

## Orthodox Use of a Hellenistic Historian: Rabbi Isaac HaLevi's Approach to the Writings of Josephus

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"Everything is dependent upon fortune, even the Torah scroll in the ark."

Rabbi Isaac HaLevi Rabinovitz, who presented the most comprehensive, profound and significant Orthodox response to the *wissenschaft des judentums* school of historiography, at least in everything concerning the history of the Oral Torah, did not enjoy the honor this might be expected to have earned him in the pantheon of Orthodox Jewish lights. To a certain extent, HaLevi did not have good fortune. The Orthodox world did not appreciate the "religious" value of his work, while the scholarly world was alienated by his arcane writing style.

In a previous study, which dealt extensively with HaLevi's historiographic method, I noted that Rabbi Isaac HaLevi's oeuvre opens a window onto a sub-genre which has not yet been discussed in academic research: critical Orthodox historiography: historiography which includes clear motifs of defensive Orthodoxy on the one hand, and, on the other hand, adopts the methodologies and conclusions of historical scholarship, ostensibly incompatible with the values of Orthodoxy.

Born in Lithuania in 1847, Rabbi Isaac HaLevi received an Orthodox Yeshiva education which included, inter alia, studies in Volozhin. He left Lithuania in 1895 when his business interests went bankrupt, and after several years of wandering in Europe he settled in Germany, where he remained until his death in 1914. Starting in 1897, during his period of wandering in Europe, he published the first in his series of historical books, *Dorot HaRishonim (First Generations)*. He published two more books during his lifetime, and other books were published posthumously from his manuscripts.

HaLevi believed that Orthodox faith and modern historical scholarship could be reconciled by their common aspiration to seek the truth: Orthodoxy liberates the historian from false prejudices, whereas the science of history provides the Orthodox Jew with tools for anchoring his faith in the past, "because the Orthodox foundation underlies the True Wisdom of Israel (*wissenschaft des judentums*).” For HaLevi this is not an empty declaration, and his books express a comprehensive effort to apply the

principles of modern historiography from within an Orthodox worldview; i.e. to create a critical Orthodox historiography.

This general approach may be exemplified by HaLevi's approach to Josephus. It is worth noting by way of introduction that any Orthodox approach to Josephus involves an internal contradiction. On the one hand, early commentators identified the book of Josippon with the works of Josephus and cited it frequently. In other words, from the viewpoint of traditional society, Josephus held a place of honor. On the other hand, the actions of Josephus – who collaborated with the Romans, published books in Greek and became an integral part of the Hellenistic-Roman culture – contradict Orthodox values, which eschew cultural collaboration with external elements outside Orthodox society. Thus, an Orthodox Jew who seeks the most appropriate attitude to Josephus finds himself between the hammer of the tradition of the *Rishonim* and the anvil of the values of the school of the *Hatam Sofer*. Before us stands another example of the paradox of Orthodoxy, which seeks to conserve tradition and thus contradicts itself, since the intensity of the desire to conserve is in itself an innovation.

One solution to this dilemma is the approach of the *Hafetz Hayyim* and the *Hazon Ish*. Their commitment to the tradition of the *Rishonim*, who used the Book of Josippon, leads them to “exonerate” Josephus. The *Hafetz Hayyim* and the *Hazon Ish* do not engage in historical scholarship, rather they view history through the lens of tradition, leading them to conclude that Josephus is Josippon, and belongs with the “good guys”. Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac HaLevi's approach is more complex.

Most of the references to Josephus in *Dorot Rishonim* are critical of Josephus's character and writing. HaLevi groups Josephus with a social framework which he calls “outsiders”, i.e. people who do not belong to one of the three known sects – Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. He argues that Josephus himself is distinct from the Sadducees in his beliefs, though he resembles them in his behavior.

HaLevi levels severe personal accusations at Josephus: treason, responsibility for the relatively easy fall of the Galilee to Vespasian, and responsibility for the anti-Semitism that ensued from his writings, in which he placed the blame for the Great Revolt on the Jews.

Additionally, in HaLevi's opinion, Josephus's writings betray an antipathy towards the Jews in general and the Sages and the zealots in particular, and admiration for their adversaries, including the Greeks, the Romans in general and Vespasian and Titus in particular, as well as Herod, Agrippas II and his faction. These proclivities are expressed, inter alia, in the choice of sources upon which Josephus relies, which are drawn from circles hostile to the sages and the Pharisees – the memoirs of Herod and Sadducee sources – suppressing information that incompatible with his historiographic objectives, and a narrative focusing on the elites and ignoring the people.

On top of these accusations HaLevi claims that Josephus's historical descriptions sometimes emerge from purely personal motivations, and are influenced by the Greco-roman audience addressed in his books. Thus, Josephus, in his view, warps his writing from personal and ideological motivations which contradict the values of Orthodoxy and lead to a deliberate and elaborate distortion of history. HaLevi condemns Josephus as unprofessional, approaching his sources uncritically, inventing words and putting them in the mouths of his heroes, contradicting himself, dating events inaccurately, and playing fast and loose with chronology.

In light of all this, we might expect HaLevi to have rejected Josephus as a usable historical source. Moreover, it would be easy to substitute the name of Josephus with the name of a modern historian such as Geiger to understand how HaLevi's historical criticism reflects ideological criticism – Josephus as a metaphor for *wissenschaft*.

In fact, in contradiction to the historical image current amongst the Orthodox as well as amongst Orthodox historiographical scholars, HaLevi adopted a completely different approach. First of all, in countless instances, HaLevi bases his historical assertions on Josephus. Moreover, HaLevi provides his readers with a method for gleaning reliable historical information from Josephus's. First, it must be recognized that there were limits to Josephus's distortions, in other words, Josephus had an agenda, and a clear assessment of that agenda can assist us in separating the

historical wheat from the tendentious chaff. The critical historian must examine whether Josephus described a particular matter in different places in his writings and compare these descriptions. Then he must clarify whether there are alternative sources for the matter and compare them with Josephus's descriptions. The next stage is to search the text for details that are not compatible with his agenda, which suggest that he is reporting them un-self-consciously. It must be noted when Josephus reveals details that he is not eager to share but cannot omit them altogether, and that he therefore weaves into the text in an effort to minimize their impact.

HaLevi's examination of Josephus led him to distinguish between his description of the framework of events, the latter being generally reliable, and his style, which is completely unreliable. At least in regard to the description of the behavior of the Sadducees, HaLevi argues that there may be room to stray from this latter rule, since in this case the social proximity of Josephus to the Sadducees distorted his description of their behavior, and here in his opinion Josephus is only reliable in describing their religious faith, since he was not a Sadducee. In HaLevi's estimation, it is also preferable to avoid relying on Josephus's chronology, since also in this area his reliability is wanting. In order to complete a historical description the historian must cautiously assemble kernels of truth found in the writings of Josephus in order to weave a balanced and reliable historical picture. The resemblance between the methodology HaLevi proposes for gleaning historical information from Josephus with the principles of modern scholarship is so great, that one might mistakenly think it was a syllabus for a university course on Josephus.

Since HaLevi does not categorically reject the use of Josephus's works but seeks to give his readers keys to judicious use of them, it is not surprising that there are points where he highlights the advantages inherent in Josephus's works, "the single source for all the chronicles of those times." The comparison with Rabbinic sources often reveals compatibility. Moreover, at times, when there are disparities between the Sages and Josephus, HaLevi prefers Josephus's view. HaLevi also believes that Josephus has an advantage over many other historians in that he wrote history

which he saw unfolding before his very eyes. Finally, in many instances HaLevi argues that Josephus's description should be accepted as accurate and reliable.

To summarize HaLevi's approach to the writings of Josephus, it can be said that HaLevi does not recognize the existence of the paradox we presented at the beginning. The values of Orthodoxy and the principles of modern historical scholarship are fully compatible, because, in his view, both these disciplines are interested in seeking the truth. In light of his view of historical truth HaLevi permits himself to criticize Josephus and present him as a traitor to his people for a bowl of Roman lentil stew, as if he is not the most important historian of the Second Temple period. That same view of historical truth led him to develop a methodology for gleaning reliable historical information from Josephus's writings, allowing him to rely on Josephus as though he did not represent values essentially opposed to the values of Orthodoxy.