

***RABBI SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH
TO LIEPMAN PHILIP PRINS OF
AMSTERDAM:
AN 1873 RESPONSUM ON EDUCA-
TION***

Translated and Introduced by David
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Biography: David Ellenson is President and Professor of Jewish Religious Thought at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. He has served as a Visiting Professor at Hebrew University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. He is author of *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer And The Creation Of A Modern Jewish Orthodoxy*.

Abstract: Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch submits his legal opinion regarding the obligation of communal benefactors to provide their children with substantive Torah education.



RABBI SAMSON RAPHAEL HIRSCH TO LIEPMAN PHILIP PRINS OF AMSTERDAM: AN 1873 RESPONSUM ON EDUCATION

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Sociologists of religion have routinely noted that the term "secularization" has provided a powerful ideal type for analyzing and illuminating the course and direction of personal and communal religious life in the modern Occident. In employing this term, sociologists do not contend that religion disappears from modern life. Rather, they utilize this notion to indicate that, in the modern setting, religion comes to be confined to ever more discrete precincts. Areas of life that were formerly under the sway of religious imperatives and sensibilities no longer are, and most individuals, and the communities to which they belong, are no longer guided in these areas by traditional religious norms and values. In such a setting, religion increasingly comes to be compartmentalized and restricted. People belong to multiple cultural worlds, and there are often great differences between the values and norms that mark those worlds. In such a situation, the dissonance between the values advanced in the formal educational institutions of a traditional religious community and the values that obtain in other sectors of society to which the religious individual is exposed is often quite pronounced. For these reasons, the modern situation often makes it difficult for traditional religions to maintain themselves and transmit a holistic heritage to future generations.

Such considerations provide a significant framework of analysis for the responsum by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) that is presented in this article. Rabbi

Hirsch was acutely aware of these matters, and the viewpoints he advanced in this responsum show that he was fully appreciative of the heavy and unique burden the modern setting imposed upon the Jewish school as a transmitter of Jewish values and identity. Rabbi Hirsch is of course famed as the foremost proponent of the "*Torah 'im derekh erets*" philosophy that spawned "Modern Orthodox Judaism." A brilliant ideologue as well as a charismatic figure who served as the rabbi of the *Israelitische Religionsgesellschaft* in Frankfurt from 1851 until his death, Rabbi Hirsch was convinced that traditional Jewish observance and belief were compatible with modern western culture. A prolific author who wrote on a broad array of topics in a number of different literary genres, Rabbi Hirsch enjoyed unparalleled fame and prestige as the foremost leader of traditional Judaism in his time and place. His correspondence was vast, and Jews worldwide wrote to Rabbi Hirsch for his legal rulings and opinions on a wide array of topics.¹

Among these persons was the famed Amsterdam Orthodox philanthropist Liepman Philip Prins (1835-1915). Prins turned to Rabbi Hirsch more than once as he sought support and advice on Jewish public affairs in general and on behalf of the Jewish educational institutions he helped establish in particular. On one occasion, for example, Prins asked Rabbi Hirsch to provide the Orthodox Amsterdam community with a curricular model for the day school they were about to create.²

¹For a volume of his halakhic writings, see Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Shemesh Marpeh*.

²On Prins and his life and his writings, see *Liepman Philip Prins: His Scholarly Correspondence*, ed. Mayer Herskovics and Els Bendheim (Hoboken: Ktav, 1992) (Hebrew). For Prins's correspondence with Rabbi Hirsch on the matter of curriculum, see Letter 4 in Herskovics and Bendheim.

In the specific responsum presented in translation below, Prins posed a different educational question to Rabbi Hirsch. In this instance, he solicited Rabbi Hirsch's opinion as to the obligation Jewish tradition imposed upon wealthy and influential members of the community to provide their own children with a Torah education. Prins took it for granted that such people were required by tradition to maintain communal educational institutions for the offspring of less affluent as well as indigent Jews, and in this responsum Rabbi Hirsch explicitly agreed with this position and labeled such support for the children of the less affluent as "an act of loving kindness." But Prins clearly wanted to impress upon members of his own socio-economic class their personal responsibility to educate their own children in traditional Jewish texts and teachings, and he hoped that the viewpoint Rabbi Hirsch would express on this matter would aid him in this effort.³

The response Rabbi Hirsch provided Prins surely did not disappoint him. Indeed, the Hirsch responsum buoyed Prins's position and strengthened Prins's resolve to provide a meaningful Jewish education for the children of all Jews as well as his conviction that authentic Jewish instruction for the children of the well-to-do and powerful was particularly critical in the present-day era of modern Europe. After all, there was an overarching social-religious-intellectual cohesion that marked the Jewish world of medieval Europe. That world was not marked by the secularization of the modern situation. The values present in the Jewish home were consistent with those that obtained in the marketplace and the synagogue as well as in the formal educational institutions of the community. With the advent of the modern West, such cohesion—for the reasons put forth in the opening paragraph

of this article—no longer existed, and the children of the wealthy were even more exposed than other Jewish children to the lures of a non-Jewish world. Without a vibrant and vital Jewish education, these children and the aid they might one day provide for the Jewish people and Jewish life would disappear. In his responsum, Rabbi Hirsch therefore insisted that these wealthy and powerful individuals were required to provide for the Jewish education of their own children, and he assigned absolute priority to this obligation for the Torah education of the offspring of the affluent.

In adopting this stance, Rabbi Hirsch showed significant religious insight and sociological sagacity. The policy statement he put forth in this particular writing is of ongoing religious and sociological significance for committed modern Jews because the thoughts Rabbi Hirsch here put forth in his social context are reflective of our own world as well. He correctly pointed out the crucial role that education plays in fostering and transmitting Jewish values to each new generation of Jews. Rabbi Hirsch also underscored the unique role that Jewish schools were called upon to play in the differentiated setting of the modern world if Jewish continuity and teachings were to be maintained and passed on to a Jewish community that no longer enjoyed the political hegemony and cultural and religious cohesion that characterized European Jewish life in the Middle Ages. In the contemporary setting of the modern Occident, the Hirsch responsum remains of enduring worth as Jews continue to grapple with the challenges and burdens confronting formal Jewish education today. It is fitting that the thoughts Rabbi Hirsch expressed on this occasion be disseminated to wider audience through the translation that now follows.

³Ibid., Letter 5. This responsum can also be found in *Shemesh Marpeh*, no. 53.

A Letter From Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch of Frankfurt to the Honorable Liepman Philip Prins of Amsterdam

May 29, 1873

Your Excellency turned to me with the following question and requested an expression of my opinion on it— Is it the obligation of the leaders of a community among the people Israel, after they have provided for the Torah education of the children of the poor and the middle-income [members of the community], to do the same for the children of the well-to-do? Is this matter not important, if not to a greater extent, at least to the same extent as the concern for matters of the synagogue and other interests of the community?"

In connection with this, I am honored to respond:

The concern for the Torah education of all the youth of the community, with no distinction between rich and poor, is not only a portion of the obligations thrust upon the leaders of a community; rather, it stands, without doubt, in first place among their obligations, and other matters retreat before it. Leaders of a community who did not do everything in their power to see to it that all the children of the community, rich and poor, can study Torah as required, have failed to fulfill the obligation that they took upon themselves before God on a matter that is of supreme import and the greatest holiness.

The law of Torah obligates us, as well as those responsible for the administration of the affairs of a community, concerning the absolute importance of this matter on the basis of the following sources:

1) "Teachers for children are appointed in every city, and if any city does not have a teacher for children within it, a ban is pronounced upon the inhabitants of the city until they appoint a teacher for the young. And if they do not

make such an appointment, they are destroying the city, that is, they are undermining rather than sustaining the future existence of the city. For the world is sustained only by the breath of schoolchildren." (*Yoreh De'ah* 245:7.)

2) "Every father is obligated to hire a teacher for his son. Comment [by Rema]—and we compel him to hire a teacher for his son, and if he is not in the city and he has means, if it is possible to inform him, they inform him, and if not, his funds are expropriated and a teacher for his son is hired." (*Ibid.* 245:4.)

3) "The residents of a city compel one another jointly to hire a teacher for their children" (*Ibid.* 245:15).

From these laws it is absolutely clear that the Torah education of the children of the affluent is not a private concern of their parents alone. The Torah education of children is a public concern attached to the entire community. The wealthy members of a community have a mutual claim upon one another to arrange for a comprehensive Torah education for their children, making use of their fiscal resources. At the same time, they are obligated to be concerned about the Torah education of the children of the poor. According to the commentary of Rashi on *Nedarim* 81a, the phrase "take heed of the children of the poor" does not at all mean that we fulfill the obligation of concern for a Torah education through a specific program of study for the children of the poor. Rather, its sole intent is to protect the children of the poor from abandonment, "that it will not be trivial in our sight to teach them Torah." This caution receives double force in that it emphasizes that it is precisely from the children of the poor that great Torah

scholars frequently emerge.

Yet, without a doubt, the first obligation of the affluent and a commandment directed towards Heaven is the concern that the Torah education of their own children takes precedence over the education of the poor.

The commandment to teach Torah to their own children assails them at the start, as it is the first commandment of the father with respect to his son and his obligation to bequeath Torah to his sons after him. Indeed, the commandment to teach Torah to the children of the poor may be thrust upon them indirectly only through the commandment of *tsedaqah*. Thus, a Jewish law states unambiguously, "One is obligated to hire a teacher for his son to teach him. However, he is not obligated to hire for the son of his friend" (*Yoreh De'ah* 245:4).

Hence, the wealth of the affluent, from which tax money is taken for the needs of the community, is subject first and foremost to the Torah education of their own children, and only afterwards to the children of the poor. The leaders of the community who are called upon to administer the community and who are obligated according to Jewish law as explicated above to demand from the affluent father that he maintain Torah education from his wealth—it is incumbent upon them to use the funds of the wealthy first and foremost for the necessity of Torah education for the sons of the wealthy themselves and only afterwards for the children of the poor.

This and more. It is clear and obvious according to the law that the holiness of the house of study is greater than the sanctity of the synagogue, for in a time of need it is permissible to transform our synagogues into houses of study (*Orah Hayyim* 153:1), and in a time of emergency it is even permissible to sell our Torah scrolls if it is necessary for the maintenance of Torah education (*Yoreh De'ah* 270:1). From this, it is also evident that a concern for the Torah education of the children of the rich and poor alike is not only a matter comparable in importance to other affairs of the community; rather, the extent of its importance, its essentiality, and its urgency, exceeds all else. For the synagogues as well as all the other religious institutions of the community

will lose all their value and prestige, and the glory of our synagogues and our scrolls of Torah—their significance and content—will be reduced to objects of scorn and derision if we are not concerned with establishing schools which will raise our children to be faithful heart and soul to Judaism and to be sanctified in those synagogues for the sake of this Torah, in accord with all its statutes and judgments, from a state of understanding and enthusiasm, and for the sake of being servants of God in truth in the life of Israel, a life of Torah and commandments.

And that which has been true at all times has been elevated into a matter of unparalleled importance at the present moment. The holy concerns of Judaism will, God forbid, be abandoned completely if we do not succeed in arousing enthusiasm among the children of the affluent for Torah and worship, and if we do not raise them to become proper Jews. For they are those most exposed to the great temptations of the time, and they are likely to be the first who will be lost to the community of Israel if they do not acquire a broad knowledge through the spirit of an illuminating and exciting Torah. In this way, they will display an honor and an enthusiastic love that elevates the prestige of Torah, and they will not, from a lack of knowledge, distort and abandon her in life. The study of Torah alone will permit their rescue, and this will be only if the affluent members of our community and their children return and understand the honor that stems from being among those who are learned and who revere the Torah and those who study it. Then, members of our middle class as well will preserve their faith in God and His Torah, and the decisive influence upon our communities will be in the hands of those who are devoted in nobility and enthusiasm for the cause of Torah and its holiness.

In our day, concern for the Torah education of the poor is an act of loving kindness. However, the concern for the Torah education of the wealthy is an act of rescue for the sake of God and His Torah.

I hope that the leaders of your community succeed in this great act of rescue for your community. May God Extend his help and bestow blessing upon all the works of your hands.