YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**GREAT BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS**

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**Lecture #25:**

**R. Hirsch**

1. **Introduction — The New Era**

The new era presented new interpretive challenges for Jewish biblical exegetes. Due to the Enlightenment, which began at the end of the 17th century, and the Emancipation, which began at the end of the 18th century, the Jewish community in Europe underwent many changes during the 19th century. Jewish emancipation allowed Jews to leave the ghetto and to integrate in all of the domains of non-Jewish life, including culture, academia, and finance, fields which they had been barred from previously.

There is no doubt that the Emancipation brought much benefit to the Jews of Europe, who, for the first time in centuries, were able to speak of equal rights. At the same time, the Emancipation held within it an existential danger for the future of Judaism. The idea of the equal rights for European Jewry enchanted the Jews, some of whom wanted to give up the Jewish characteristics of religion, dress, language and Jewish community, in order to be fully equal to the rest of the population. Thus, for the first time since the period of Ezra, Orthodox Jewry had to compete with a widespread phenomenon of willing assimilation.

The Reform movement was a direct result of the Emancipation. At the beginning of the 19th century, the Jewish spin-off of the Enlightenment, the Haskalah, began; its adherents, the *Maskilim*, had the intent of emending the Jewish religion. These *Maskilim* saw abstract Jewish principles — monotheism and pure morality — as worth saving, but other fundamentals unique to Judaism (for example, practical commandments and characteristic dress) were seen as expressions of Jewish isolation and clannishness. Thus, they maintained, the modern Jew must give them up. (The distinction between abstract principles and practical commands is based on, apparently, Christian influence). In practice, these alterations were designed to uproot the national fundamentals of Judaism. Judaism was seen as a religious affiliation alone; those who believe in it were seen as having only a faith in common, without any national identity.

An additional phenomenon at this time was the appearance of biblical criticism. This view was developed by Baruch Spinoza at the end of the 17th century, and it acquired Jewish supporters in the 18th and 19th centuries. According to this view, the Torah was not given by God at Sinai; rather, the Pentateuch is a literary creation which was written in a later time than the era of the Torah, composed of the works of different authors in different periods. These literary creations were brought together, through the years and by later editors, into the Torah which we have in our time.[[1]](#footnote-1) The view of biblical criticism in the new era was considered the most enlightened view of understanding *Tanakh*, as opposed to the traditional view; naturally, it influenced one’s relationship to the fulfillment of Torah and *mitzvot* and the belief in a God-given Torah.

In the following lessons, we will look at the biblical commentators of the new era, and we will see how their commentaries are influenced by the phenomena we have mentioned: the Haskala, the Emancipation, the Reform movement, assimilation, and biblical criticism.

I have chosen to begin with the commentary of R. Shimshon ben Refael Hirsch. R. Hirsch is not the first of those opposed to these phenomena, but his commentary is one of the most prominent representatives of contending with the spirit of his generation. About R. Hirsch’s commentary, his great-grandson, R. Mordechai Breuer, *z”l*, writes the following:

One may say that, without any concern of exaggeration, R. Hirsch’s commentary on the Torah was, in its time and in its era, akin to Rashi’s commentary for the Jews of Germany. Men, women, and youths who wanted to study the weekly Torah portion would skip all of the classic Torah commentaries, including Rashi’s commentary, in order to study R. Hirsch’s commentary…

Below, we will attempt to clarify the singular nature of his commentary and to explain the firstborn status it earned in his generation.

1. **Biography**

R. Shimshon ben Refael Hirsch (1808-1888) was born in Hamburg, Germany. R. Hirsch studied in his youth in the Gymnasia of R. Yitzchak Bernays, Hamburg’s chief rabbi, and he was greatly influenced by him. R. Yitzchak Bernays had a modern approach, and he was interested in general philosophy. On the other hand, he was one of the great warriors against the Reform movement. His student, R. Hirsch, also followed this approach, integrating secular and religious studies while struggling against Reform Judaism. While engaged in his studies, R. Hirsch also worked as a clerk in a commercial enterprise.

At the age of twenty, R. Hirsch travelled to the yeshiva of R. Yaakov Ettlinger, one of the Torah greats of that period, and after two-and-a-half years of study, he received his ordination. In the year 1829, R. Hirsch began studying in the University of Bonn, where he studied theology (apparently, he did not complete his studies there).

In 1830, with the retirement of the rabbi of Oldenburg, R. Hirsch was appointed rabbi of the city. The young age of the new rabbi (he was 22) testified to his great skill. A year after this, he sharply polemicized against Reform leaders and against biblical critics.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It was during this time that he composed his famous book *Horeb*, in which he explained with scientific tools that serving God according to the Torah is not old-fashioned, and he published his famous *Nineteen Letters on Judaism*. Both of these were written in German (the latter as *Neunzehn Briefe über Judenthum).*[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the year 1841, he left Oldenburg and moved to Emden for six years. In Emden, he continued his polemical activities against the Reform movement, using the slogan: “Truth lasts, but falsehood does not.” He dealt at length with education and social welfare.

In the year 1847, he became the rabbi of Nikolsburg. His appointment as rabbi was something of a compromise: the *Maskilim* accepted him as the most “enlightened” rabbi whom they could appoint, and the Charedi[[4]](#footnote-4) community accepted him as the most “traditional” rabbi whom they could succeed in appointing. The result was that the two sides accepted this as the least objectionable option, and his time in this office was characterized by a series of polemical exchanges with both Charedi and Reform elements.

In the year 1850, eleven Orthodox families in Frankfurt am Main received the license to establish a separate congregation with its own rabbi, because of the dominance of the *Maskilim* in the city. This congregation identified itself as Adat Yeshurun. R. Hirsch decided to leave his well-established post for this tiny community, the members of which had a worldview similar to his own. His success in this community was massive — many joined his community within a short amount of time, and similar congregations were established in different cities all over Germany.[[5]](#footnote-5) This, in fact, was the beginning of the movement known as Neo-Orthodoxy.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In Frankfurt, R. Hirsh wrote his commentary on and translation of the Pentateuch in German,[[7]](#footnote-7) and he also composed a commentary on the *Siddur* and the Book of *Tehillim*. His Torah commentary, as we shall see below, was influenced greatly by processes in the Jewish community in the 19th century. In addition, R. Hirsch tried to update and rejuvenate traditional Orthodoxy: the synagogue was built in glory and great splendor, featuring an all-male choir; for ritual slaughter, they were careful about rules of hygiene. The most significant innovation was in the high school he headed, where secular and religious studies were integrated. In this school, which he led himself, the ideal was to educate students who would embody “*Torah im derekh eretz*,” “Torah with the way of the world.”

**C. Aim of the Commentary**

In his introduction, R. Hirsch explains the aim of writing his commentary on the Torah:

I seek to explain the biblical verses on their own, to draw this explanation from the literal expression through all of its facets, to pull the explanation of the words from the treasury of the language of the Holy Writ, to draw and to describe by way of linguistic research. I will draw from the traditions of law and lore, which have been transmitted to us from the days of our predecessors, together with the biblical text, those truths upon which is based the worldview of Jewish life. These they are the laws of Israel’s life forever and ever — behold, this is the burden of his soul of the author, and so long as he does not miss the target totally in this commentary, then this author will not have worked for naught. He hopes to make some small contribution to recognizing the full unity of the spirit which reverberates through the Holy Writ of God’s word. Thereby, we may realize that this spirit is not the inheritance of days of yore, now obsolescent; rather, it lives with us in the present, and in it is the future hope of all human aspirations.

According to these words, the main aim of R. Hirsch is to draw from the Torah the worldview of Jewish life. For R. Hirsch, the aim of understanding the *peshat* is to comprehend the Jewish worldview that the Torah comes to teach. That is how the verses shape the spiritual world of each and every person. This aim stands at the center of R. Hirsch’s commentary.

**D. Educational Topics**

R. Hirsch, educator of the generation, expresses his view on many educational topics, and he explains the Torah in terms of the needs of the generation. In this framework, we will address only a minimal number of topics:

**Marriage**

In the verse which describes Yitzchak’s marriage to Rivka, “And Yitzchak brought her to the tent of Sara his mother, and he took Rivka, and she became his wife, and he loved her…” (*Bereishit* 24:67), R. Hirsch points out that the order of the actions in the verse seems unusual — first, “And he took,” then “And he loved her”:

The more she was his wife, the more his love grew! The marriage of the first Jewish son is exemplary, and this is how the marriage was established. Most Jewish marriages are based not on lust, but on the judgment of reason…

One need only peruse the novelistic descriptions taken from life in order to immediately establish how great the gap is between “love” before marriage and the same afterwards…

Not so is the Jewish marriage… for there the wedding is not the apex of blooming, but the taking root of love.

**Education**

The Torah describes the maturation of Yaakov and Esav in the following way: “And the youths grew up, and Esav was a man who knew hunting, a man of the field, and Yaakov was a simple man, dwelling in tents” (*Bereishit* 25:27). R. Hirsch tries to answer the question of how the son of Yitzchak and Rivka became the evil Esav. According to R. Hirsch, the main cause was the poor education which Yitzchak and Rivka gave to Esav:

As for the deep opposition between Avraham’s grandchildren, its essential source was not only in their personal qualities but also in their poor education. As long as they were small, they did not pay attention to their hidden inclinations. One Torah and one education were given to both of them, and they forgot a great principle of education: “Educate a youth according to his way” (*Mishlei* 22:6). We must direct the disciple in terms of the particular way which is most appropriate for him in the future, which accommodates the latent tendencies of the depth of his soul…

The great Jewish purpose is one and singular in its essence, but the ways of its realization are many and variegated…

R. Hirsch goes on to investigate the psychological explanation of Yitzchak’s love for Esav and Rivka’s love for Yaakov (*ibid*. v. 28):

Bearing in mind the power of attraction between opposites, we may understand easily Yitzchak’s love for Esav and Rivka’s love for Yaakov. Yitzchak, who was “a perfect offering,” kept quite distant from the bustle of the world, and he preferred the pleasant quiet of Be'er La-chai Ro'i in the place of teeming human society. It may be that he loved the characteristics of Esav, who was fearless and proud of his actions, seeing him as capable of leading the house with surpassing skill. On the other hand, Rivka saw Yaakov as the perfect character, very distant from all the concepts of her father’s house.

**E. R. Hirsch in the Age of Enlightenment**

As we said above, R. Hirsch sees in a positive light the era of the Enlightenment and the Emancipation, viewing it as an opportunity to perfect the world in the divine image. Concerning the social ideas which were developed in the new era, R. Hirsch claims that they are not new at all; the Torah originated them. An example of this is human equality: R. Hirsch sees the Emancipation as the phenomenon which could influence the Jews in a positive way, and it expresses the ideas which are already found in the Torah.[[8]](#footnote-8) In his commentary, we can find a number of examples of the idea of human equality and freedom. Thus, for example, in his commentary on one verse in the passage of the Binding of Yitzchak, “And the two of them went together” (*Bereishit* 22:19), R. Hirsch writes:

In other human societies, they would have done this differently. The experience was one of such elevation and closeness to God, exaltation of a sort beyond any terrestrial border. People such as Avraham and Yitzchak would have been wholly overcome by their own importance and by the matter of the divine. They would no longer have any connection to any issue of regular, terrestrial life or regular, terrestrial people…

However, Avraham and Yitzchak differed essentially from this, displaying the spirit of a wondrous nature transmitted through the generations. After they experience the utmost of any human being to walk the earth… there is no great degree of respect they accord themselves more than others. In the eyes of a son of Avraham, all people are equal in their occupation; he does not make any distinction between himself and the woodcutters or servants of a low status…

Another example of the spirit of the Emancipation is R. Hirsch’s defense of those commandments which apparently oppose the principle of sexual equality. For example, this is what he writes in his commentary to *Bereishit* 23:19:

Also, marrying a woman is learnt from the purchase of Efron’s field.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Jew acquires his wife — this is what a thoughtless time accuses us of. Verily and truly, he acquires his wife, but on the other hand, she remains his. She is honored as his greatest possession upon this earth…

In the passage of the Hebrew slave, R. Hirsch claims that this passage does not deny human freedom; rather, it comes to help the sinner. This is what he writes in his explanation of *Shemot* 21:6:

The Torah commands us to bring the sinner into the family…

Moreover, the Torah ordains a number of sets of guidelines to ensure that the status of the slave in the same family will be maintained. Thus, the ethical consciousness in the soul of the sinner will not be depressed, so that despite his low status, he will still feel that honor is accorded him and that they treat him with a custom of brotherhood…

How much inconvenience we subject the master to, in order to maintain the family ties of the servant, so that his family will not be abandoned to sorrow and sighing as a result of his sin…

R. Hirsch continues to explain why the punishment of the Hebrew slave is more enlightened and ethical than the accepted punishment of incarceration:

The punishment of imprisonment — with its attendant loss of hope and corruption of morals, residing behind the walls of the prison, with all the sorrow and sighing it brings the prisoner’s wife and children — **it has no place in God’s Torah**.

Another example of R. Hirsch’s relationship to contemporary issues is his opposition to Reform Jews.[[10]](#footnote-10) In *Bereishit* 18:19, the verse describes the destiny of Avraham’s descendants: “to keep the way of God, to do righteousness and justice.” R. Hirsch relates to the fact that the Torah first mentions, “to keep the way of God,” and only afterwards, “to do righteousness and justice”:

Why does “to keep the way of God” appear first and “to do righteousness and justice” afterwards?

Walking with God in the way of the ethical purity; this is the condition and root of relations of justice and rectitude with all creatures. Only a generation conceived, born and raised in the bosom of laws, illuminated and enlightened by these laws — only a generation such as this is prepared “to do righteousness and justice.” The commandments between man and God are a precondition, the root for all commandments between man and fellow man.

There is no doubt that this contention is directed against the Reform movement, who claim that there is no need to fulfill ritual commandments between man and God.

In this context, it is worthwhile to note R. Hirsch’s attitude towards the reasoning of the commandments. The Reform movement, with its willingness to blur and erase the distinctions between Jews and Christians, sought to annul the fulfillment of active commandments,[[11]](#footnote-11) mainly those which make the nation of Israel unique. One of the claims of the Reform movement was that the commandments of the Torah were given in a certain setting, at a certain time, and for this reason they are not relevant to the modern era. As part of R. Hirsch’s war against these views, he claims that the meaning of the *mitzvot* is not only practical; they have a basis in philosophy as well. He dedicates a complete work to the investigation of symbols in general, and he explains the commandments in particular as symbols, and so he shows how the commandments are appropriate also for his era.

A good example of this may be seen in his commentary to *Vayikra* 16:4, “And he will wash in water his flesh,” in which R. Hirsch deals with the symbolic significance of the High Priest washing his hands and feet of the on Yom Kippur after every change of clothing:

We have derived from this that not only the change of wardrobe from holy to holy, but even the change of wardrobe from holy to mundane, requires washing hands and feet…

I would say that even taking off holy garb in order to put on mundane, everyday clothing is part of the service. It turns out that this is the idea, completing the order of this day: the significance of all of the symbolic actions in the Temple lies in the actual life outside the Temple, for the life of the mundane actualizes the spirit, which is drawn from the life in the Temple. **Indeed, the significance of the aspirations in the holy garb lies in the acts done in secular dress.**

It is difficult not to see this as an application of the philosophy of “*Torah im derekh eretz.*” R. Hirsch endorses the intellect and the new culture, and in all of these, there may be an expression of serving the Creator. However, the secular life must emerge from a vector of holiness: “for the life of the mundane actualizes the spirit, which is drawn from the life in the Temple.”

**F. Etymology**

R. Hirsch deals at length with his research into the fundamentals of the Hebrew language. In his view, the root of the word teaches us the philosophical meaning of the word. R. Mordechai Breuer[[12]](#footnote-12) beautifully expresses the theory of the importance of language in R. Hirsch’s philosophy:

Our master determined as a principal and fundamental idea that this language carries in its heart the announcement of the creator to man and to Israel, not only through its content, but through its form. The language of Scripture is the objective language in which the Creator expressed through the forms of language the meaning of the words, as came out in his thought and as the person wanted to relate to them.

R. Hirsch used the idea of phonetic relationships to develop etymological distinctions, as according to him all letters which have the same source[[13]](#footnote-13) are interchangeable. Thus, for example, there is a connection between the similar roots *nun*-*samekh*-*ayin*, *nun*-*sin*-*alef*, *nun*-*samekh*-*heh* and *nun*-*samekh*-*chet*; they all indicate a certain movement:

*Nun*-*sin*-*alef,* to lift and take an item from its place;

*Nun*-*samekh*-*heh*, to ascend to a higher level… for this is the essence of the trial;

*Nun*-*samekh*-*ayin*, to leave a place consciously and willingly;

*Nun*-*samekh*-*chet,* to uproot with the power and strength of the hand. (*Bereishit* 11:2)

Another example may be found in his commentary on *Bereishit* 42:3, on the verse, “Lest a disaster befall him.” *Kuf*-*reish*-*alef* is close to *kuf*-*reish*-*heh*, *kuf*-*reish*-*ayin* and *kuf*-*reish*-*chet*, and apparently there is no connection between these roots. However, R. Hirsch maintains, as a matter of fact, that these are different manifestations of one basic idea:

*Kuf*-*reish*-*alef*, to bring a person to willingly leave the direction of his way;

*Kuf*-*reish*-*ayin*, [to tear] — tearing moves the parts of the material in opposite directions;

*Kuf*-*reish*-*chet*, [to make bald] — gathering the parts of the body in a direction that is opposed to the power of adhesion;

*Kuf*-*reish*-*heh* — the events which influence a person or an item, changing the natural direction which one has willingly chosen and turning in another direction, are called circumstance.

This etymological approach is undoubtedly speculative, and for the most part it is not accepted nowadays in linguistic research. Nevertheless, this methodology is undeniably creative, and like all of his other comments on the Torah, via this approach, R. Hirsch adds spirit to the words of the Torah. Concerning the commentary of R. Hirsch, R. Breuer makes the following declaration:

Every meaning that a man from Israel finds in the Torah is the “true” meaning of the Torah, as it speaks to him, emerging from the unique letter he has in the Torah.

Know that this is the true, because it is accepted to say this today even about secular literature: the meaning of every creation is not dependent on the writer’s intent. Rather, it is given over to the view of the reader; and every meaning that the reader finds in his creation is the “true” meaning.

All the more so, we may say this about God’s Torah, the explanation of which is not “in the heavens;” instead, it is given over to the person who reads and studies. Every comment which is “pleasing” in the eyes of the student, which satisfies his mind, serves to steer him towards the truth of the Torah, as it shines for him from his unique letter in the Torah.

Because of this, the commentaries of R. S.R. Hirsch can be neither proven nor disproven; it is impossible to say that they are “correct” or “incorrect”. It is possible only to say that they are “pleasing”; **for they express the meaning of the Torah which complements the root of the soul of the reader.**(“*Peirush Rabbi Shimshon Refael Hirsch La-Torah*,” *Machanayim* 4B, 5753)

1. According to their view, the rest of *Tanakh* came together in a similar way: the books of *Nevi’im*, for example, were not prophetically stated from God’s mouth; rather, they were written by later authors, and they were edited later still. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Apparently, this struggle failed, because when R. Hirsch left in 1841 (to the city of Emden), the community of Oldenburg appointed a Reform rabbi as his replacement. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This led Shadal to criticize him, in a letter that he wrote to him after R. Hirsch sent him a copy of the work. Shadal questioned R. Hirsch’s motivations, wondering, “Has he turned into Geiger?” and condemning his use of German “rather than the language of Judah and Jerusalem.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. What is known as the Charedi community today, with all of its various characteristics, did not yet exist at this time, and it certainly did not use the term, and therefore this appellation is certainly anachronistic. Nevertheless, in retrospect, we may identify the ideological characteristics of opposition to Reform, which is similar, at least partially, to the Charedi community of today, and therefore we have used the term. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. With Hitler’s rise to power and the closing of many synagogues and *yeshivot* throughout Germany, R. Joseph Breuer, grandson of R. S.R. Hirsch and uncle of R. Mordechai Breuer, moved to the United States, and there he founded Khal Adath Jeshurun (KAJ), a congregation in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. This became a huge community, and similar congregations were founded throughout the United States.

In the last few years, Machon Moreshes Ashkenaz, the Institute for German Jewish Heritage, has spearheaded the founding of a number of congregations in Israel following the path of R. Hirsch in Frankfurt am Main. One of the most prominent is K’hal Adas Yeshurun — Jerusalem (KAYJ), in the capital’s Ramot neighborhood. Similar congregations have been established in Bnei Brak, Beitar, and Kiryat Sefer. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The distinction between Orthodoxy and Neo-Orthodoxy was expressed in a number of aspects. First of all, while Orthodoxy sought to maintain the closed nature of the community and saw the Emancipation as a destructive force for Judaism, Neo-Orthodoxy tried to take advantage of modernity because of the opportunities it afforded for the advancement of Jewish life and the Jewish religion. Second, Neo-Orthodoxy believed that European Jewry could make the Jewish faith flourish, while Orthodoxy rejected this idea. Similarly, Neo-Orthodoxy stressed the importance of the texts, customs, and aesthetics of the synagogue, while Orthodoxy did not. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In 1992, his great-grandson, R. Mordechai Breuer, translated this is into Hebrew. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thus, for example, he writes in Letter #16 of *Nineteen Letters*:

I laud the principle of equal rights, for an onerous load was pressing excessively upon the Nation of Israel, squeezing it out of all walks of and curtailing its opportunities to develop its spiritual possessions. This would minimize the free development of its greater qualities…

Now, I see in this breaking dawn the burgeoning and resurgence of the human race — a corridor in order enter in the great hall of recognizing that God is the Lord of all… for all people are His sons… [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Kiddushin* 3a. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It is worth noting that the Reform Movement in Germany was more dominant than in other countries. The essential reason was that in Germany, the struggle to keep and maintain the Emancipation was particularly difficult, and it culminated in an official way only about a century after the French Revolution, in the year 1869. Throughout R. Hirsch’s life, the question of Emancipation in Germany was in some doubt, and it still was necessary to persuade the general community that the Jews were “fit” to be considered German citizens with equal rights. On the basis of this fact, we may understand the great need felt in the Jewish street in the days of R. Hirsch to be “Germans for all purposes” and to try to blur the religious distinctions between each Jew and his German neighbor. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Christianity, of course, annulled the fulfillment of practical commandments at its inception. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This may be found in the introduction to his translation of R. Hirsch’s commentary on the Book of *Bereishit*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This refers to glottal, labial, or dental consonants and the like. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)