### Rabbi S.R.‎‎ ‎Hirsch's Educational Worldview,‎

### as Reflected in His Torah Commentary

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### English Abstract I-VII

**Abstract**

This study deals with the educational philosophy of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) as expressed in his exegesis of the Torah (Pentateuch). R. S.R. Hirsch was a Jewish Orthodox leader and educator in 19th-century Germany. He was renowned as the founder of the educational approach of *Torah im Derech Eretz*. He expressed his educational thoughts in his books *Horeb* (1835) and *The Nineteen Letters* (1836), as well as in articles he published in the *Jeshurun* monthly that he edited for two decades (1854-1870). He began writing his commentary on the Torah, which took over a decade (1867-1878), many years after first publishing his books and articles.

R. S.R. Hirsch’s commentary on the Torah was one of the many composed during the 19th century as part of a growing movement that focused on biblical exegesis, in part as a response to Reform Judaism. The exegetes believed in the strength of the written word and that biblical exegesis could be employed in their struggle against the Reform movement. One of the central figures in this trend was R. S.R. Hirsch. In his commentary on the Torah, he attempted to relate to and contend with the spirit of the times and to present a firmly consolidated Jewish worldview. R. S.R. Hirsch sought to uncover the relevance of the Scriptures for the members of his generation and it was this desire that led him to author his commentary on the Torah. He maintained that the Bible is a guide that shows us the path for this world and that it is the responsibility of the generation’s educators to turn the books of the Torah into a constitutive element in the molding of the younger generation’s identity. In order to do so, he made use of his own broad cultural horizons, both religious and general. Much like his rabbis, R. S.R. Hirsch interpreted the biblical text based on grammatical research, paying careful attention to every detail. He used etymology much of the time along with the analysis of symbols to gain an understanding of the Bible’s meaning, although he did not hesitate to use “external” sources of knowledge as well. While his commentary was written in the spirit of accepted tradition, it incorporated modern components too, such as principles from the study of linguistics and style, and drew on other fields too, such as history and geography. This study is a review of the many aspects of his unique method.

The basic premise of this dissertation is that the study of R. S.R. Hirsch’s commentary on the Torah, which is intertwined so closely with his educational philosophy, will offer a deeper understanding of his exegetical methods. However, it is important to analyze the similarities and differences and investigate whether there is a difference between the words of Rabbi Hirsch in his approach to the verses of the Torah as a philosopher, educator and rabbi, and the conclusions he arrived at in his capacity as a commentator laboring in the fields of biblical exegesis.

A study of R. S.R. Hirsch’s commentary on the Torah reveals the great diversity of educational topics that Rabbi Hirsch dealt with and integrated into his commentary. This research highlights those instances where Rabbi Hirsch chose to insert his educational philosophy and the tools he used as a commentator to weave his educational outlook into his commentary.

Despite the undoubted influence of Rabbi Hirsch’s educational philosophy on his Torah commentary, this research proves that there are significant differences in Rabbi Hirsch’s approach to the biblical verses cited in the educational writings he authored as a philosopher, educator and rabbi, and the conclusions he drew from the text in his writings as a biblical commentator. These differences give rise to the understanding that one should not view the works of Rabbi Hirsch as uniform in character, but that his exegetic technique should be characterized separately.

Before examining R. S.R. Hirsch’s commentary on the Torah in this study, several questions were posed:

 1. How are the influence of the period in which R. S.R. Hirsch lived and his daily struggles in the field of education expressed in his commentary on the Torah?

2. Is he content with finding solutions for difficulties arising from the verses, or does he attempt to extract some added educational value from his commentary?

3. (If the previous question was answered in the affirmative): What are the verses and biblical contexts in which R. S.R. Hirsch chose to integrate his educational viewpoint, and why did he choose to present it in these particular verses?

4. Is it possible to identify the characteristics of R. S.R. Hirsch’s exegetic method from an analysis of those educational subjects in his commentary on the Torah?

In light of this research and the examples given, the first question can reasonably be answered in the affirmative. Rabbi Posen described this most eloquently: “It would appear that there is no other commentary from whose pages the voice of the times rings forth as from the late Rabbi Hirsch's commentary.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

R. S.R. Hirsch approached the task of writing a commentary on the Torah with a solidly formulated educational outlook. His positions had already been set down in *Jeshurun* and in his books that pre-dated his commentary on the Torah. R. S.R. Hirsch did not write as an exegete who explored the biblical text’s primary sense, but sought to consider the meaning and spiritual effect of his commentary upon the readers of his time. Therefore, as Breuer wrote: “He was not fearful of the tension between ‘correct’ and ‘nice.’ ” So, in according with the purpose of his commentary, at times he offered an explanation that he considered ‘nice’, even though it was not ‘correct’ as far as the biblical text’s plain sense was concerned.[[2]](#footnote-3)

He conducted a dialogue with the Bible, seeking to discover how the text molds the personality, strengthens character and brings the individual closer to his Creator. This study can enlighten the reader in regard to his unique approach.

As for the second question, one may conclude that although Rabbi Hirsch sought to derive added educational value from his commentary, quite often, his suggestions stemmed from his desire to resolve difficulties arising from the verses, and his solutions helped to resolve the problem. This conclusion does not mean that Rabbi Hirsch was a commentator who focused on the literal meaning of the text, and clearly, many of his comments, even those that struggle with a linguistic challenge in the verse, may be defined as interpretations that utilize the biblical text as a trigger for the promulgation of educational values, serving as “ploys” to tie in his ideas with the biblical text.

In my research, I located those instances in which R. S.R. Hirsch chose to articulate the main points of his educational philosophy. I examined the reason for his insertion of an idea in a particular place. On the basis of this examination, I outlined several characteristics of his exegetic method. My focus on educational issues limited my ability to characterize his exegetic method in general terms, but even within these narrow confines, it was definitely possible to determine that R. S.R. Hirsch has unique characteristics as a biblical commentator.

Thus, for example, I discovered that Rabbi Hirsch took “exegetic license” in respect to those verses for which a variety of explanations were offered to resolve difficulties. In such instances, R. S.R. Hirsch displayed his special ability to see beyond the commentary, and it was those places that he inserted his educational viewpoint.[[3]](#footnote-4)

**Research Methods**

The first stage of this research was to locate those instances that R. S.R. Hirsch discussed directly as educational issues. After locating those “educational” verses, they were examined with the aim of understanding the reason for including the educational message specifically in the explanation of these verses. R. S.R. Hirsch’s explanation of the verse was first analyzed and then examined as to whether his interpretation resolved the exegetical issue or perhaps provided a convenient platform for expressing a philosophical-educational position. In many cases, wherever possible, his educational philosophy, as formulated in his writings that preceded his Torah commentary by many years, was compared to this commentary to examine the extent to which they were consistent. In those places where inconsistencies were found between his educational writings and his commentary on the Torah, the reasons for the differences were discussed, as were the characteristics of R. S.R. Hirsch, the biblical commentator, as opposed to R. S.R. Hirsch, the philosopher and educator.

**Structure of the Research**

This dissertation consists of an introduction and two sections. The introduction presents a review of the history of the research and a definition of the study’s goals and the research methods. The first section discusses several subjects that will help the reader become acquainted Rabbi Hirsch’s spiritual and philosophical world and introduces several features of his exegetic method. This part of the research includes the following topics:

1. The background to Rabbi Hirsch’s biography and work

2. A description of Rabbi Hirsch’s “desktop” and an examination of his approach to earlier biblical commentary

3. General characteristics of his exegetic technique when focusing on educational issues

In referring to the commentary’s characteristics, I discuss Rabbi Hirsch’s general approach in his commentary on the Torah. The characteristics of his exegetic method are sketched out in general terms, for example, his unique etymological method and his linguistic sensitivity as a biblical commentator. His symbolic and psychologistic commentary is also reviewed briefly. Also discussed is his approach to the order of the biblical verses and the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated Torah texts. As part of the study of R. S.R. Hirsch’s exegetical methods, I also discuss Rabbi Hirsch’s approach to several of the biblical commentaries and his approach to and method of deriving educational meaning from the enterprise of the Masoretics.

The second and principal part of this dissertation discusses “educational circles” – educational subjects in R. S.R. Hirsch’s commentary on the Torah. These circles were defined by Rabbi Hirsch in his writings and in his commentary on the Torah. According to him, a member of the Jewish people moves through various circles in the course of his lifetime.

In his view, these life circles are composed of the circle of the individual and his world (*Einzelnen*), the family circle based upon the mother and father, the tribal (social) circle to which each family belongs and the national circle. According to Rabbi Hirsch, these circles move in a manner similar to “gears” in a machine: on one hand, each circle moves independently, but on the other, the movements of each circle are integrated and coordinated with the movements of the other circles. It is the movement of the circles in this manner that will lead the nation to its goal as it progresses towards fulfillment of its mission. The educational philosophy according to the “circles” theory is presented in detail in the second part of this dissertation.

The first chapter of the second part deals with the circle of the individual. The first subject discussed is Rabbi Hirsch’s complex approach concerning man’s inborn nature, and as a direct continuation of this, a discussion on self-education follows. This chapter discusses Rabbi Hirsch’s outlook on man’s struggle with his inborn nature and the temptations he faces, as well as the various methods the individual must employ to develop his character according to the guidelines that Rabbi Hirsch wove into his commentary on the Torah.

The second chapter deals with the family circle. This chapter begins by discussing the ways a family circle is created, starting from the couple, which forms the center of the circle, and then addresses the topic of the appropriate relations that should prevail between the two partners, as perceived by R. S.R. Hirsch, as a condition for expanding the family. The expanding family has its own dynamic and it behooves the parents to work cooperatively for its success and prosperity. Therefore, the chapter also deals with the roles of the parents and their attitude towards the family’s various components. The discussion centers on R. S.R. Hirsch’s commentaries in which he defines the roles of the mother and father in the education of their children, as well as the child’s relationship with his parents. He considers the parents’ goal to be their children’s welfare, although each one plays a different role.

The definitions of these roles are the focus of the discussion in this chapter. Clearly, the parents and children have a two-way relationship, and consequently the discussion is expanded to include not only the definition of the parents’ duty towards their children but also the duties and proper behavior of children towards their parents.

The third chapter deals with the wider circle, the tribal (social) circle. Man is a social animal. His life is not bound by the narrow confines of the family unit since the family has ties with the surrounding society too. This chapter deals with the relationship between the home and its surrounding society, which can influence a person’s character and qualities. For this reason, this chapter opens with the unresolved debate on nature versus nurture (heredity versus environment). As an educator, Rabbi Hirsch addressed this topic in his writings and in his Torah commentary, and at times, used the verse as a point of departure to present his position on this complex subject. This chapter also discusses the topic of being “open and closed,” that is, the degree and timing of children’s exposure by their parents to their social environment, in those places where the surrounding society’s culture and values are incompatible with those of the family. As a derivative of this topic, in this chapter the reader will find Rabbi Hirsch’s approach to the subject of withdrawing from the community, as well as his unique stance on exposing the child to the “other.”

 The fourth chapter deals with the wider circle: the national circle. This chapter discusses the role of communal systems in the individual’s educational development. Also presented is the tension between the individual and the community and the manner in which the public allows the individual to realize his unique attributes, in view of the individual’s responsibility towards the community’s welfare. The chapter deals with three communal systems that play a role in forming a person’s personality: the religious system and its leadership, the judicial system and of course, the education system. The management of these systems was imposed upon the tribe of Levi, of whom it is written: “They shall teach Your laws to Jacob, and Your instructions to Israel. They shall offer You incense to savor and peace-offerings on Your altar” (Deuteronomy 33:10). This chapter expands the survey of the educational system and includes a profile of the teacher and R. S.R. Hirsch’s advice on the various techniques the teacher may use to educate the child.

After discussing the four circles, the last chapter of the study summarizes the conclusions reached with regard to Rabbi Hirsch’s method in his commentary on the Torah and the influence of his educational philosophy upon his commentary. This chapter briefly answers the questions posed at the beginning of the study.

This study demonstrates the soundness of Gadamer’s approach regarding the process of extracting meaning from text, which he described in his book *Truth and Method* (p. 304). Gadamer believed that every reader approaches a text equipped with analytical tools that include his own views – developed as a result of his exposure to society and to various individuals whom he has met at various junctures in his life – his personal experiences and how he was raised and educated. These tools help the reader extract meaning from the text and Gadamer calls this extraction of meaning a “fusion of horizons,” in that the reader’s horizons fuse with the text itself. Samson Raphael Hirsch’s own method in his Torah commentary clearly corresponds with this approach.

The purpose of this study was not to describe R. S.R. Hirsch’s educational philosophy but merely to examine whether the fact that he was a pedagogue influenced his exegetical methods. However, the reader can learn something of his educational approach and his multifaceted personality too, even without any earlier acquaintance with his pedagogical writings.

A perusal of Hirsch’s commentary on the Torah will impress the reader with the wide variety of educational issues Hirsch addressed and included in his commentary. Among the topics that this study focuses on are: the parent’s role in educating his child, the role of the teacher and the education system, confidence in the educational process, the uniqueness of each child, acceptance of the other, openness and introversion, moral education, education for esthetics, confronting moral conflicts and dilemmas, setting educational limits, education for diversity, the legitimacy of various educational methods, the integration of different cultures. R. S.R. Hirsch had to address all these issues in his role as school principal and mentor to the parents of his community. R. S.R. Hirsch’s philosophy on the educational issues noted is culled from his educational articles, most of which were published and known to parents and educators in Rabbi Hirsch’s community many years before he published his commentary on the Torah.

R. S.R. Hirsch’s philosophy remains fresh, relevant and up-to-date in many ways, even to today’s younger generation who debate how to achieve a synthesis between both a full religious life and a strong desire to be fully involved in modern life. In my opinion, every educator can use the works of Rabbi Hirsch’s philosophy as a basis for classroom discussion when dealing with the dilemmas today’s youth face.

I believe that this study provides a clearer understanding of Rabbi Hirsch’s unique exegetical method and that my learned colleagues will make use of the fruits of my efforts and continue the work of formulating a full characterization of Rabbi Hirsch’s exegetic method, as has been done with other commentators, and of which Rabbi Hirsch is certainly deserving. However, in the words of Rabbi Hirsch in his commentary on Exodus 30:13, “The contribution of the individual, even if it is as objectively complete as possible, can never be truly complete. What the individual does is forever merely a small part, and for his work to be complete requires the equal dedication of his brethren. Indeed, the individual is not required to accomplish anything in its entirety: ‘It is not for you to complete the work.’ But he is required to contribute his share towards its completion.”
I have tried my utmost to begin the task; for the rest, go learn.

1. Posen, *Perush R. S.R. Hirsch, obm*, p. 105 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See Breuer, *Perush RSRH, pp. 296-311.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See, for example: pp. 250-253; 265-269. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)