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*Review Essay:*  
**DISCONTINUITIES: THE CASE  
OF SAUL LIEBERMAN**

*Saul Lieberman: The Man and His Work*  
by ELIJAH J. SCHOCHET AND SOLOMON SPIRO  
(New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2005)

**M**eir Bar Ilan was a major figure in Orthodox Judaism by virtue of both his top leadership in the religious Zionist movement and his status as the son of the famed dean of the Volozhin yeshiva, R. Naftali Tsevi Y. Berlin. Prof. Saul Lieberman (1898-1983) married Meir Bar Ilan's daughter, Judith. In America, Judith Lieberman was the principal of Shulamith, a major Orthodox day school for girls in New York, for decades. When Prof. Lieberman sat *shiv'a* for his wife in Jerusalem, he told a number of people paying a *shiv'a* call that he had never once visited his wife's school. Why is that?

In 1966, two Yeshiva College students visited Prof. Lieberman at midnight during the fire at the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary. They had come, upon the request of the president of Yeshiva University, Dr. Samuel Belkin, who had told the two students a short while before that if Prof. Lieberman would issue a *pesak* that it was obligatory for the students at Yeshiva College to help save the books, then he, Dr. Belkin, would accept this *pesak*. During the midnight meeting with two student strangers, Prof. Lieberman ruminated about R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, whom he admired greatly as a genuine *talmid hakham*. It was clear from the tenor of his spontaneous remarks that his admiration was very much at a distance, almost as if the two lived in different eras. Why is that?

In the book under review, the authors relate that Prof. Lieberman once wrote to his cousin, R. Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (Hazon Ish), asking for a certain rabbinic source that eluded him. Hazon Ish sent a postcard back wondering why Lieberman would turn to him, writing

## TRADITION

that if Lieberman didn't know, no one did—wasn't Lieberman the master *baki*, polymath? The authors accept this exchange at face value, as an attestation of Prof. Lieberman's premier scholarship and of the esteem in which he was held by his eminent cousin. Is this the only plausible way to understand this exchange?

The book under review is simultaneously exciting and flat. It reveals an enormous amount of information about a tantalizing and towering cross-culture figure—but information alone does not tantalize. The authors are too much in awe of their mentor to ask questions that would get at the heart of his personality, his place, and his dilemma. The question as to why Lieberman never visited his wife's school is (to use Harry Austryn Wolfson's term) a floating buoy, hiding a vast undercurrent of cross flows. The authors are so filled with reverence for Lieberman that, at best, their understanding of their responsibility to scholarship is to collect information that expresses various views of him. Even this is limited, as much of the book is a stout defense of Lieberman as the single personage who may be compared to the Vilna Ga'on.<sup>1</sup> A book that could print, without comment, this sentence by Louis Finkelstein about the publication of Lieberman's *Tosefta ke-Peshuta* has its obvious analytical limits: "We are going to celebrate early in August a most important event in the history of American Judaism and indeed, in the history of world Judaism." I do not wish to be mistaken; this is a very valuable book. The basic legwork in amassing critical biographical details about a major figure is never easy and the authors have done a yeoman job. No future consideration of Lieberman will be able to dispense with their work.<sup>2</sup> But now that the biographical detail is in front of us, what might we make of it? Who was Saul Lieberman—European Talmudist, sampler of modes of the Musar Movement, enemy of the Slobodka Rosh Yeshiva's astute eye, savant of the Greek civilization in which Mishnaic authors lived, and eminent scholar and dean of the rabbinical school of the leading non-Orthodox font of Jewish scholarship?



Perhaps the most important line in the book appears toward the end. It is a comment by R. Dr. Haym Soloveitchik: "There was no fusion between [Lieberman's] intellectual status and his personality. In meeting him or seeing him in ordinary conversation, one would never have guessed his towering intellect." Clearly, scholars come in all shades. A temperament that keeps ordinary conversation ordinary is not unique

to Lieberman and, in and of itself, not worthy of notice. What we have in Soloveitchik's comment, however, is a hint of the deeper dynamic that needs to be identified and fleshed out in order to penetrate to the essential Lieberman. "There was no fusion"—the phrase may stand on its own. Lieberman was marked by disjunctions whose lineaments included a certain detachment, a certain obliviousness, a capacity to taste and sample spiritual trajectories and scholarly methodologies that, alternatively, he might value or reject, but in either case extirpate from their context and import into his own personal universe. Lieberman is marked by an odd kind of calm, rooted in an individualism so strong that he did not perceive the customary expectations of his spiritual or methodological choices.

Up and down this book, the great scholar—and, as we shall see, the great ethicist—is oddly out of touch with a wide swath of realities. Late in his life, following the death of Harry Austryn Wolfson in 1974, Lieberman's interview for Wolfson's chair at Harvard, which was his for the asking, fell flat, in part because of miscommunications over such minor matters as the precise connotations of proposed professorial titles. That Lieberman may, in fact, never have really wanted the chair does not explain the wall he built around himself that made him unable to grasp the language of those who offered it to him. Early in his life, he passed through the Slobodka yeshiva, apparently clueless that intellect alone was not the sole criteria by which the yeshiva evaluated its charges. He could feel that his later choices did not render him disloyal to his early religious training because significant ideological elements of that training never really penetrated.

The authors devote a good deal of space to the relationship between Lieberman and the Orthodox world in which he was raised and to whose tenets he remained committed. The authors present much information that vouches for Lieberman's standing in the eyes of Orthodox authorities as a true Orthodox Jew and as a genuine, and even superior, Talmudist.<sup>3</sup> The authors never consider the undercurrent of irony, echo of "the lady doth protest too much," that underlies at least some of this. They never wonder, for example, whether Hazon Ish's seeming compliment may have been subtle sarcasm, draped in an accolade, designed to distance himself from what he considered his wayward cousin. It is no more credible to understand Hazon Ish as lacking a reference than it is to regard Lieberman's knowledge as on par with that of the Vilna Ga'on.<sup>4</sup> The book's information on Lieberman's relationship to Orthodoxy is stripped of its inherent polemic and is thus unable to generate the most

## TRADITION

interesting questions. These are not how pious Lieberman may have been or may have been regarded, but what inner adjustments he needed to make in order to spend most of his professional life in institutional abandonment of the Orthodox Judaism to which he said he was committed. He always protested that he was not a Conservative Jew, yet he served as dean of the Conservative rabbinical school for decades. In this he was not dissembling; he was discontinuous.

At this point, we must introduce a critical fact. Lieberman's Talmud classes were the highest, the most demanding, at JTS. He functioned on this level for some four decades. And yet, the number of genuine talmudic scholars whom he trained, in comparison to the number that, say, Rabbis Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Jacob J. Ruderman, or Isaac Hutner trained, is truly miniscule. What this means is that the highly individual world that Lieberman created for himself cut him off from the nurture not only of peers but of all but a few students. He was out of touch with a Talmud-learning community, save for the cerebral one he created through his own literary endeavors. This engendered in him no discernible angst or complaint. If most cross-cultural figures from Eastern Europe lived uneasily between two worlds, Lieberman seems the exception. His adjustment was not so much the resolution or synthesis of contrary pulls, or, to the contrary, a *modus vivendi* for living with dissonance. Rather, he brought all of the cultural and intellectual trajectories he encountered under his own, idiosyncratic, serene dispensation.



The same individualist dynamic is evident in his use of “modern scientific techniques.” Lieberman was not a traditional Rosh Yeshiva, yet the sense in which he was an academic scholar is strikingly attenuated. His approach to the Talmud, supposedly, was the “Western European critical approach,” but his writings exclude a breathtakingly long list of what are usually taken to constitute a critical approach to texts: methodological excursions, the history or dating of texts, the identification of editions, the formulation of the world view or other larger perspectives implicit or explicit in the texts, and the placement of the texts in their social or economic context, vertically (in relationship to history) or horizontally (in relation to their own time). Just exactly what part of “critical” remained in Lieberman's work? One wonders exactly how he would have been regarded at Harvard had he chosen to go there, since he would have succeeded a scholar who engaged in the entire spectrum

of critical scholarship, including that to which Lieberman did bring his critical tools: establishment of the text and *explication de texte*.

The authors of the book speak of Lieberman's "reverence" for the text, hardly a critical approach, but still a key to his scholarship. Through his mastery of ancient Greek, he was able to illuminate the connotations and denotations of talmudic terms and statements and to resolve talmudic conundra in a way that would never occur to a traditional scholar. The quantity of knowledge and curiosity required to undertake this philological task is prodigious. The narrowly circumscribed world of scholarship that Lieberman defined for himself did not reduce his sense as a scholar, nor, if we reverse the perspective, induce a sense of being a Rosh Yeshiva. Nor did it attenuate the expansive glorification of him by his students, votaries, and colleagues.

If I read a biography of R. Eliyahu E. Dessler, I learn that he was the greatest Jewish thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If I read the admirations of R. Yitshak Hutner, I learn that he was the greatest Jewish thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And when I read many evaluations of Rabbis Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Abraham Isaac Kook, respectively, I learn, once again, that there was one who towered above everyone else—in an entire century. Here, in this book on Saul Lieberman, I encounter the absolute faith that it was he who towered above any other talmudic scholar—in two centuries, no less. This foreshortening tendency cannot abide the notion of many protean, very different masters. It cannot acknowledge the impossibility of devising a single set of criteria of greatness for halakhists, not one of whom derived his uniqueness from poetic, kabbalistic, philosophic, musar, and critical training, but all of whom mastered one or two of these fields and some of whom evinced fundamentally different approaches to Talmud study. The uniqueness in Lieberman's approach, besides Greek in Palestine and love of the Yerushalmi, was his devotion to the Tosefta. The authors seem unaware of other recent masters of the Tosefta and therefore cannot offer any comparative analysis of Lieberman's approach. Lieberman stands alone. End of discussion.<sup>5</sup>

One wonders what Lieberman himself thought of the adulatory instinct, given his own exposure to the Musar Movement. Looking through the authors' lens, the most attractive quality of Lieberman is ethical. The fundamental polemic of the Musar Movement never penetrated Lieberman, but its ethics did.

Musar argued that intellect had become detached from will, that knowing the right thing was no longer sufficient impetus to doing the right thing, that the greatest deformation of service of God was the de-

## TRADITION

unification of mind and heart, that deviation from the total personality transfiguration demanded by the Torah could congenially accompany the observance of the Torah. Musar sought to defeat non-Orthodox Judaism by re-vivifying Orthodox Judaism, infusing the piety inherent in the Torah into the observance and articulation of halakha, and ensuring that the articulation of the Torah did not supersede or overshadow its deepest intent.

On the scale of ethics, Lieberman comes off as a beautifully sensitive individual. He was solicitous of other people's children, supported graduate students anonymously, and provided scholarships for elementary school students. He was a *ba'al tsedaka* for causes ranging from Israel to *tabarat ha-mishpaha*. He was sparing in his scholarly criticism, even when he differed fundamentally, and assisted refugees from Europe immigrate to the United States. He sent flowers every year to the switchboard operator at JTS on the anniversary of her husband's death. On the scale of Musar, however, Lieberman's strong individualism removed him from a certain seminal arena of self-scrutiny. His rationalizations for advancing a seminary and a movement that undermined halakha incubated no discernible consciousness of the Musar ideology whose various centers he sought out in his youth. He embodied the dynamic that R. Israel Salanter addressed: the bifurcation of the intellect and the will, with, in Lieberman's case, the intellectual pursuit of Talmud sustained with gusto and achievement, the larger goal of Torah unattained as he rationalized living comfortably in a non-Orthodox seminary due to every inducement to scholarly achievement made available to him. It was not only salary; it was prestige, library, light teaching load, publication subventions, and opportunity for academic leadership. R. Israel Salanter observed that rarely is any positive act or intention, no matter how pure, empty of dross, and rarely is any negative act or intention, no matter how impure, empty of altruism. On some level, self-scrutiny did leave its mark on Lieberman. He knew that if the senior scholar at the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary visited his wife's Orthodox Shulamith School, this could complicate her work there, her own piety notwithstanding. Lieberman, creator of a monumental Tosefta and possessor of charm and character, could just glimpse his fundamental choice: cold fusion. It promises the world, but is at loggerheads with reality.

NOTES

1. See note 4.
2. See, however, Marc B. Shapiro, *Saul Lieberman and the Orthodox* (Scranton: Scranton University Press, 2006), who identifies several factual errors in Schochet and Spiro's book. See, for example, Shapiro, notes 11, 124, and p. 47.
3. Marc B. Shapiro's essay is much more subtle and comprehensive on this point and should be consulted in conjunction with Schochet and Spiro's analysis.
4. Lest the inaptness of the comparison of Saul Lieberman to the Vilna Ga'on not be apparent, consider only that while Lieberman wrote a masterful work on most of the Tosefta and wrote extensively on the Yerushalmi, he wrote nothing on all of the following, on all of which the Ga'on wrote masterful works: the entire *Shulhan Arukh*, most books of Tanakh, major works of kabbala, Midrash, *tefilla*, and *Haggada*. The Ga'on also glossed the Tosefta, as well as writing on trigonometry and other topics.

One may consult a recently published bibliography of the Ga'on and compare it with Lieberman's. Even allowing for the fact that the bibliography of the Ga'on includes works on the Ga'on and not only by him, the Ga'on's bibliography far outstrips Lieberman's. None of this is intended to derogate from Lieberman's impressive work. It is simply that the Ga'on's range and level of achievements were unique, a fundamental datum of modern Jewish history that escapes Schochet and Spiro, out of excessive piety. See Yeshayahu Vinograd, *Thesaurus of the Books of the Vilna Gaon* (Kerem Eliyahu: Jerusalem, 2003).
5. As for Hazon Ish's irony, consider some of his language in a short letter that he wrote to Lieberman in response to an inquiry (Shapiro, 5 [my translation]): "I have no *beki'ut*. I lack childhood mastery and the other methods of acquiring *beki'ut*." This is not mere false modesty. Nor is Hazon Ish being obvious, as his protestation of absence of *beki'ut* is slipped in among expressions of familial concern.
5. In an appendix, Schochet and Spiro reprint, in translation from the Hebrew, Hayyim Zalman Dimitrovsky's "From Commentary to Scholarship" (originally printed in *Le-Zikhro shel Shaul Lieberman* [Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1984], 34-49), which does offer a comparative analysis of Lieberman's approach and an analysis of the development of Lieberman's scholarship generally.