

RABBI HAIM SOLOVEITCHIK

THE GAON OF BRISK

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Rarely is an individual identified with a world-spread Movement. Especially so if that person has no organization backing him, no office, no journalists, no public conventions etc. But with Rebbe Haim we find that although he was quiet and unobtrusive; nevertheless the great majority of the Lithuanian Yeshiva world, and their successors the non-hassidic yeshiva world of our day and age, continue his unique study system. Of what does this consist?

We all know that there are two schools of thought, how to study the Talmud.

The B'ki'im (well versed) and the Me-aynim (deep contemplation).

The former "cover" a lot of ground, since they don't stall for time but peruse quickly, again and again rereading the ancient texts so to remember by heart the studies of our ancestors. These B'ki'im spend little time in analysing or examining the texts involved, since they feel that our criticism (as tryros) cannot be well based when concerning the Masters.

However the latter group, the Me-aynum feel that superficial reading, without understanding fully the intellectual truths involved, without being able to explain logically the reasoning and bases for the opinions delivered in those given texts, this cannot be considered "learning" or "studying".

How is a student to analyze? One must pay careful attention to the text at hand. Are there any superfluous words involved? If so, we are missing in comprehension since it is impossible that our great sages took the time or effort to add one unnecessary word. Are there any repetitions? This too is an important point to consider. And item repeated again must be due to some "hiddush" (innovation). According to Rebbe Haim's way of study, it is more important to understand the theory of the system, than to know the practical application of the Halacha to be practiced. This approach eventually produced a great disdain towards those Yeshiva students who studied so to be able to get a document and begin professional life as a practicing Rabbi. This is similar to the great debate in the secular world between "Pure science" versus "Applied Science".

When students of Rebbe Haim debated subjects against proponents of the B'khus schools, they easily got the "upper hand". Since against every quote from the ancient sources that was advanced, by sheer acumen and mental agility they were able to show the slight difference between the subjects at hand versus the "proof" advanced. After evidencing this disparity, the efficacy of the source material advanced was disproven, and discarded, leaving the way open for the opinions of the "I'yun" groups, without the "B'khus" people being able to disprove them by logical thought. And with time, due to this superiority, many of the Roshei Yeshivot of the non-Hassidic groups were the disciples of this discipline. They too taught their third generation students to follow this path. Until we have the result today that the great majority of yeshiva students justly admire these methods and attempt to emulate them.

Another reason for the great success of the Brisker approach (as it was called, due the place of residence where Rebbe Haim officiated as a Rabbi) was that combating the inroads of Modernity, we found great danger to Torah commitment due to the glitter of University Intellectualism. Modern day scholarship appears to present analysis and deep thought, not relying on quotations alone. To the contrary, in the secular world of knowledge modern methods have great efficacy in de-bunking the ancients, in showing up their fallacious reasoning, in criticizing their unprecise terms; and thereby revealing their contradictions (which had been unrecognized till now). When Lithuanian youth met these great advances in the Gentile world, many of them felt that the Jewish world was in arrears. But Rebbe Haim's novel approach gave Jewish counterparts and parallels to modern advances. Jewish youth felt more confident with our heritage, and found a secure field for fertile thought, for diligent inquire, for mental alacrity. Hundreds of students leaped with love and admiration at the new approach.

Another great advance proffered by Rebbe Haim was that he originated "K'llallim", principles and propositions. When a Talmud student sees a great array of individual laws, all apparently disconnected with each other, it is difficult to remember or to understand. But the keen genius of Rebbe Haim succeeded in showing an underlying system, some logical plan behind all the ancient decisions. He showed the abstracts, towards which not enough attention had

been dedicated till his day. This kind of legality caused great joy, and deep respect for our Talmudic sages who worked according to a basic system.

As aforementioned, Rebbe Haim taught that "I'yun" (logic) is worth more than "B'kius" (Memory). This can be demonstrated with a remarkable story, told by Rabbi Maimon in his book of biographies "Mi'dei Hodesh b'hodsho" (volume four, page 60). During a certain Talmudic lecture that Rebbe Haim gave in Yeshiva Wolozhin, a certain student interrupted the lecture, calling out that Tosafot in Massechet Bava Metzia refuted the opinion or reasoning advanced by Rebbe Haim. The react of Rebbe Haim was to be stunned for a moment. He creased his forehead with deep thought, and then answered "Tosafot does not say at all what you just quoted. Not in Bava Metzta, nor Bava Kama or even Bava Batra". The student adamantly stood his ground, claiming his veracity. Immediately after the lesson, many of the students ran to the library, to check page after page, where was that Tosafot? After an hour of search (by tens of students) they returned to their Rabbi, praising him at his great B'kius. Since within a minute or two (apparently) he mentally recollected and searched page by page throughout all of the three "Bavot" before he vehemently denied the quotation from the Tosafot. But Rebbe Haim smilingly deprecated their praises. He said: "may you all be well, I am not a Bakee. But I attempt to understand properly. I knew that such a crooked reasoning as that which the student claimed to be written by the Tosafot, simply could not be! Therefore I said what I said".



Enough said about his educational system. Let us discuss now his personality. Rebbe Haim was the son of Rabbi Joseph Dov, the world famous author of "Beit ha-Levi". He was the co-Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Wlozhin (alongside the Netziv). These two personalities were the epitomes of Pilpul and B'kius respectively. How wonderful it was that Rebbe Haim married the grand-daughter of the Netziv, linking together these two great houses. For several years Rebbe Haim gave lectures in this Yeshiva, until it was closed down by anti-Semitic forces of the Russian government in 1892. Approximately at that period Rebbe Joseph Dov, who was the officiating Rabbi of the town of Brisk, died and Rebbe Haim assumed the office. Due to Rebbe Haim's swift and deep thought, he found it

difficult to “pasken” in practical questions of practice, since he always recognized two different sides of a possible solution.

The writer of this article heard a story told by his teacher Rabbi Yaakov Ruderman z”l, the Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel (Baltimore, U.S.A.) as follows. Whenever a very abstruse question of Halacha reached his hands, he wrote a letter with his question to Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan (of Kovna) asking for a response by telegram, so that the answer be terse. Since if he would back his decision with legal reasoning Rebbe Haim (due to his great innate awe of G-d and his fear of a mispass) would find round to quibble with the p’sak, and even disprove that p’sak. But if given in one final line, there would be no opening for debate.

I would add, this is what the “Hebrew Encyclopedia” (volume 25, page 501) relates that upon becoming Rabbi of Brisk, he delivered the task of day to day rulings to a resident Dayyan, and Rebbe Haim dealt with his deep studies. (see “Midei Hodesh b’chodsho”, IV page 66)

Rebbe Haim was a very devout person. Although living in Russia, he never learns the Russian language. He felt that that would open the possibility to learn secular studies, which he considered to be a great danger to Judaism (ibid).

He was also a great opponent to the Zionist Movement and so too to the Mizrachi Movement. Nevertheless Rabbi Maimon recounts many a tale that Rebbe Haim’s compassion with individual Jews, even if they were outright wicked, was tremendous. (See ibid pages 66-70). His illustrious grandson, the great Rabbi Yoseph Dov Soloveichik, the Head of Yeshivat Yitzhak Elchanan and Yeshiva University (New York), makes a demarcation line between a villain due to evil inclination, or a villain out of spite, or principle. (see “Nefesh Ha-rav”, written by his disciple Rav Zvi Shachter (edition, 1994, pp. 278-279).

Rabbi Maimon relates that there was many a maid who erroneously became pregnant, although being unmarried. These sinners knew that if they would leave the foundling with Rebbe Haim, he would deal with finding an adopting parent. Many of these babies spent weeks in his house, till the proper connection was made, and Rebbe Haim personally dealt with hiring nursing mothers. This point is made too by Rabbi Shlomo Zevin; in his biography on our subject, in his book “Ishim v’shitot”, biographies. Rabbi Maimon (pp. 61-62) tells that once there was a conflagration that consumed all the wooden edifices in the town. Immediately

Rebbe Haim stood at the head of the Committee to organize aid from all neighboring towns, to rebuild the homes of the homeless Jews of Brisk. His own house, which was also destroyed by the flames, he built as the last of the reconstructions. He knew that his great admirers would not leave him roof-less, but he knew that after his loss being corrected, the donations would dwindle and be minimized. Therefore he kept himself destitute to the end.

There (pp. 64-65) it is told that a certain Jew went bankrupt, and his many debtors influenced the courts to imprison him until their debts were repaid. The Jew languished in prison for a long period. But Rebbe Haim at hearing the story went to action. It was Erev Yom Kippur. He blocked the Hazzan from saying "kol Nidrei" until a public collection was made (especially from the rich members of the community). When he achieved his objective, only then (even if belated) did he allow the Yom Kippur services to commence.

It happened once that he was seen holding a long conversation with a person who was considered an ignoramus. People who knew of Rebbe Haim's acumen were surprised, what topic of interest would the great sage find to spend his time with such a hollow character? An intrepid student asked, and got his answer. Rebbe Haim related that that person was suffering despondency; his spirits reached a terrible low. In the same way as there is a mitzva to support financially the destitute, so too it is a mitzva to support by encouraging words those who have problems of moodiness. ("midei Hodesh b'chodsho", p. 63)

We could learn a lot from Rebbe Haim on national matters.

For instance, what is the identity of Amalek in our day and times? Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (Yeshiva University) quotes his father that any enemy of the Jewish people as a people, attacking a Jew not for the sake of money etc. but only due to his race, is to be dealt with as an Amalekite. (book "Ish ha-emuna", p. 102). The interesting point is that this father, heard this point from his grandfather, Rebbe Haim, as attested by Rebbe Yehuda Gershuni, in his book "Kol Tzofayich", based on an interesting observation on the words of the Rambam (Hilchot MeLachim, chap. 5, paragraph 4), about the seven infidel nations, the Rambam concludes "their identity is obscure, since they have vanished historically". However in the subsequent paragraph,

referring to Amalek, this observation is lacking, so to say. Their identity is not obscure! How so? Since their terrible actions publicize their identity (see too "Nefesh ha-Rav" by Rabbi Shechter, p. 87 about Germany). Any scholar familiar with the Rambam's great accuracy in phrasing his words, can immediately recognize the veracity of Rebbe Haim's teaching, since the Rambam should have placed the above mentioned quotation ("their identity is obscure") immediately after paragraph five, not paragraph four?! But apparently the Rambam teaches that concerning Amalek we do know their identity even today. This point is also backed by the Maharal ("Or Chodosh" p. 201) and so too Sefer Haredim, p. 183.

Let us conclude with a wonderful "chidush" about Kavannah (intent) during prayer. The Rambam (whose book is always the spring-board for Rebbe Haim's dialectics) says that prayer without intent, is valueless and one must repeat his prayer (Hilchot Tefillah, chap. 4 paragraph fifteen). Apparently the intent necessary must be throughout all of Shmoneh Esreh, since the Rambam doesn't limit the requirement.

But in Chapter Ten the Rambam says that the obligation of intent is only during the first benediction ("Avot"). – Why did he specify this release only after six chapters later?

The answer that Rebbe Haim gives is remarkable. There are two sorts of "intent". One is that of paying attention to the words uttered. The other sort is general, to know and be conscious of the fact that one is talking with the King of the universe. The lenient opinion given in Chapter ten refers only to intent per the meaning of the words of the prayers. But the "intent" referred to in chapter four regard the general knowledge that one is now talking with Great God. If this simple fact slips a person's mind, he is not praying at all. He is only mocking and mimicking a person, theatrically making a play. (This teaching Rebbe Haim writes in his Commentary to the Rambam, the sole book we have from his pen).

Back to our topic, Rebbe Haim was a great luminary. Although he was humble and reticent, his many students recognized his worth and followed his footsteps. So too, all of Orthodox Jewry honor his memory.

May his great merit stand to our stead.