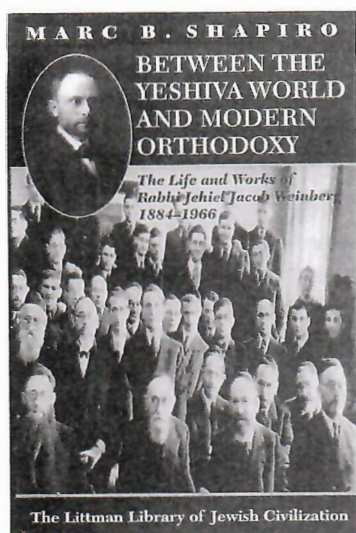


Biography of a man in two conflicting worlds



Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1884-1966

Marc B. Shapiro

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Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg (1884-1966) was one of the giants of Orthodoxy. His responsa, *Seridei Esh*, rank among the very greatest of their kind. Marc Shapiro, Professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Scranton, Pennsylvania, has now written a splendid biography of this complex and lonely figure, which adds greatly to our understanding of the tensions between Orthodoxy and modernity.

Born in Ciechanowiec, near Grodno in Poland, Weinberg showed early brilliance in his talmudic studies. At the age of 17 he entered the yeshiva of Slobodka where he came under the influence of such masters of the Musar movement as Rabbi Nathan Zvi Finkel and Rabbi Isaac Blazer. In 1906 he accepted the position of

rabbi in the Lithuanian town of Pilwiski, where he also entered into an arranged, unhappy and short-lived marriage. His views at that time were hostile to the Torah-plus-Western-culture synthesis of Samson Raphael Hirsch, and ambivalent about the religious Zionism of Rabbi Isaac Reines.

In 1914 Weinberg travelled to Berlin for medical treatment and was forced to stay there by the outbreak of the First World War. It was this exposure to German Jewish life that eventually changed and broadened his outlook. In 1919, at the age of 35, he began a course of university studies, first at the University of Berlin, then at Giessen, where he made the friendship of the non-Jewish scholar Paul Kahle. In 1924 he joined the staff of the Berlin Rabbinical Seminary, founded by Rabbi Ezriel Hildesheimer. By then he was able to speak warmly of the German-Jewish synthesis achieved by Hirsch, Hildesheimer and David Zvi Hoffmann. To be sure, he still valued the Lithuanian yeshiva and its inwardly directed spirituality, but he now understood that the two approaches were right for their respective constituencies. West was not East. A synthesis that might have weakened Jewish life in Lithuania, saved it in Germany.

By 1933 German-Jewish life was overshadowed by Hitler's rise to power, and it was then that Weinberg was guilty of a great error of judgement. He radically under-estimated the antisemitism of Nazism, going so far as to commend Hitler for his opposition to communism. He was not alone in this view, nor did he persist in it for long, but it makes sobering reading. Within a month, however, the character of the new regime was becoming clear. One of its first acts was to forbid *shehitah* unless

the animal had been pre-stunned. This presented Weinberg with a formidable halakhic problem: could stunning be permitted if it were the only way of keeping large numbers of Jews from eating non-kosher meat? Unwilling to give a ruling without the support of leading halakhists elsewhere, Weinberg eventually bowed to the consensus of East European sages who opposed any leniency.

At this time two possibilities were mooted which might have had long-lasting consequences. The first was the proposal, mooted by Meir Hildesheimer, that the seminary should move to Israel. This collapsed under the opposition of Rabbi Hayim Ozer Grodzinski and others. The second was the invitation extended to Rabbi Weinberg by the then British Chief Rabbi, J. H. Hertz, to become head of the London Beth Din. Again under pressure from Rabbi Grodzinski, Weinberg declined. One can only speculate on the impact Rabbi Weinberg might have had on the development of these Jewries, but it was not to be.

In late 1934 or early 1935 Weinberg became rector of the Hildesheimer seminary. The deepening crisis of European Jewry had a devastating effect on him. Kristallnacht, the Warsaw ghetto and the dawning realisation of the extent of the Final Solution left him a crushed and broken man. From 1946 to 1966 he presided over the yeshiva in Montreux where he felt isolated but lacked the will to take up the various positions offered him in London, Paris and Israel. When he died and his body was taken to Jerusalem for burial, the cortege including Israel's President, set out to accompany the coffin to Sanhedria, when it was effectively hijacked by a group of yeshiva heads and taken to *Har Hamenuhot*

alongside the graves of other Torah sages. In death as in life, Rav Weinberg belonged to two conflicting worlds.

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His greatness lay in the depth of his understanding of Judaism in the context of the modern world. His famous responsa on mixed youth groups and bat mitzvah ceremonies are landmarks in the field of *halakhah*, combining unimpeachable scholarship with profound sensitivity to the situation and psychology of the modern Jew. There is, in much of his writing, a sense of spaciousness and integrity that make him not only one of the great Torah sages of recent times, but also a role model for an intellectually compelling

presentation of Judaism in the contemporary world. Consider just one of his remarks about those who oppose *Torah-im-derekh-eret*:

The Catholics, *lehavdil*, have professors, intellectuals, researchers, and great scientists, and they are strong and defend their religion with all the weapons of modern philosophy.... I am afraid that this fear of secular studies will lead, God forbid, to a disgrace of the Torah. Might one then be able to say that our great divine Torah cannot endure the conjunction of Torah with so-called secular studies?

There is so much sanity in those three sentences that one wonders why it is so rare in Orthodoxy today.

Marc Shapiro has written a superlative book, elegantly written and fastidiously researched, providing us with rare insights into Orthodoxy's encounter with the modern world as reflected in the

life of one of its most complex figures. Nor does his contribution end here. Alongside the present book he has also published an extraordinary correspondence between Rabbi Weinberg and the Reform scholar Samuel Atlas ('Scholars and Friends', *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, volume 7, 1997, 105-121) and a Hebrew collection of Rabbi Weinberg's letters and essays, *Kitvei HaGaon Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg*. This is scholarship of a high order.

Rabbi Weinberg emerges as a tragic figure who might, had he been born at another time and place, have exercised a far greater influence on the imaginative horizons of Orthodoxy. Many, though, will find solace in the knowledge that their hopes for, and frustrations with, Jewish life and thought were shared by a man of Weinberg's stature, and may one day take further the route he began: talmudic learning and halakhic decision-making rooted in a generous vision of humanity and of Judaism's place within it.

Chief Rabbi Professor
Jonathan Sacks.