

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

by Marc B. Shapiro

Simcha Krauss

Abstract: An analysis of the biography of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, known as the *Sredei Eish*, who became a leader and halakhic authority for German Jewry in the first half of the 20th century. Shapiro explores R. Weinberg's intellectual and social struggle in attempting to synthesize traditional Orthodoxy with modern critical studies, liberal Judaism and Zionism.

Biography: Rabbi Simcha Krauss, a member of Edah's Board of Directors and *The Edah Journal* Editorial Board, teaches Talmud at Yeshiva University, is the spiritual leader of the Young Israel of Hillcrest Queens NY, and is President of the Religious Zionists of America.

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Reviewed by Simcha Krauss

We live in an age of sound-bytes. Newspaper headlines are considered too long. Since we are all in a rush, we invented the byte for brevity. To a certain degree, this development is positive. It saves time and energy. But it has a major drawback. When one talks or writes in bytes, there is no place for nuance and complexity. Only the bottom line is important.

This phenomenon is also true in the Jewish world. A tour of Jewish bookstores fills one with joy and gladness at the explosion of Jewish books, all of which are intended to “sell” Judaism. These books, however, are often on a grade school level. This is particularly true of biography—specifically biographies of Jewish leaders, *g’dolei yisrael*.

The flat, monochromatic image of our leaders conveys a distorted message. It suggests that the *gadol* was great, scholarly, pious and an outstanding leader, all without effort. It contends that there were no periods of growth, never a doubt and never a struggle. A perceptive observer, himself a *gadol*, articulated his response to contemporary standards for evaluating a *gadol*:

“...We are engaged only with the last summation of their standing. We retell their path to wholeness while skipping over the internal struggle that permeated their soul. When we speak of our *gedolim* we get the impression that they appeared from the

time they were created in their full stature... Everyone speaks, is excited and uses the Hafetz Hayim as a model for his purity of speech, but who knows of the wars, the struggles, the failures and steps backward that the Hafetz Hayim experienced in his struggle with the evil inclination?”¹

Marc Shapiro’s biography of Rav Jehiel Jacob Weinberg is a refreshing exception. In it Shapiro relates Rav Weinberg’s odyssey from Ciechanowieck to Berlin, via concentration camps, to Montreux, Switzerland, in all its complexity. Shapiro takes us along Rav Weinberg’s difficult, tragic and lonely life, revealing his inner world. We are privileged to an insider’s view of Rav Weinberg’s conflicts and tensions, his struggles, contradictions, defeats and successes. We get a true glimpse of the development of a *gadol*. For this alone, we would be indebted to Marc Shapiro.

Who was Rav Weinberg? Why is his message so resonant, especially to the segment of Orthodoxy that defines itself as Modern Orthodox?

Rav Weinberg, who studied in Slobodka when it was at its zenith, was first and foremost an outstanding Rav, *posek* and Lithuanian style *lamdan*. Yet he was also at home in the modern world of “critical” and “scientific” Jewish studies.

¹ *Pabad Yitzhak, Igrot Uketavim, Mori V’rabi Harav Yitzhak Hutner, z’tl*, p.217.

He eventually settled in Germany where he began his studies at the University of Giesen, and after completing the course requirements became a member of its faculty. In 1924, he joined the faculty of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin. Just before the outbreak of World War II, he was expelled from Germany, incarcerated in the Warsaw Ghetto and transferred to a German prison, surviving miraculously. Thanks to efforts of his student, Saul Weingort, he settled in Montreux Switzerland in 1946, where he spent the rest of his life.

His mastery of Jewish sources was combined with a comprehensive knowledge of secular learning, a unique synthesis for a Lithuanian *lamdan*. He wrote and spoke in Hebrew to Hebrew speaking audiences.

After he became Rector of the Seminary during his stay in Berlin, he was essentially the *poseq* of German Jewry. He wrote extensively, yet tragically most of his writings were lost during the Shoa. Fortunately he gave his student, Eliezer Berkovits, a manuscript of his responsa before he left Germany. This was published after the war, under the title, *Seridei Esh*, and became his best-known work. Among his other books are *Lifraqim*, *Et Abai Anokhi Mevaqesh*, and *Hidushei Ba'al Seridei Esh*.

Shapiro takes us along Rav Weinberg's difficult, tragic and lonely life, revealing his inner world.

Rav Weinberg's life (1884–1966) spans a period in which the Jewish community experienced cataclysmic changes. The Shoa and the establishment of *Medinat Yisrael* were the most obvious. Yet beginning with Emancipation, the Jewish community in Europe was buffeted by ideas and ideologies that questioned the very axiologies of the traditional Jewish world. If, as Peter Berger says, modernity means having options and choices, then we can say that the pre-Shoa Jewish community was given a wide array of choices—many of which were marked by the rejection of religious observance and traditional values. The breakdown of the ghetto walls threatened the relative spiritual

safety of the past insular society. Socialism, Bundism, and an increasingly aggressive secularism questioned the behavioral norms and values of traditional Judaism. Zionism, in all its manifestations, challenged the passivity of the Jewish community. Finally, as society became more open, schools and universities challenged the educational foundations of the Jewish community.

The points of conflict that were the “live” issues within Orthodoxy at that time have yet to be solved. Today's Orthodox community still grapples with the issues of the relationship of Orthodoxy to contemporary culture, the relationship of Orthodoxy to political Zionism, and the relationship of Orthodoxy to heterodox movements as well as to the non-Jewish world.

In these areas of the Orthodox divide, the “*yeshiva* world” took the position that no change to the *status quo* was valid and that any accommodation with modernity would lead to irreversible severance from tradition. Hence, secular studies were banned in all *yeshivot*. When Rav Reines, a respected Torah scholar and the founder of Mizrachi, started a *yeshivah* that included secular studies in its curriculum, he was isolated from the *yeshivah* world. In an article eulogizing Rav Isaac Jacob Reines (1915), Rav Weinberg seemed torn. On the one hand, he notes Rav Reines' sheer greatness in Torah should have been sufficient reason for *g'dolei yisrael* not to isolate him. On the other hand, Rav Weinberg's loyalty to the leaders of the *yeshivah* world, i.e. “the *geonim* and the old *tsadikim* who carry on their weak backs the spiritual loads of the Jewish people”, initially caused him to withhold his own imprimatur from this new style *yeshivah*. As Shapiro shows, Rav Weinberg has eventually embraced Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's position of ‘*Torah im derekh erez*.’ He became its defender and champion, a position he articulated in an address he delivered in memory of Rav Hanokh Ehrentrav, who according to Rav Weinberg best exemplified the ‘*Torah im derekh erez*’ model.

Rav Weinberg explained that the synthesis between the Jewish and the secular was more than a technical

accommodation such as wearing a “*shabbos belt*” to carry keys on *shabbat*. It meant, rather, the synthesis of all aspects of life and human experience. This entails struggle, he claimed, but all truly great ideas in science, philosophy and culture have a tragic element: the confrontation between the old wisdom and the new insight. Here Orthodoxy is no exception. Indeed, true Orthodoxy is about the balancing of modernity and tradition.

In another context, Rav Weinberg said:

“If it were, G-d forbid, as the opponents of secular education say, it would be a disgrace for the ‘wise and understanding nation’ that it is not able to simultaneously digest belief and secular education, while other peoples with their foolish beliefs can do so. The Catholics, *le-havdil*, have professors, intellectuals, researchers and great scientists, and they are strong believers and defend their religion with all the weapons of modern philosophy...I am afraid that this fear of secular studies will lead, G-d 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—with a little grammar, geography, history, mathematics?” (quoted in book under review, pp.179–180)

This balance of tradition with modernity and the struggle it takes to remain honest to both, also expressed themselves in the area of Jewish and non-Jewish relationships. As Marc Shapiro brilliantly shows, Rav Weinberg was unique among *g’dolei yisrael* in his friendships with non-Jews.

One such friendship was with Professor Paul Kahle, a Semitic and Masoretic scholar who was Rav Weinberg’s teacher and mentor at the University of Giesen. Kahle noted Rav Weinberg’s great talent and this relationship soon developed into a lifelong friendship. Indeed, when Kahle’s wife died, Rav Weinberg wrote the following letter:

“As often as I had the opportunity to meet her, I was strongly impressed by her deep religiosity, her modest demeanor, and her sure judgment—spiritual strengths which make a woman strong and great. Besides its tragic character for her own family, this death of a noble, pious Christian woman also possesses a historically devastating aspect. She was one of the few German women, perhaps even the only one, who found the courage to oppose the overpowering might of the criminal usurpers when it came to standing up for the innocents being persecuted. In the Israeli papers this heroic act of a German woman was lauded as praiseworthy, and I am convinced that many among us keep her in grateful memory.” (quoted in book under review, p.183)

Rav Weinberg’s attitude to non-Jews, however, was even stronger. As a survivor of the Holocaust, he personally experienced the evil that results from intolerance and hatred. In a letter written “with the blood of my heart, the blood of my soul” to his (Reform) friend Professor Samuel Atlas, he wrote the following:

“The entire world hates us. We assume that this hatred is due to the wickedness of the nations, and no one stops to think that perhaps we also bear some guilt. We regard all the nations as similar to an ass. It is forbidden to save a gentile, it is forbidden to offer him free medical treatment, it is forbidden to violate the sabbath to save his life, his sexual intercourse does not render a woman forbidden to her husband according to R. Tam because their issue is like the issue of horses. Can the nations resign themselves to such a deprivation of rights? It is permitted to deceive a Gentile and cancel his debt as well as forbidden to return his lost object! What can we do? Can we uproot our Torah teaching with apologetic formulae or clever deceptions.”²

² “Scholars and Friends: Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg,” Marc B. Shapiro, *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, Vol. 7, 1997.

If Rav Weinberg found some “company” in his position vis-a-vis *‘Torah im derekh erez’*, I am quite certain that in the latter position concerning gentiles he was nearly alone.³

More in consonance with his peers, yet still sufficiently nuanced, was Rav Weinberg’s position on intra-Jewish relationships. Germany, after all, was the battleground of *Austrit vs. Einheit Gemeinde*. On this issue, Rav Samson R. Hirsch’s position of *Austrit*, carried the day. However, as Shapiro points out, even among those who officially took the position of *Austrit*, there were various interpretations. In Frankfurt Am Main, the Separatists were exceedingly zealous in guarding and maintaining their position. In Berlin, in contrast, even those who were formally Separatists cooperated more freely with the Liberal (Reform) communities.

While Rav Weinberg never articulated a formal position on this issue of separation, he served for a time as *Gemeinde* Rabbi, as did many of the graduates of the Hildesheiner Rabbinical seminary. He also served in the *Halakhah* Commission of *Vereinigung Traditionell-Gesetztreuer Rabbiner*, an organization many of whose members also belonged to the *Allgemeiner Rabbinerverband*, a group made up of both Orthodox and Reform rabbis.

While relatively liberal on the question of Orthodox Jews separating from heterodox Jews, Rav Weinberg was a strong opponent of the philosophy and ideology of Reform. He felt that the Reform movement was akin to Christianity and he did not consider their marriages and divorces to be valid. He refused to allow Reform rabbis to speak in Orthodox synagogues and questioned their conversions. Yet he had friendly and warm relationships with Reform leaders. In a letter to Professor Samuel Atlas he sarcastically wrote that a certain Reform rabbi created a *hilul Ha-Shem* because he was living proof that one can be

a fine and decent person without observing *halakhah*. Conversely many Orthodox Jews, who were punctilious in the observance of *halakhah*, were lacking in relations *bein adam lehavero*.

After the death of Leo Baeck and Israel Bettan, Rav Weinberg wrote, “Every great man who dies leaves a void. Who can replace Dr. Baeck? When they are alive, we criticize them and search for their faults, but when they die we feel that we have lost.”

His attitude to Reform may be summed up by paraphrasing Voltaire: “To Reform as Reform, nothing; to Reform as individuals, everything.”

The Shoa found Rav Weinberg totally unprepared. Even after *Kristallnacht*, when the Berlin Seminary was closed, Rav Weinberg expressed the hope that it would soon reopen. Only when he was expelled from Germany in 1939 did Rav Weinberg realize the magnitude of the upcoming tragedy.

R. Weinberg’s optimism regarding the Nazi regime was shared by many others. In October 1933, three “separatist” organizations sent a letter to Hitler in which they declared their loyalty to Germany, and stated that they shared some of the Nazi societal values, boasted of German Jewry’s contribution to the German army in the First World War and promised to work with Jewish communities the world over to stop the boycott of German products. Although Rabbi Weinberg was not a signatory to this letter, it was not because he felt differently about the Nazi regime. Rather, he sincerely felt that in such issues the Jewish community must act as a whole without separatist agendas.

The period 1933–1939 was a tragic one for German Jewry. The Nazi regime gave one of the first signals that it

³ On similar concerns voiced by the Me’iri and his views on the halakhic status of gentiles and Jewish obligations toward them, see Moshe Halbertal’s essay, “Possessed of Religion: Religious Tolerance in the Teachings of the Me’iri,” in this volume.—*Editor*

intended to implement its anti-Jewish platform by outlawing the traditional method of *shehitah*, which required the stunning of animals prior to slaughter.

This decree raised both halakhic and policy issues for the German Jewish community. First, does the stunning of animals render it unfit for kosher consumption? Secondly, even if there is a halakhic rationale for a lenient ruling, there is yet an issue of policy to be determined, i.e. the extent to which this leniency would galvanize the anti-*shehitah* forces in the rest of the European continent.

As the major *poseq* in Germany, Rabbi Weinberg took on the challenge. He did find a possibility for lenient ruling on this issue and began corresponding with the leading rabbis and *roshei yeshivah*, trying to elicit support for his position. (This correspondence to and from him makes up a large part of the first volume of *Seridei Esh*.) However, with all his energy expended to prove that his position for leniency in this case has halakhic validity, R. Weinberg failed to gain a consensus for his position. The leading rabbis and *roshei yeshivah* rejected his call for a lenient *psaq*. The reasons, Shapiro shows, were ‘meta-halakhic’ (Shapiro’s term), i.e. the decree might soon be rescinded, but the *heter* would remain. It also might endanger the position of *shehitah* in other countries. Although he believed he was right, R. Weinberg, acquiesced to the majority opinion.

This is characteristic of R. Weinberg methodology of *psaq*. On the theoretical level, he would be bold, courageous and creative. He was willing to be led by his creative instinct to the brink of his logical conclusions. In the final decision, however, he was guided by precedent, the opinions of earlier decisors and his peers whom he respected.

Yet there were exceptions to this rule. When asked by the leadership of Ezra, a youth movement, about the permissibility of men and women singing together, he answered in the affirmative. Many of his peers opposed him but R. Weinberg stood his ground. Likewise, his lenient position regarding *b’not mitzvah* was not shared by his peers.

R. Weinberg often dealt with difficult halakhic problems. Many of them are still unresolved, such as the issue of *agunot*, of conditional marriages, and medical *halakhah*. In dealing with all these problems he appears to use a consistent methodology. He believed that a lenient position could be taken—or at least defended—on the basis of a theoretical breakthrough. Yet he literally “feared” to decide a case leniently; indeed it was more than “fear.” In a particular *she’elah*, he exclaimed that that though he knows his position to be justified, how could he rule against Rav Yitzchack Elchanon Spektor or the Noda B’Yehuda? He was truly conflicted, yet in the end his fidelity to precedent carried the day.

While relatively liberal on the question of Orthodox Jews separating from heterodox Jews, Rav Weinberg was a strong opponent of the philosophy and ideology of Reform.

These conflicts accompanied him throughout his life. After the Shoa, R. Weinberg settled in Switzerland. The establishment of *Medinat Yisrael* was, to him, was an event unmatched in Jewish history. Only a person “whose heart is frozen,” he writes, will fail to be impressed by the return of Jews to their homeland and the new dynamism one witnesses in Israel.

Yet, here too the joy was tempered by conflict. This occurred on two levels. First, he foresaw the problems still with us today. The secular-religious *kulturkampf* and the issue of democracy vs. the Jewish character of the state. He agonized over these issues, believing that with good will these problems could be solved. He was afraid, however, that extremists on both the right and the left would torpedo any attempt at reconciliation.

Secondly, he was personally torn. Though living in Switzerland, Rav Weinberg received many offers to settle in Israel. The offers were as varied as was his personality. He could have accepted the position of *rosh yeshivah* in a traditional *yeshivah* or a professorship at Bar Ilan University. He also had an offer to found a new

Rabbinical Seminary in Israel built on the model of the Hildesheimer Seminary in Berlin.

None of these options were realized. R. Weinberg felt, as Marc Shapiro shows, that by associating himself with a university he would become isolated from the *yeshivah* world. By accepting a position as a *rosh yeshivah*, he was certain to be isolated from the academic world. In sum, the “normalcy” he enjoyed in Berlin by straddling both worlds without having to choose between them was a luxury he could not duplicate in Israel.

This tension accompanied R. Weinberg even in death. Shapiro begins his book with the following episode:

“On Tuesday, 25 January 1966, the coffin of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg left Jerusalem’s Sha’arei Tzedek Hospital, accompanied by a throng of people. It had been transported from Switzerland, where Weinberg had died the previous day. Among those accompanying the coffin to its final resting-place were many of Weinberg’s students, as well as a large number of religious and political leaders, including the country’s chief rabbis, government ministers, and President Zalman Shazar. As Weinberg’s coffin was about to

be placed in the hearse that was to take it to the cemetery in the Sanhedria district of Jerusalem, a number of *yeshivah* students intervened. They insisted, in accordance with Jerusalem custom, that the coffin be carried to the cemetery. After a short discussion the students had their way. A few minutes later, as the funeral procession made its way on foot to the cemetery, it was met by a number of rabbis led by Weinberg’s close friend Rabbi Ezekiel Sarne, head of the Hebron-Slobodka *Yeshivah*. Sarne ordered the students carrying the coffin to proceed to the cemetery on Har Hamenuhot. Many great Torah scholars are buried in this cemetery, and Sarne and his colleagues were adamant that Weinberg be laid to rest beside them. An argument ensued on the road, and Sarne emerged victorious. Once again the funeral plans were altered.”

He died as he lived—with conflict. Perhaps this is the meaning of, “*Tsadiqim ein lahem menuha bein b’olam ha-zeh bein b’olam ha-bah, sh’nemar, Yelkhu mehayil el hayil.*”

We are indebted to Marc Shapiro for his brilliant work that brings to life this major halakhic personality.