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Two Versions of "Synthesis"

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From the very beginning of Jewish history Judaism has, for better or for worse, experienced some interaction with its surrounding culture. A great part of the Bible is a warning, both explicit and implicit, against assimilating the cultic pagan practices.

However, with the rise of Greek philosophy and the prominence given to reason and a more sophisticated culture, some Jews began to expose themselves to the non-Jewish modes of thought and fall under their influence. Gradually, individual thinkers, such as Philo in Alexandria, and later, as in the "Golden Age" in Spain, whole schools concerned themselves with the direct confrontation of traditional Judaism and Western thought.

With the Emancipation, this confrontation was no longer confined to a few individuals or even schools. The interaction between Judaism and the culture of the host people was now of major import to the Jewish community as a whole. The variety of responses to this massive challenge of Western civilization is represented by the spectrum of Jewish allegiances extant even today. They range from a complete abandonment of Judaism and Jewish loyalties to an utter and complete rejection of Western philosophical and scientific ideas. In-between there exists a graduated fragmentation, a kind of Maxwellian distribution of interpretations.

The purpose of this essay is to present two versions of one particular type of response to the challenge of modernity, one that is more than a mere arithmetic decision on the proportion of Jewishness to be admitted in the make-up of the "modern Jew."

The modern Orthodox Jew in America represents the product of such a response resulting from the confrontation between authentic halakhic Judaism and Western thought. He is a novel

kind of Jew, a historical experiment in the reaction to the great dialogue. His survival and success may very well have the most fateful consequences for Jewry and Judaism throughout the world.

What is the peculiar nature of this new type of Jew? "Synthesis," a word long favored in the circles of Yeshiva University, the major school of American Orthodoxy, is the term we shall use for the response to the Jewish-Western dialogue. It is a term which, in great measure, also describes the writer's revered guide and distinguished colleague, Rabbi Leo Jung, to whom this volume is dedicated.

What is meant by Synthesis? What are the religious and cultural dimensions of the personality formed as a result of the encounter between traditional Judaism and modern non-Jewish culture, or in the language of the Rabbis, between *Torah* and *Hokhmah*?¹

There are, in the framework of what has come to be called Orthodox Judaism, two main theories of Synthesis that share certain fundamental features and yet diverge from each other in significant ways. These interpretations are to be found in the writings of two distinguished Jews of modern times who were deeply concerned by the confrontation of Torah and Wisdom. In a great measure they also represented and realized in themselves these ideals—for Synthesis is not an abstract theory that can be discussed, much less realized, *in vacuo*; it is an event or process that takes place in the personality. One of these individuals is a West European, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888). The other is the late Chief Rabbi of the Holy Land and originally an East European, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook (1865-1935).

Hirsch was one of the giants of German Jewry. As a leader and educator he was eminently successful. He was personally responsible for the flourishing *Denkgläubigkeit*—or enlightened Orthodoxy—that survives him to this day. Thoroughly Jewish, and also a completely modern Western man, he aspired to bring about a harmony between—or "synthesize"—the two traditions and outlooks. He tried to formulate a Jewish Humanism, demonstrating that the Humanism so popular in the Europe of his day had Jewish roots. Hence, his superman, the *Yisroel-Mentsch*. And hence, too, his great educational program of Synthesis under the slogan of *Torah im Derekh Eretz*.

Torah and Wisdom were not regarded by Hirsch as deadly enemies placing upon us an either/or choice between them. It is true that he gave Torah primacy over secular education if a choice had to be made.² But from his critique of Maimonides and Mendelssohn who approached Torah "from without," and from his development of his autochthonous attitude to Judaism,³ we get the impression that Hirsch believed in the original identity of Torah and the secular disciplines which now appear but in different forms. One cannot speak, therefore, of an essential conflict between them. But if no conflict is theoretically or essentially possible, neither can there be any meaningful dialogue between them. They can cooperate, even as the limbs of the body cooperate and coordinate; but they cannot interact and speak to each other, even as a sane and balanced person does not talk to himself. Hirsch does not say this explicitly, but it is, in the opinion of the writer, an inescapable

2. S. R. Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal*, ed. Dayan I. Grunfeld (London: Soncino, 1958), vol. 1, p. 170.

3. *The Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel*, trans. Bernard Drachman (New York: Bloch, 1942), Letter XVIII. Hirsch is severe in his criticism of Maimonides who, he maintains, merely "reconciled" Judaism with Greek philosophy, i.e., philosophy was superadded to Judaism, distorting it in the process, rather than allowing a philosophy of Judaism to issue from within the Jewish tradition autochthonously. Maimonides was "the product of uncomprehended Judaism and Arabic science" and "was obliged to reconcile the strife which raged in his own breast" (p. 181). He blames Maimonides for emphasizing abstract rational principles as opposed to action and deed as the highest expression of Judaism. "This great man is responsible, because he sought to reconcile Judaism with the difficulties which confronted it from without, instead of developing it creatively from within. . . . He entered into Judaism from without, bringing with him opinions of whose truth he had convinced himself from extraneous sources and—he reconciled!" Yet it is not entirely fair to accuse Maimonides of "reconciliation," with the implied derogation of without-ness. Maimonides, like Saadia before him, believed in the common origin of reason and revelation, hence of philosophy and Torah (cf. Julius Guttmann's introduction to Chaim Rabin's translation of the *Guide* [London: East and West Library, 1952] pp. 9-31). All discrepancies must then be considered as only apparent and these are to be "reconciled," but this can hardly be subject to the accusation of stepping out of the realm of Judaism to introduce, subversively as it were, alien ideas. Once the original identity of Torah and Wisdom is granted, such a charge is irrelevant. When Maimonides makes use of Aristotelian terminology and methodology, he is no more "without" the pale of Judaism than is Hirsch himself when he employs the dialectical modes of Hegelian thought popular in his day, albeit without mentioning their source (cf. Noah H. Rosenbloom, "The 'Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel,'" *Historia Judaica* [April, 1960], pp. 23-60, especially p. 58).

1. מדרש איכה (הוצ"ב) פרשה ב' על הפסוק "מלכה ושריה בגוים אין תורה", אם יאמר לך אדם יש חכמה בגוים תאמין... יש תורה בגוים אל תאמין.

conclusion and one that will appear more significant when contrasted with the position of Rav Kook. The Synthesis of Hirsch is pleasant, harmonious, charming, and creative. The secular studies help us in understanding Torah more deeply,⁴ even as the Torah tells us how to contemplate nature and listen to history.⁵ Considering the long estrangement of Jews from secular studies since the Golden Age of medieval days, and the unhappy record of the relations of science and religion in European history, this was a courageous attitude and a refreshing approach. His stature must be assessed from this background, as well as against the contemporary isolationism of East European Jewry. Hirsch tried to show, in the words of his translator, Bernard Drachman, that "Orthodox Judaism was not maintained solely by the superstitious or narrow-minded older generation, who had never been initiated into the science or the culture of the age."⁶

Yet it is precisely a statement of this sort that makes us wonder about the sufficiency of the Hirschian interpretation of Synthesis for contemporary Orthodox Judaism. For Hirsch it was important to produce a Westernized Orthodox Jew in order to refute the charge that Judaism is a collection of old superstitions. For Drachman in the America of his day, at the very end of the Nineteenth Century, a college education and a Ph.D. were social necessities, lest Torah Jews be classified as narrow-minded. Surely modern American Orthodoxy has progressed beyond the stage where it has to prove itself, where an English-speaking Orthodox Rabbi with a University education is an unusual phenomenon.

Perhaps this statement by Hirsch himself will allow the reader to feel the temper if not the contents of his particular brand of Synthesis: "Pursued hand in hand, there is room for both [Jewish and general studies], each enhancing the value of the other and producing the glorious fruit of a distinctive Jewish culture which, at the same time, is 'pleasant in the eyes of God and man.'"⁷ He

4. Zvi Kurzweil, "Samson Raphael Hirsch," *Tradition* (Spring, 1960), p. 296. Compare the attitude of R. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna, as reported by his student, R. Barukh of Shklov. The Gaon urged that as much of secular knowledge be translated into Hebrew as possible, because *כי כפי מה שיחסר לאדם כי דעות משארי החכמות, לעומת זה יחסרו לו מאה ידות בחכמת התורה, כי התורה והחכמה ידעו יחד (הקדמה לספר אוקלידס, האג חקיים)*. The last clause is particularly significant.

5. *Nineteen Letters*, p. 197.

6. *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

7. *Supra*, n. 2.

seems to be delighted that he can avoid those intellectually bloody conflicts between religion and science, that he can steer clear of the ragged edges of discord between Torah and Western Wisdom. "Hand in hand" they will walk, and appear "pleasant" in the eyes of all. There is something placid as well as idyllic and utopian in this vision. It is too easy, too gentlemanly, too "cultured," or—if one may say this—too bourgeois.

The slogan *Torah im Derekh Eretz* would not be appropriate to the Synthesis envisioned by Rav Kook, as it emerges from his *Orot ha-Kodesh* (Jerusalem, 1938) and his courageous address at the opening of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.⁸ Torah "with" *Derekh Eretz* or secular wisdom implies that they keep a respectable distance from each other, like neighbors who remain courteous as long as they do not become too intimate. Torah "and" *Derekh Eretz* would be more fitting for the Kook version of Synthesis. For there is a decided difference between these conjunctions.⁹ Torah "and" *Derekh Eretz* suggests a meeting of two powerful personalities, the two of them coming to grips with each other, with the very serious question of whether this engagement will be an embrace or a wrestler's head-lock.

For Rav Kook, the educational problem is treated in a metaphysical frame. The categories with which he operates are those of *kodesh* and *hol*, and the issue transcends, therefore, the demonstration that Orthodoxy is not narrow-minded or superstitious.

Rav Kook speaks of two tendencies of the Jewish spirit. One is directed inwards; it is a deepening of the sacred, and is represented by the traditional *yeshivot*. The other is an outward one, relating the within to the without. Just as the intensification of the sacred is embodied in the old-type *yeshivah*, so is the relating of the sacred to the secular the function of the university.¹⁰ We must forgive Rav Kook if, despite his courageous criticism and warnings issued at the time, he allowed himself the extravagance of imagining that the Hebrew University would fulfill the lofty mission he assigned to it; hindsight is always wiser than foresight. But his analysis is valid.

8. Reproduced in *חזון הבנייה*, ילקוט דברים של הגר"י קוק ד"ל (ירושלים: תשי"א) עמ' רס"ד-רע"ג.

9. Cf. the difference between *הרכבה מוגהת* and *הרכבה שגויה* in *Guide for the Perplexed* 2:22.

10. *Ib.* *חזון הבנייה*, loc. cit.

It is this second tendency, the centrifugal motion of the sacred to the secular, that is of utmost consequence to us. The merging, or synthesis, of Torah with Wisdom is not meant to make up for some lack in Torah, but rather to create something new and original in the world of the spirit through these combinations.¹¹ Kook tells us that the sacred is not antagonistic to science, but first he reminds us that it vitalizes all, it is that which gives life to the secular disciplines.¹² *Kodesh* and *hol* are functionally and indissolubly related to each other. "The sacred must be established on the foundation of the profane."¹³ They are related to each other as matter to form—the secular is matter, the sacred form—and "the stronger the secular, the more significant the sacred."¹⁴ Just as the body must be healthy in order for the spirit to flower, so secular knowledge should be of superior quality if the sacred is to benefit.¹⁵ This intimate relationship of sacred and secular is given its strongest expression when Rav Kook writes that the *yesod kodesh ha-kodoshim* comprises both the element of the sacred and the profane.¹⁶ This implies the significant notion, which Kook later states explicitly,¹⁷ that there is nothing absolutely profane or secular in the world. There is no absolute metaphysical category called *hol*; there is only the holy and the not-yet-holy. This Kook version of Synthesis is the very antithesis of secularism, which recognizes the sacred only in its insularity. Kook's centrifugal *kodesh* is so overpowering and outgoing, that *hol* or the profane loses its absolute character even before its encounter with the sacred. It is, as it were, fated from its creation to submit to the sacred.

Having denied the absolute character of the profane, does this imply a blurring of the distinction between *kodesh* and *hol*? The answer is an emphatic No. Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, in his famous *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit*, asks: why in the *havdalah* is the distinction between *Yisrael la-amim* mentioned? The other distinctions—between light and dark, Sabbath and weekday, sacred and profane—are all appropriate to the *havdalah*, but that between Israel and the nations seems irrelevant. He answers that there is a significant

difference between Israel and the nations in how they conceive of the distinction between sacred and profane, etc. The non-Jew conceives of an absolute separation between them. The Jew, however, believes that the gulf between *kodesh* and *hol* is meant not to introduce a permanent and irreconcilable dualism, but to allow the sacred to be confirmed in its strength and purity so that it might return and sanctify the unholy.¹⁸

This is how Rav Kook conceives of the relationship of *kodesh* and *hol*. There is a *havdalah*, so as to allow for the intensification of the sacred in its centripetal motion;¹⁹ and this itself is prelude to its outward, centrifugal movement, where it reaches for the profane and transforms it into the sacred, a transmutation for which it has been waiting from the moment of creation. The fact of *קידוש* leads to the act of *קידוש*.

This brief survey of Hirsch and Kook can give only the barest idea of the similarities on the one hand, and the differences on the other. Both men and the *weltanschauungen* they represent are relevant to our day and the shaping of Jewish destiny. Each represents a different version of the Synthesis which is the most characteristic aspiration of modern Orthodox Judaism and the major purpose of such institutions as Yeshiva University. Hirsch, the aristocratic pedagogue, and Kook, the poetic Kabbalist, both inspire admiration and deserve our gratitude. Yet basically, Hirsch is the cultural thinker and educator, while Kook is the metaphysician and mystic. Hirsch's Synthesis is one of coexistence, hence essentially static. Kook's is one of interaction, and hence dynamic. Hirsch is an esthete who wants Torah and *Derekh Eretz* to live in a neighborly, courteous, and gentlemanly fashion. Kook is an alchemist who wants the sacred to transmute the profane and recast it in its own image. From the point of view of Kook, it is not enough to raise a generation of Orthodox Jews who will also be cultured Western men, admirable as this ambition may be. It is not enough to bear the two cultures as parallel lines which can meet only in

11. *Orot ha-Kodesh*, vol. I, p. 63.

12. *Ib.*, p. 3.

13. *Ib.*, p. 145.

14. *Ib.*, p. 145; also p. 64.

15. *Ib.*, p. 65.

16. *Ib.*, p. 64.

17. *Ib.*, p. 143 — לדעת שאין באמת חול מוחלט בעולם.

18. For further development of this theme, see Norman Lamm, "The Unity Theme and its Implications for Moderns," *Tradition* (Fall, 1961), p. 61.

19. This requirement for the sacred to deepen within itself before it undertakes the venture of sanctification of the non-sacred has certain practical consequences. It necessitates, for instance, the existence of the "old fashioned" *yeshivot* which are fully devoted to Torah study, alongside the "modern" *yeshivot* where the actual interaction takes place. Cf. the remarkable letter by Rav Kook in *Iggerot R'iyah* I, 206-7, also quoted in הרב בנימין אפרתי, *התניינות במשנת הרב קוק* (ירושלים: מוסד הרב קוק, תשי"ט) עמ' 105-6.

infinity. It is urgent that there be a confrontation and an encounter between them. In the Kook version of Synthesis, there must be a qualitative accommodation of both studies; for the secular studies are not inherently and eternally unholy, and the *limudei kodesh* are sterile unless they have something not-already-sacred to act upon. The *limudei hol* are part of the drama of *kiddush*.

For Hirsch, the direction of the interaction is from the profane to the sacred, that is, the secular disciplines are employed to order, define, and assist the sacred and place it upon a firm scientific basis. For Rav Kook, who demands interaction as the central theme of Synthesis, the motion goes in both directions. The less important one is the kind we have just mentioned, the rationalization, explanation, and adornment of the sacred by the profane. Kook calls this a right-to-left motion. Far more significant and consequential is the left-to-right motion: the radiation of *kodesh* towards *hol*, ennobling it, raising it to the loftiest levels, sanctifying it, impregnating it with meaning and purpose.²⁰ Thus, whatever the interaction between *kodesh* and *hol* in the Hirschian brand of Synthesis, it will be something on the order of using chemistry to clarify a problem in *Yoreh Deah* or mathematics to settle a problem of the *luah*. The dynamic relationship demanded by the Kook-Synthesis emphasizes the use of *Halakhah* in defining for the chemist or mathematician how to shape his approach, his purpose, his significance in the world. It requires the mastery of Torah so as to teach the *Ben Torah* how to grapple with the mundane, stubborn issues of ordinary life and make them yield to the light of Torah. The encounter of Torah and Wisdom has, as its goal, to "create in the world new souls, and give life a new, thriving, healthy form."²¹ In a word, Hirsch's *Torah im Derekh Eretz* aimed at bringing both disciplines together in one person; Kook's *kodesh-hol* dialogue strived to bring them together in one personality—in shaping it, inspiring it, vitalizing it.

Fifty or seventy-five years ago, in the conditions that prevailed in this country, Synthesis, even of the Hirschian type, was a utopian, wild, audacious vision. It was the kind of idea which practical, hard-headed men dismiss as visionary, and which visionaries are much too impractical to implement. To hold forth this Synthesis as an ideal was an act that demanded courage and boldness. Today, because of the efforts and influence of a number of dedicated indi-

viduals, such as Rabbi Jung and the founders of Yeshiva University, Synthesis as such is no longer a dream, no longer an experiment. American Orthodoxy today is a realization of Hirsch's vision—and, given the conditions of our society, nothing but a Hirschian Synthesis can be the first goal. American Jewry has produced not only individuals but a whole community of people who live *Torah im Derekh Eretz*. Considering the vicissitudes of these past 75 years—the uprooting and the immigration, the *Hurban Europa* and the State of Israel, the economic growth and the social changes, the scientific revolutions and intellectual displacements—such an achievement can be classified only as heroic.

Yet this ideal is transcended by the Synthesis envisioned by Rav Kook. It is a far more difficult task, far more dangerous, far more uncertain. Because Kook's dynamic conception affects personality, rather than mere coexistence in a person, as with Hirsch's more static version, it can operate only in chosen individuals rather than on a broad, public scale. For a Kook-type Synthesis requires a deepening of scholarship, the development of singular thinkers who, steeped in Jewish learning, especially Halakhah, will be able to sanctify the profane which they will know with equally thorough scholarship. Rav Kook has set a high goal: להשקיף על החול מתוך אספקלריא של קודש²² i.e., to view the secular from the vantage of the sacred.

Hirsch's Synthesis is not easily attained, Kook's much less so. Tension is an indispensable concomitant of Synthesis, of any variety. Anxiety and doubt and perplexity are necessary side-reactions of the act of Synthesis. Thus Hirsch writes to his fictitious young friend: "Do not think our time so dark and helpless, friend; it is only nervous and uncertain, as a woman in childbirth. But better the anxiety that prevails in the house of a woman about to give birth, than the freedom from anxiety, but also from hope and joy, in the house of the barren one."²³ These words of comfort and encouragement strike home to those in American Orthodoxy today who are concerned by the constant self-examination and critical self-evaluation in its ranks. They are signs of creation and birth.

Rav Kook speaks of Synthesis and the accompanying anxiety in similar terms.²⁴ He quotes Isaiah, ופחד ורחב לבבך, "and thy heart

20. *Orot ha-Kodesh*, I, pp. 68f.

21. *Ib.*, p. 63.

22. *Ib.*, p. 143.

23. *Nineteen Letters*, p. 201.

24. *Supra*, n. 8.

shall tremble and be enlarged" (Is. 60:5). The dynamic Synthesis of Kook is fraught with danger and risk. *Pahad*, fear, is inescapable. The centrifugal motion of *kodesh*, the sanctification of the profane, suffers from a historical ambivalence, as when it appeared in the controversy surrounding the translation of the Torah into Greek. Whenever there is an encounter of sacred and profane there must be *pahad*, for who knows but that instead of the *kodesh* converting the *hol*, the *hol* will master the *kodesh*, as in Anatole France's story *Thäise*. If it is security and freedom from fear that is sought, then it is sufficient to withdraw into hermetically sealed ghettos or vanish into easy assimilation; the confrontation between Judaism and world culture is then either avoided or ended. But if neither world is to be relinquished, and they are even allowed to act upon each other, then one must accept *pahad* and the sense of crisis and all the neurotic tensions that come with it. He who enters into this dialogue of Torah and Wisdom must tremble at the risks inherent in this kind of Synthesis, even while acknowledging that it is his duty to undertake it. Many human casualties have already resulted, and there are more yet to come, from this historic program of Synthesis. Rav Kook was not troubled by this phenomenon. On the contrary, he reminds us that those who approached the encounter without *pahad* were failures—most of their descendants were assimilated and subsequently lost to our people. Only if there is *pahad* can there be hope to experience the second part of the Prophet's verse: ורחב לבבך, "thy heart shall be enlarged," true joy and exultation.