

## *Torah im Derekh Eretz as a Means of Last Resort*

RABBI DR. SAMUEL GRUENBERG (1879-1959) was one of the intellectual leaders of German Orthodoxy in the years prior to World War II.<sup>1</sup> Born in Rumania, he received both a yeshiva as well as a secular education. He then traveled to Berlin where he studied at the Berlin Rabbinical Seminary, and later received his doctorate at the University of Giessen.<sup>2</sup> Gruenberg was appointed to the faculty of the Rabbinical Seminary where he taught Talmud, biblical literature, and Hebrew language. He was also a leader of the Mizrachi movement in Germany and the prime mover behind the 1930 founding of the international Shomrei Shabbat society.

Settling in Palestine in 1936, he was one of the founders of Yeshivat Torah u-Melakhah in Petah Tikva and he would later become head of the Religious Council in Tel Aviv. In 1945 Gruenberg published a volume of biblical studies, *Li-Feshuto shel Mikra*. Among other intellectual achievements, he co-authored a German-Hebrew, Hebrew-German dictionary and translated R. David Zvi Hoffmann's classic study of the Mishnah, *Die erste Mischna und die Controversen der Tannaim* into Hebrew.<sup>3</sup>

Gruenberg's 1929 essay, offered here in translation, is part of my continuing efforts to make important *Torah im Derekh Eretz* writings available to the English-speaking world.<sup>4</sup> What makes this essay significant is its argument that while Hirschian *Torah im Derekh Eretz* is necessary in modern times for those Jews living in Europe, it must be viewed as a necessary means of last resort rather than a desired state of affairs. Yet just as significant is Gruenberg's conclusion that all of the negative aspects of *Torah im Derekh Eretz* are tied to the Diaspora and its non-Jewish cultural surroundings. However, the Land of Israel, with its reborn Jewish community, is for Gruenberg the perfect place for the creation of a true *Torah im Derekh Eretz* community, one that will be Jewish in both content and form.

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## SAMUEL GRUENBERG

*Towards an Evaluation of the  
Orthodox Educational Methods*

*Ha-Hed* recently published two articles<sup>5</sup> dealing with the German Orthodox educational method known as *Torah im Derekh Eretz*. One side praises it and says that this method is very good, “tried and proven,” and full of blessing. “By participating in the cultural-intellectual life of the [Gentile] nations we have been enriched with a number of noble values.” The other side speaks negatively about this method and about European culture, and points to the damage caused by the latter. The first side thinks that we must relate to the above-mentioned method [*Torah im Derekh Eretz*] not out of necessity, but rather out of love as a positive commandment. The other side proclaims: “This viewpoint is ‘death in the pot’ [cf. 2 Kings 4:40]! Turn away from it and do not come near! Return to the *hadarim* [pl. of *heder*] and the yeshivot! All who remove themselves from them [the *hadarim* and yeshivot] it is as if they remove themselves from the Torah.”

The educational question among us did not arise yesterday. More than a hundred years have passed since its presence was felt in the Jewish street. Much has been written on it, and there have been many disputes. Without involving ourselves with the various disagreements in *Ha-Hed*, from either side, we must say that in our opinion this is not the way to dispute about this difficult issue. It is not correct to ask which approach is better, this one or that. Rather, *at present* we should formulate the question as follows: Which approach is *possible*? What are the prospects [of success] for each one? For only from the standpoint of *possibility* can we analyze and clarify the matter. A short glance at history will show us how matters developed, the conclusions we can derive from the past, and the relationship that we must establish between ourselves and the two methods [of education] on the one hand, and how to evaluate and relate to European culture on the other.

It is well known that until the era of the French Revolution (1793 [!]) Jewish education was very simple. The Jew was regarded by the Gentiles among whom he lived as a contemptible good-for-nothing. (The Golden Age of Arabic Spain is many hundreds of years removed from us and there is no need to include it in our review). The Jew did not have anything to do with the Gentile surroundings. He was a dangling limb in the midst of society and state, both of which were explicitly Christian. The Jew made a meager living

from small trade, primitive labor, money lending, and similar pursuits. Due to state and societal compulsion he had to be satisfied with a life of abject poverty. It was enough that he was alive, even if his life was very difficult. Since the external circumstances were so hard, he sought and found his spiritual fulfillment by educating his children in the Torah, which alone was his enjoyment in life and in it he found everything. As great as the disdain from his enemies and oppressors, so too grew his own disdain for them. The poor and despised Jew regarded his life as the most exalted, the most ethical, and the most excellent. The vulgar and insolent Gentile surroundings were not able to influence him in any noticeable way. There were, to be sure, in every generation individuals who abandoned the life of their people. They also made light of our spiritual values and qualities, and longed for either the action and freedom beyond the walls of the Jewish street, or for the ideas of non-Jewish intellectuals. However, their number was always relatively very small, and no one regarded those who broke with the community as a danger to the customary method of Jewish education, or to the traditional Jewish culture that was ingrained throughout the nation.

But then the French Revolution occurred, bringing in its wake what were almost new structures of life. At this time, equality, fraternity, and liberty were proclaimed. It was also then that the enlightened [Gentile] neighbors began in small measure to relate to the Jews as people just like them. From one side they gave the Jews the option to change the conditions of their lives for the better, while on the other side they placed upon them obligations of citizenship. At this time, the great change happened in the education of Jewish children, marking the birth of the question of education. Knowledge gained from the *heder* and *yeshiva* was no longer sufficient for the Jew who entered the [wider] society and state. Not only were the ways of his life forced to change, but also his preparation for earning a living. In order to be a merchant going from village to village, a middle-man in town, a primitive craftsman, *heder* teacher, blood-letter or “doctor” on the Jewish street, one did not have to study European languages, have [academic] knowledge in business and technology, or know about sciences and universities. But the new economic and cultural possibilities that the Jew received in the new era required approaches to education and acquisition of knowledge that differed from those offered in the *hadarim* and *yeshivot*. Later, civil laws were instituted that *required* the Jew to leave his four cubits and to enter into the larger world against his will, for example, by being drafted into the army. This law apparently came about due to civic egalitarianism. However, our fathers understood that a young Jewish man, a product of the *yeshiva*, whose ears

had never heard a coarse expression in his life, and whose eyes had only looked into holy books, would now enter an environment destructive of moral standards, and what he would hear, woe to the ears that hear this, and what he would see, woe to the eyes that see this! Consequently, through this the Jewish character would lose its glory, essence, and purity, which indeed happened to an even greater extent than had been feared by the holy and pure fathers and mothers. Our entire structure of life was thus changed, and with it the structure of education.

“Haskalah” was the magic word for that generation that went in search of personal freedom. It was not simply Haskalah on account of a world outlook and idealistic vision, but Haskalah as a bridge and path to a new and expansive life that came effortlessly to that generation. The Jews were given freedom first in Western Europe, and that is why *it was there that the question of education first arose*.

From this time a new historical phenomenon begins, which was unlike anything in previous generations: The battle of the older and the younger generations. The older generation was used to its way of life, which was also the way of life of its fathers, and wished to keep this tradition in all particulars. The younger people, who were drawn by the new possibilities for both a more productive life and also to be more respected among the general population, hastened their path by chopping not simply at the branches of Judaism but also at its roots. Thus, the war spread, and as the war intensified due to *conditions of life* that assisted the younger generation, people no longer understood each other. The older people said: “It is impossible to compromise, it is forbidden! The Jewish child needs a complete Jewish education just like our forefathers.” They understood and felt that a compromise with the conditions of life would weaken Judaism and damage it, and on occasion even be the cause of its death. But the new circumstances, which Judaism had never before confronted since the time it first went into exile, did not reverse themselves because of the reproach of the elders. The baser elements triumphed over the nobler ones, those affirming “life” over those who negated it, with obvious results.

However, when the cry encompassed the entire Jewish community of Western Europe and the danger of assimilation increased frightfully, a few superbly talented *gedolei Yisrael* arose. These men had pure Jewish hearts, great piety, knowledge of Torah, were at home with high European culture, and with all this a penetrating and wide-ranging vision that enabled them to understand the reason for the great crisis and from where the danger drew its strength. They were the ones who awakened and stood in the breach, begin-

ning the work of a new education, and a new blending, in accordance with the method of *Torah im Derekh Eretz*. This method is based on coming to terms with the reality of life and its inescapable demands. They certainly wanted, based on the historical idealistic Jewish outlook, to hold onto the view of R. Simeon ben Yohai. But they recognized that those who do so in contemporary times will not be successful. Therefore, they adopted the position of R. Yishmael (*Berakhot* 35b)<sup>6</sup> and created the motto of "*Torah ve-Derekh Eretz*."<sup>7</sup> They undoubtedly knew that this approach is not preferable, and is not the best for the spreading of Torah and bringing about a flowering of Judaism. They certainly understood that we would rather be able to educate our children in a completely Jewish fashion, and in a way that the limited general knowledge that Jews also long for could be taught in a purely Jewish environment, just as our forefathers did for generations. Yet they understood the new situation, and they realized that this aspiration is an ideal only for *exceptional people*, and that in contemporary circumstances it is impossible for the *general population*. They saw the educational method of "*Torah ve-Derekh Eretz*" as a necessity, which while having negative aspects and dangers attached to it, provided some slight relief. In the emergency situation we are confronted with, we must save that which we can, and the meager anchor available for this was the method of "*Torah ve-Derekh Eretz*."

Some of them also attempted to see the good in European culture, which we can now no longer avoid, and felt that we should *attempt to make use of it for our benefit*. But the way history developed proved to us that this was a false hope. European culture brought pain to every good aspect [of our lives] and increased spiritual waste like no other. To be sure, we cannot swim against the current. We are not able to free ourselves from the effects of European culture. But every sensitive Jewish soul must recognize and admit that this foreign culture, even the truly positive found in it, does not strengthen our Jewish consciousness. It also does not offer assistance in difficult times to triumph over the anti-religious forces that have arisen among us. Yet this very culture is what captures the hearts of the Jews and pours upon them a spirit of dizziness, the spirit of our time and of our Gentile neighbors. It drives them out of the Jewish world and away from Jewish hopes and aspirations. Only with great difficulty do the overwhelming majority of those educated in this culture retain a *measure* of their Judaism, and it too is lacking and defective. What they retain is only due to the essential strength that is found in our religion and due to the promise of God that the Eternal One of Israel will not lie [cf. 1 Sam. 15:29]. We must admit that among Torah observant Jews, there is a great distance in Jewish understanding, Jewish completeness, Jewish puri-

ty, and Jewish living between those educated in the *heder* and yeshiva and those raised with European culture and educated in the schools—even those schools operating with the “*Torah ve-Derekh Eretz*” method. We must admit that European culture negates and destroys Judaism, but there is no way to avoid this difficulty. From the standpoint of the truly refined and traditional Judaism, happy is he who doesn’t have to confront it [European culture]!

In the conditions of contemporary life, which I see no need to recount in detail as they are many, the approach of “*Torah ve-Derekh Eretz*” is the method that is suitable and proper for *the masses*. What I mean by this is if we desire that Jewish children in their multitudes will grow up as Jews, despite the conditions of contemporary life, we have no other method than “*Torah ve-Derekh Eretz*.” As mentioned, this will raise up Jews whose Torah knowledge and Judaism is weak and very superficial, because the few hours that can be given in this method to Jewish studies are not able to provide the young children with the strong influence that was found in the *hadarim* and yeshivot. The desired blending often spoken about has really not yet been found. Furthermore, the influence of popular literature, newspapers, and society is very damaging and wipes out the national consciousness and feeling, so that it is possible even in extremely Orthodox households to raise children to be Germans of the Mosaic persuasion and French of the Mosaic persuasion. However, we cannot change the functions of life and its direction. We must not delude ourselves with a false hope that we can change matters and bring the masses of Jews back to the yeshivot and their way of learning, much as we acknowledge that they educate [pupils] to become fully Jewish. The people will not listen to us, even if we prove the value of the yeshiva and the negative aspects of the schools when it comes to the survival of Judaism. Life moves on, and due to this we see the decline of the yeshivot and the turn to irreligiosity of some who are yeshiva educated when they go out into the world. Conditions of life, economic and cultural, have conquered the entire world. We therefore say that the educational approach of the *hadarim* and the yeshivot is only possible for a *few individuals* and in exceptional circumstances. We strongly hope that in every generation and in all conditions of life there will be those special cases, idealists, complete Jews, who will study the Torah *li-shemah*, disdain all the hindrances of life, and completely devote themselves to Torah study. They will be the ones who guard and carry the Torah and its spirit, the guardians of complete Judaism and observers in the traditional fashion. But throughout the Diaspora, these special people will be few. Only through a correct evaluation of the circumstances will we know how to guard our existence as a chosen people, a people of the Torah and

mitzvot, and know how to defend our independence and Jewish character.

Let us summarize: The method of "*Torah im Derekh Eretz*," which still needs to be improved from top to bottom, is for *the masses* the method that is *possible*. The old educational approach of the *heder* and the *yeshiva* is today only possible with *a limited number and with small groups*. To tell the truth, the first approach [*Torah im Derekh Eretz*] is lacking and defective, but *it is the result of the current conditions of life that we cannot change*, in particular, when it comes to general and cultural life. It guarantees us "a minimum" of Torah and Judaism. The second approach [that of the *yeshivot*], which is the tradition of thousands of years and which raised up all of our great Torah sages and *tzaddikim*, indeed raises complete Jews, but the battle for it is on all fronts, and only an elite few still remain attached to this approach after coming into contact with modern life.

We are currently dealing with a necessity [*Torah im Derekh Eretz*], which although not to be condemned can also not be lauded. Anyone who cares about the fate of *authentic* traditional Judaism, as is still found in Eastern Europe, should carefully examine matters as they really are, without any whitewashing. Only then will he understand that one must not be satisfied with the meager measure that, due to necessity, has been and continues to be provided through the method of *Torah im Derekh Eretz*. General culture has brought us knowledge but not values! The advocates [of *Torah im Derekh Eretz*] will also acknowledge that even from their perspective this method is "choosing the lesser evil."<sup>8</sup> Would that more follow in its path [*Torah im Derekh Eretz*] rather than the path of general European education, in which today more and more young Jews are being educated, whether out of compulsion or of free will.

Today we cannot give up on either of the two methods [of education], but must recognize their place and their strengths. For what happened in Western Europe in the previous century is repeating itself at present in every Jewish center, be it in Eastern Europe, the Land of Israel, and needless to say across the sea in the great America and its environs.

In conclusion, one more point: Happily, we live in an era that is seeing the creation of a new Jewish center in the land of our forefathers, the Land of Israel. Therefore, in evaluating methods of education we need to distinguish between the Land of Israel and the Diaspora. Here, in a foreign environment where we are hitched to the norms of life matching those of the leaders of the land, we cannot hope for greatness to come out of the method of "*Torah im Derekh Eretz*." This is not the case for the Land of Israel. In the independent Jewish center that is arising, there is the possibility that also this

method will bear admirable fruit. There the land is Jewish, the environment is Jewish, the organization of the community is Jewish, and the life on the street and its conditions are Jewish. There it is possible that all the knowledge that a Jewish child learns in school will have a Jewish form. There it is possible to provide a larger measure of Torah and Jewish knowledge, love of Torah, and love of Israel. And there the popular Jewish elements will slowly arise that will be able to strengthen the position and spirit of Judaism against European culture and its influence. There it is possible that the “synthesis” of “*Torah im Derekh Eretz*” that we are seeking, and which is impossible to find here in the Exile, will be born. However, we must also support yeshivot there, from which Torah will go forth in a more significant way than what the [modern] schools with their curricula are able to give to their students.

## NOTES

1. Biographical information on Gruenberg is found in *Areshet* 2 (1960), 430-431.
2. His dissertation was published as *Die weisen Sprüche des Achikar nach der syrischen Hs. Cod Sachau Nr. 33 der Kgl. Bibliothek in Berlin herausgegeben und bearbeitet* (Berlin, 1917).
3. *Ha-Mishnah ha-Rishonah u-Felugta de-Tanai* (Berlin, 1913).
4. Gruenberg's essay originally appeared in *Ha-Hed* 4 (Shevat 5689 [1929]), 1-4. I previously published “Rabbi David Zevi Hoffmann on Torah and Wissenschaft,” *Torah u-Madda Journal* 6 (1995-1996), 129-137; “Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer's Program of Torah u-Madda,” *ibid.* 9 (2000), 76-86; “*Torah im Derekh Eretz* in the Shadow of Hitler,” *Torah u-Madda Journal* 14 (2006-2007), 84-96; “Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Friedrich von Schiller,” *Torah u-Madda Journal* 15 (2008-2009), 172-187.
5. From the *Admor* of Lubavitch and R. Dr. Moses Auerbach [see *Ha-Hed*, Av 5688, Sivan 5688].
6. [*Berakhot* 35b records the positions of R. Ishmael, that one must combine Torah study with an occupation, and R. Simeon ben Yohai, that one should devote himself to Torah study alone. Gruenberg's description in this paragraph reflects the approach of R. Esriel Hildesheimer rather than the outlook of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch. Contrary to Gruenberg, Hirsch did not regard the educational method of *Torah im Derekh Eretz* as a concession brought about by the problems of modern times. Regarding Hildesheimer's view (which is not without ambiguities), see my *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy* (London, 1999), 76 n. 2.]
7. Gruenberg alternates between the phrases *Torah im Derekh Eretz* and *Torah ve-Derekh Eretz*.
8. The sentence is ambiguous and its meaning might be that even the opponents of *Torah im Derekh Eretz* will acknowledge that this is “the lesser evil.”