

“THE COUNTENANCE OF HIS FATHER”: TWENTY-FIVE YEARS SINCE THE PASSING OF HADOAR AUTHOR ISAAH BERGER OF BLESSED MEMORY

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I grew up on the front lines of an incessant war between books and clothing, and the books had the better of it. In the bookcases, they reigned supreme, while in the closets the long coats and dresses had to defend themselves against the infiltrations and attacks of the new volumes that multiplied without cease.

This lust for books may have resulted from the fact that my father had virtually no formal education in either Jewish or general studies and attained most of his knowledge not from teachers but through constant, wide-ranging reading. His father, who was a rabbi in Zinkov in Ukraine, passed away when his younger son was a baby. The elder son migrated to Canada, where he succeeded in setting up a business, and as time passed he helped his mother and younger brother come to New York via Canada when my father was sixteen years old.

The young immigrant studied for some time in Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University, but he carved out an independent path for himself in areas that interested him and decided to educate himself outside the framework of organized educational institutions.¹ The evidence furnished by the dates noted in his books indicates that he began to form his library in 1927 when he was twenty-one years old, and in the following year his first scholarly article appeared in *Ha-Tzofeh le-Hokhmat Yisrael* (“Le-Toledot Meqorotav ve-Hashpa’ato shel Sefer Sha’ashu’im le-R. Yosef ben Meir Zabbara”). The article is

¹ Nonetheless, he wrote two enthusiastic articles about Yeshiva, one on its fiftieth anniversary (*Hadoar* 16:32), and another on the opening of Stern College (“Mikhlalah li-Benot Yisrael,” *Hadoar* 33:40).

remarkable for the range of expertise that it displays in Jewish literature throughout the generations, and there is no doubt that readers would have been stunned had they known that the author is a twenty-two year old without an academic degree.

Nonetheless, my father experienced difficulty in his search for a means of livelihood, in large measure because learning was his heart's desire, but also as a result of character traits like modesty, lack of initiative in economic matters, and sometimes even an excess of decency. I remember his telling me that one of the obstacles that he faced as a teacher in a primary school for part-time Jewish study (a Talmud Torah) over a period of several months—a position that was in any event not designed to generate great wealth—was his refusal on ethical grounds to utilize the proven method suggested to him to control disruptive children, namely, to appoint them as monitors over the other pupils.

Eventually, he opened a bookstore that served primarily as a warehouse. He periodically issued a catalogue with a list of books in Hebrew and other languages that dealt mainly with Jewish themes but to a non-trivial extent also with general folklore and other areas of study that interested him. An important scholar informed me quite recently that he saves the catalogues of "Isaiah Berger, Books" as documents of importance for the history of Jewish culture in the United States.

In the thirties, articles by Isaiah Berger began to appear in *Hadoar*, including reviews of overarching studies like Joseph Klausner's *History of Modern Jewish Literature* (*Hadoar* 19:30) and Meyer Waxman's *A History of Jewish Literature* (*Hadoar* 16:31, and 21:22). These essays combined heartfelt positive evaluation and pointed, sometimes sharply formulated criticism. In 1954, shortly after the passing of Menachem Ribalow [the founder and long-time editor], he began his work on the editorial staff of *Hadoar* on a regular basis. The catalogues that he published provided him with an opportunity to continue his involvement with the books that served as the source of his spiritual sustenance, but his daily livelihood came from his position with *Hadoar*, where he remained almost until his passing in 1973.

He was of course acquainted with all the prominent figures in the Hebrew movement in the United States—Ribalow, Daniel Persky, Moshe Meisels, A.R. Malachi, and many more. Even though his main areas of expertise were folklore, proverbs, and literature, he wrote a major article on "Jewish Scholarship in America" surveying such scholarship from

1848 until the date of the study (1939).² His task at *Hadoar* included the reading and correcting of the large majority of articles, and beginning with the mid-1960's he transformed the section on "Books Received by the Editors" (which he wrote anonymously) from a simple list to a succinct analysis of studies in all fields and periods, to the point where one could characterize him as Samuel David Luzzatto once characterized himself: "Nihil judaicum alienum est mihi."³

He was graced with a well-developed sense of humor, and his scholarly interest in jokes did not remain restricted to research. Despite the smile that frequently played across his lips, he took very seriously the cultural aim of *Hadoar* as he understood it and vigorously opposed proposals to lower the journal's intellectual level for the sake of achieving popularity. This seriousness marked his attitude toward all matters of culture and language. We did not speak Hebrew at home, but my father insisted on the purity of language even in English. When I would intersperse words in Hebrew or Yiddish into an English conversation, he could not tolerate the admixture, and he would always stop me by asking, "How do you say that in English?" He was also not among the despisers of Yiddish, and he wrote articles on Peretz in *Yivo Bleter* and in *Die Goldene Kait* without any diminution of his engaging literary style.

In addition, he served as a translator in English, Hebrew, and Yiddish. In these instances as well his name was not mentioned, and generally

² "Hokhmat Yisra'el ba-America," *Sefer ha-Shannah li-Yehudei America li-Shenat Tav Resh Tzadi Tet*, ed. by Menachem Ribalow (New York, 1939), pp. 345-378.

³ He wrote short notes or reports on events in the Hebrew movement anonymously or with an abbreviated byline (Y. B. or just B. or sometimes Y. ben Yitzhak). In addition to his position in *Hadoar*, he also did editorial work for Ktav Publishing House, where he prepared inter alia detailed indexes in the form of entire volumes to the *Hebrew College Annual* and the old series of the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, indexes that are based (as one of the reviewers of the project noted) not on the reading of the titles alone but on the study of the articles themselves.

In an earlier period, he helped Israel Davidson prepare *Otzar ha-Meshalim ve-ha-Pitgamim* (Jerusalem, 1957) to the degree that by his own testimony he almost deserved to be described as an author, and he was disappointed that his name did not appear anywhere in the book. (This may be because the work was not completed in the author's lifetime. In one place in the introduction by Shmuel Ashkenazi, who prepared the volume for publication, there is a reference to "the author and his assistants" [p. 15].) He left behind many notes containing material relevant to the study of folklore and proverbs. He was especially interested in the topic of the "evil eye," but did not live to publish the large amount of material that he assembled. [I will be happy to supply this material to any scholar in the field who can put it to good use.]

speaking I have no information regarding the articles that he translated. I must, however, note one translation of a particularly important work. At the end of the 1950's. he put great efforts into translating a lengthy lecture by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik from Yiddish into Hebrew. The lecture never appeared in Yiddish and was first published in Hebrew in the collection *Torah u-Melukhah: Al Meqom ha-Medinah ba-Yahadut* (Jerusalem, 1961), edited by S. Federbush, who turned to my father with the request to translate Rabbi Soloveitchik's work from its original language. I am referring to the famous essay, "Qol Dodi Dofeq." When the essay appeared in print, my father reacted with disappointment when he saw the extent of the changes introduced by Rabbi Soloveitchik, but he consoled himself somewhat with the observation that in the final analysis his translation still served as the foundation for the published version.

The first major article that he wrote when I was capable of appreciating his work to some degree was a study entitled "Rashi in Popular Legend" ("Rashi be-Aggadat ha-Am")⁴, which appeared as a sort of companion piece to his important, much earlier article on "Maimonides in Popular Legend" ("Ha-Rambam be-Aggadat ha-Am").⁵ The new article, written not only in response to the invitation of the editor of the collection but also thanks to the encouragement of my mother, appeared when I was fifteen-years-old, and I read it with the enthusiasm of a son beginning to appreciate the stature of his father. The Hebrew dedication that he wrote in the offprint that he gave me resonates in my memory to this day: "On your fifteenth birthday, I present you my dear son David with this booklet of mine on Rashi who is beloved and admired by you. May our Torah always be your delight, and may you find favor in the eyes of God and man. Your father who hugs, kisses and respects you."

The final verb, which was underlined, made a profound impression on me because my father was never impressed by elementary achievements. He derived enjoyment from my public reading of the Torah and *haftarah*—I learned the proper cantillation of the *haftarah* from him—but my general

⁴ *Rashi: Torat ve-Ishiyuto*, ed. by Simon Federbush (New York, 1958), pp. 147-179.

⁵ *Massad: Me'assef le-Divrei Sifrut* 2, ed. by Hillel Bavli (Tel Aviv, 1936), pp. 216-238. In his book *Shivhei ha-Rambam* (Jerusalem, 1998), Yitzhak Avishur cites this study dozens of times. He writes among other things that the article "includes everything that was known at the time about stories concerning Maimonides" and that "from the time of Berger's study no article of importance on popular stories concerning Maimonides appeared until...1962" (pp. 15, 17).

impression when I was a child was that he did not get particularly excited over the trivial things I was capable of learning or accomplishing. I recognized that he had exalted expectations, even when they were expressed—if they were expressed at all—in a calm and relaxed fashion. He once told me with a smile that he would be happy if I would know the content of one small bookshelf, and he showed me the shelf containing the volumes printed in a small format by the publishing house "Horeb": the Babylonian Talmud in four volumes, the Palestinian Talmud in two, *Shulhan Arukh* in two, *Mishneh Torah* in two, the Mishnah, *Midrash Rabbah*, *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Yalkut Shim'oni*, *Humash* with the *Miqra'ot Gedolot* commentaries and *Nakh* with the *Miqra'ot Gedolot* commentaries.⁶

It may be that one should not draw conclusions from off-the-cuff comments accompanied by a smile, but I had no doubt whatever that this was precisely what my father wanted. The only imprecision in his remarks was that he wanted even more than that. Among the many books that surrounded me at home in my high school years, I was particularly attracted to Nahmanides' commentary to the Pentateuch and his disputation with Pablo Christiani, to *Mehqerei ha-Yahadut* of S. D. Luzzatto, and to the poems of Bialik. The ability to hold discussions with my father about matters that he considered important engendered great satisfaction for both of us, and a new stage in our relationship developed, even though neither of us could relate seriously to the subject to which the other devoted his leisure hours: I had no talent in chess, and he never succeeded in understanding a scintilla of the rules of baseball.

The list of "Horeb" publications underscores another central characteristic that was not altogether typical in the Hebrew movement: the intimate connection to Jewish tradition, to the observance of the commandments, to Torah in its full sense. If the Hebrew movement of the twentieth century was born at the knees of the Jewish Enlightenment,

⁶ My father loved those little books passionately. When I studied at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, we were granted permission to bring a copy of the entire Babylonian Talmud to a major examination in Talmud. With considerable difficulty, I succeeded in persuading my father to allow me to bring that little four-volume Talmud to the yeshivah. When I returned home that evening, I had to stop on the way for several hours at Columbia University, and I left a full suitcase in the car with those four volumes next to it. The suitcase was stolen, but the books remained. I told my friends that I saw the hand of providence in the fact that the suitcase had been too full to fit the volumes of the Talmud in it, because if the books had been stolen—even without the suitcase—I would not have dared to come home.

or *Haskalah*, my father's worldview was born at the knees of the religious *Haskalah*. Needless to say, the term *Haskalah* does not fit the current century, and my father also felt great affection for hasidism in a fashion that was not at all typical of the original *Haskalah*, even in its religious manifestation. Although he did not live the life of a hasid, he read hasidic works, writing notes recording hasidic observations and "words of Torah" that touched him both as a scholar and as a Jew.

I was educated in the Yeshiva of Flatbush, a modern yeshivah where the discourse in Jewish studies classes was conducted in Hebrew, but the decision to send me there came primarily from my mother. My father was prepared to have me study in Yeshiva Chaim Berlin because of the emphasis on the study of Talmud.⁷ As I noted, he did not know his father, but on several occasions, he referred to a conversation that made a deep impression on him. He once met a non-religious Jew who grew up in Zinkov and asked him if he knew Rabbi Yitzhak Berger. The immediate reaction was, "I must go into the other room and find a skullcap before I can discuss him." This heritage generated a religious dimension in my father that merged almost seamlessly with the cultural atmosphere of the Hebrew movement on all its levels.

Approximately twenty years after my father's passing, my first grandchild was born. He was named after my father, and at the meal marking his circumcision, I cited the Hebrew lines written on my father's monument. As a historian, I must tell my students that one can learn a great deal about the values of a society from tombstone inscriptions, but one learns very little about the deceased themselves. But as a son, I call upon Him who knows hidden things to witness that these lines describe faithfully and almost without exaggeration the rare qualities that characterized my father of blessed memory:

יקר רוח ועדין נפש
גבוה משכמו ומעלה ונחבא אל הכלים
אוהב את המקום
אוהב את הבריות
סופר חוקר וחובב ספר
בקי בכל חדרי התורה והחכמה

⁷ Many years later, Joel Braverman, the celebrated principal of the Yeshivah of Flatbush, told me that he succeeded in expanding the time devoted to Talmud study from one hour a day to two after a lengthy debate with members of the school's Board of Education. "I explained to them," he said, "the importance of the study of Talmud, since without Talmud it is impossible to understand Bialik."

(Precious in spirit and refined in soul
Taller from his shoulders upward yet hidden among the vessels⁸
Loving God and loving mankind⁹
Author, scholar, and lover of books
Erudite in all the recesses of Torah and wisdom.)¹⁰

When my father passed away, my mother was inconsolable. On a number of occasions, she expressed her conviction that a person like him was simply not to be found, and she could not forget a sentence that he uttered on his deathbed. At that point, his words were not always clear, but while apparently referring to his imminent passing, he suddenly said, "Yeshayahu ve-Sarah Chanah Berger" (his name and that of my mother). My mother understood these words as an invitation to accompany him to the world to come, and she indeed passed away less than a year later. She asked me to write his words on her monument. I was unable to find a felicitous way of fulfilling this request with absolute literalness, but on the line before the date of her passing, I wrote, "Aletah la-marom lehiyahed im nishmat ba'aloh" ("She ascended heavenward to be united with the soul of her husband").¹¹

May their souls be bound up in the bond of life.

⁸ Cf. I Samuel 10:22-23.

⁹ *Ethics of the Fathers* 6:1, 6.

¹⁰ I borrowed the first line from the eulogy delivered by Tovia Preschel at the funeral. See too Preschel's article, "Yeshayahu Berger z"l" (*Hadoar* 53:11) where most of my father's important articles are mentioned, and the letter to the editor in 53:14, "Le-Zekher R. Yeshaya Berger z"l." (If I remember correctly, the author of that letter, which is signed Qore Pashut [A Simple Reader] was A.R. Malachi.) Aside from the articles listed by Preschel and Malachi and the plethora of smaller pieces in *Hadoar*, I note a political analysis where my father expressed his views on the Dumbarton-Oakes conference, the secession of "Si'ah Bet" from Mapai, and the beginning of the activity of *Lehi* ("Bein ha-Zemannim," *Bitzaron* 5 [1944]: 379-382. The article is signed, "Ben Yitzhak.")

¹¹ [The full inscription—once again with nary an exaggeration—reads as follows:

בת ישראל נאמנה לבוראה / מסורה ללא שיעור להוריה בעלה ובנה / ועמוד התווך של כל משפחתה /
חלשה בגופה ואדירה ברוחה / בינה ואצילות ועוז והדר לבושה / עלתה למרום להתיחד עם נשמת
בעלה / ז' חשוון, תשל"ה.

(A daughter of Israel loyal to her Creator, / Devoted without measure to her parents, husband, and son / And the central pillar of her entire family. / Weak in body and powerful in spirit, / Wisdom, nobility, strength and grandeur were her raiment. / She ascended heavenward to be united with the soul of her husband / 7 Cheshvan, 5735.)]