

Facing Current Challenges: Essays on Judaism By Yehudah Levi



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Reviewed by

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I once asked the principal of a yeshivah high school why the standard curriculum does not include the study of Jewish thought, such as excerpts from *The Kuzari*, *Derech Hashem* or *Michtav MeEliyahu*. He answered me quite candidly, saying that the study of such works is likely to provoke students to raise significant questions that teachers are not necessarily equipped to answer satisfactorily. Better, he contended, not to raise questions in stu-

dents' minds than to raise questions that will remain unanswered.

While we may be disappointed with the principal's response, we cannot deny the reality of his concern. A standard yeshivah education generally does not equip a teacher with familiarity—let alone mastery—of Jewish thought. Systematic study of the great works (such as those cited previously) is a rarity. Often, the sum total of a yeshivah alumnus' exposure to *musar* or *machashavah* is the collective wisdom contained in whatever *shmuessen* (lectures) he has haphazardly attended over the years.¹

If the educator is not educated, how can he educate others? Furthermore, can we consider a yeshivah alumnus adequately equipped to face the challenges of life if he lacks an understanding of Jewish thought? His experiences may cause him to have questions, and others may raise questions to him. How can one be a fully functioning *oved Hashem* without having a solid grounding in Jewish thought? Indeed, it is the pursuit of such grounding that Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto demands of us when he opens *Mesillat Yesharim* with these words: “*Yesod hachassidut veshoresh ha'avodah hatemimah hu sheyitbarer veyitamet eitzel ha'adam mah chovato be'olamo*—the foundation of piety and the root of perfection in the service of God lies in a man's coming to see clearly, and to recognize as a truth, the nature of his duty in the world.”

Clearly, both teacher and student need a curriculum for the study of Jewish thought, which is exactly what Dr. Yehudah Levi's book *Facing Current Challenges* provides. Dr. Levi is

ideally, perhaps uniquely, suited to provide a framework for thoughtful analysis of the issues that a Jew faces in the world. Heir to the *Torah im Derech Eretz* tradition of his German-Jewish forebears, Dr. Levi was educated in the profound approach to Talmud and Jewish thought that was the hallmark of Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner's Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin. He is also an accomplished scientist and academician. Dr. Levi's works possess a remarkable breadth and depth. (I make extensive use of his other books as well.)

Dr. Levi has taught for many years, also serving for some time as rector at the Jerusalem College of Technology, popularly known as Machon Lev. *Facing Current Challenges* consists of lectures that he gave to his students there. Dr. Levi obviously prepared extensively for the lectures, as they are rich in sources and extensively footnoted.

Unlike *Facing Current Challenges*, other compilations of Jewish thought² that are useful to educators consist of excerpted material from classic sources or summations with extensive references. *Facing Current Challenges*, however, preserves the flavor of Dr. Levi's lectures, enabling the reader to follow the logical and methodical development of his themes.³

Occasionally, Dr. Levi presents information that is so novel a reader may doubt its accuracy—that is, until he checks the reference in the back of the book. For example, we read that the Chazon Ish, *zt”l*, said, “History and world events do much to instruct the wise man on his way, and on the basis of the chronicles of the past he establishes the foundation of his wis-

dom” (225). We would not expect this statement from the Chazon Ish, who was generally opposed to learning secular studies.

More often, however, one will read the essays and emerge more educated in a broad array of issues, from “Zionism: A Torah Perspective” and “Kahanism” to “Organ Transplants” and “Ecological Problems.” A vast gamut of issues is presented by Dr. Levi in this work: issues concerning the land of Israel and the State; the relationship between Jews and Gentiles; family and sexuality; the interface of Torah, medicine and science and the role of *Aggadah* and *kabbalah* in Judaism, to mention a few.

It will be evident to any reader that Dr. Levi believes that the perspectives he presents are the authentic views of Chazal, the Rishonim and the Acharonim. To be sure, he admits that there are other views, but he explains—respectfully and politely—why they do not reflect mainstream Jewish thought throughout the ages. Not surprisingly, Dr. Levi's views are influenced by his exposure to the Hirschian philosophy of *Torah im Derech Eretz*, by his experience in the Lithuanian yeshivah world and by his scientific training.

Here, for example, are his views on Zionism:

What is Zionism? Some define Zionism as a love of Zion—on first sight quite a reasonable definition. It does not, however, fit the normal use of the word. If love of Zion made one a Zionist, the extreme anti-Zionist Neturei Karta, who loved Zion to the point that they refused to leave Jerusalem even during the War of Independence, would be the greatest Zionists of all. Few, however, would classify them as such. It follows that this is not the accepted use of the word (9).

On the topic of nationalism, he notes:

Nationalism, in general, is evil because it turns the nation into an end in itself. Judaism, however, is different; it has a higher purpose—to bring redemption to the world and actually rid it of nationalism. The nationalism called for by the

Torah—Torah nationalism—is secondary. While the Torah confirms the importance of Jewish nationhood, it values it not for its own sake, but because of Israel's exalted mission (7).

Secular Zionists, on the other hand, in a resolution adopted at the Tenth World Zionist Congress (Switzerland, 1911), divorced themselves from Torah, proclaiming, “Zionism has nothing to do with religion.” It is, therefore, a nationalism that is not rooted in Torah. What, then, is Religious Zionism? Is the term an oxymoron? The author continues:

What about religious Zionism? There are many views as to what it signifies. Based on the simple meaning of the

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words, it is Zionism . . . that favors religion and sees in it an important supplement to Zionism. It follows that the religious Zionist will wish to strengthen religion in the nation, because he sees this as being of benefit, even great benefit, to the nation. Even so, as long as he is a Zionist according to the meaning of the term as analyzed above, he will view the nation as the supreme value (10).

After noting the incompatibility of this stance with Torah-true Judaism, Dr. Levi writes:

In the religious Zionist camp there are also many who view the Torah, rather than the nation, as the supreme value. When they see themselves as Zionists, they use the term Zionism to mean something entirely different from the accepted meaning. Such usage turns the term into an obstruction to effective communication; beyond this, it may compromise the clarity of thought of those who use it (11).

Dr. Levi surmises that this need for clarity led Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik to say, “We do not believe in ‘Zionism plus religion’ or ‘religious Zionism.’ For us there is only one special noun—Torah” (12).

Dr. Levi surveys the problems facing Religious Zionists as a result of the inherent contradiction between Zionism and Torah. These problems include succumbing to the idolization of secular Zionist “heroes,” separating from heretical organizations such as the World Zionist Organization and failing to maintain good relations with religious anti-Zionists. He then states:

I believe every Torah-true Jew must take pains to free himself of these errors [problems noted above]. Then, he will no longer be a Zionist—not a general Zionist, nor even a religious Zionist. He will be a lover of Israel, of the Land of Israel, even an excellent citizen of the State of Israel. He will be engaged in the state's advancement and in straightening its path, involved with its economy and politics, and will take pains to awaken it to its purpose. A “Zionist,” however, he will not be (14).

The above will not sit well with those who identify with Religious Zionism nor with those who reject involvement in advancing the State. But the book's greatest strength is that it irritates the reader by challenging his preconceived positions.⁴ Dr. Levi did not make these assertions in a declarative, bombastic fashion. In the course of the three essays in which he formulates his perspective on the Land, State and society of Israel, he carefully musters evidence, like the good scientist that he is, from Rabbis Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, Moshe Avigdor Amiel, Eliyahu Meir Bloch as well as Achad Ha'am to prove his theses. While a reader may want to disagree with Dr. Levi, he may have to do a lot of thinking in order to effectively do so.

Similarly, Dr. Levi's treatment of secular studies will provoke both those who feel that such subjects should be afforded less significance as well as those who feel they should be accord-

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