you: to introduce the love for the old Bet Midrash to those circles which viewed it as the remnant of a dated, vanishing past, and then to bring a new awareness and love for science and inquiry to those for whom the Torah and the literature and *lifestyle* connected to it are the highest attainment. If you approach your studies with such intentions, then you have the right to hope that from your midst will emerge that group of leaders who walk before the generation and direct its path. You will then have the right to take upon yourselves the vocation destined for you, that is to mold anew the fate of the Jewish people and to pioneer a national religious education that will arouse the nation to new life in the spirit and in the light of our history and on the earth of our ancient-new motherland.



NOTES

1. Most biographical comments on R. Weinberg appeared in the form of eulogies following his death. See, for example, E. Berkovits, "Rabbi Yechiel Yakob Weinberg Zts'l: My Teacher and Master," *Tradition* 8:2; S. Atlas, *Ha-Gaon Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg Zts'l: Kavvim li-Demuto (Sinai 58)*; G. H. Cohen, *Devarim le-Zikhro shel ha-Rav ha-Gaon Dr. Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg Zts'l* and M. Stern, *Ish Eshkolot (De'ot 31)*. The current researches of Mr. Marc Shapiro at Oxford promise new information about various aspects of R. Weinberg's career.
2. R. Weinberg's primary publications are the four volumes of *Seridei Esh (Mosad haRav Kuk, 1961-66)*, containing responsa, Talmudic novellas, essays on Jewish intellectual history (e.g., the *musar* movement, R. S. R. Hirsch) and scholarly studies on Rabbinic literature. The less known *Li-Perakim* (Jerusalem, 1967; 2nd edition) contains many significant occasional pieces as well as fragments of an insightful commentary on Talmudic Aggada.
3. *Li-Perakim*, ch. 24, 115-120.
4. Marc Shapiro's inquiries at Giessen have corrected some oft-repeated misconceptions about R. Weinberg's activities there.
5. They broke bread together "every evening" (personal communication of the Rav).
6. For a recent comment on the aborted move, see Yaakov Bar-Or (= Breuer), *Torah Im Derekh Erets ba-Aspaklaria shel Yahadut Mizrah Europa* (in *Torah Im Derekh Erets*, Bar Ilan 1987, ed. M. Breuer). pp. 163-72, esp. 166-7.
7. *Seridei Esh*, Vol. 4, 7-135. See also the responsum on women covering their heads for the application of scholarly inquiry to practical halakhic clarification.
8. Marc Shapiro informs me that the lecture was delivered on April 19 under the title "Notwendigkeit der Quellen forschung auch in der Halacha" and reported in the *Israelit* of April 26.