

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter and Rabbi S. R. Hirsch

Editor's Note: In the *Israelit*, on March 22, 1906, Rabbi Naftali Hertz Ehrmann published an account of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter's stay in Berlin about thirty years earlier and of his desire to meet Rabbi S. R. Hirsch. This account, quoted in *Tenuas Ha-Musar* (I, pp. 199-200), appeared in English in *The Light*, on 14 Nisan 5738, and is reprinted here by permission.

At about this time, Rav Shimshon (ben R'foel) Hirsch arrived in Berlin. He often came to Berlin at the beginning of the 1870's in order to prepare the way for the "Austrittsgesetz,"* which was finally passed in 1876. Three years older than Rav Yisroel, he was always under great strain and beset with many different types of work which made great demands on him at all hours of the day and night throughout his stays in Berlin. He sought out ministers, ministerial advisers, and influential representatives in every area and, through personal representation of the case, tried to win over the authoritative factions in favor of the law. In the evenings, his correspondence and writing awaited him, and this often kept him occupied until well into the night. Rav Yisroel had a great longing to become acquainted with Rav Hirsch and to hear his views on the measures for consolidation of traditional Jewry in Russia. He had great respect for the regenerator of German Jewry, and no one else was more deeply convinced of the desperate need of *Russian Jewry* for such a personality. Questions of etiquette—regarding which of the two was to visit the other first—did not exist for Rav Yisroel. He asked me (as I was taking care of a few small duties for Rav Hirsch during his stay) to ask Rav Hirsch when would be the most

* The law permitting a group of Jews to form an autonomous community outside the jurisdiction of the government-recognized "official" community. In Rav Hirsch's case it allowed his *frum* community to separate itself from the dominant Reformers.

convenient time to visit him.... When I saw how the time of this great man was so completely taken up, I hardly had the courage to mention Rav Yisroel's wish, for I knew that its fulfillment would cost him more precious time... I therefore ventured to remark that the matter was not so urgent and the visit could easily be postponed for a few days. However, Rav Hirsch refused to hear of it, and asked me to ask Rav Yisroel to honor him with his visit the very next evening...

THE MEETING

More than 30 years have passed since the memorable evening. But the overwhelming impression of the meeting between these two great personalities has remained with me until this day. Their similarities and their differences; the overflowing wisdom of their thoughts, and the restrained modesty of their spoken words. The expression in Rav Hirsch's eyes from which his great, noble soul seemed to pour forth, and the flashing sparks which shot out from the gaze of Rav Yisroel and blazed around his great learned brow. All that and so much more—all of it remains in my memory as vividly as if it had just happened yesterday. How different were the two great men in speech and bearing, and in various other external aspects which draw the attention; and yet how similar and related were they in their thoughts and their spiritual life—in short, in everything which makes a man a Jew. Never have I sensed the binding and brotherly strength of the Torah *l'tzarefes hab'riyos* more deeply than in the moment when the two men reached out their hands to each other. Rav Yisroel who, even in general conversation, never let a word leave his lips which had not been carefully considered from all sides, and who knew in addition how precious Rav Hirsch's time was—particularly then—came straight to the matter which lay on his heart more than on anyone else's. He explained the dangers which he believed threatened the future of Russian Jewry and asked Rav Hirsch for his views on how best to combat them. Rav Hirsch, in his modesty, thought that he was not familiar enough with Jewish life in Russia to be able to express an authoritative opinion. Rav Yisroel however, he reasoned, must surely have thought about the problem a great deal himself, and he therefore asked him to first state his opinion. Rav Yisroel pointed out that the best means of preserving the younger generation for Jewry—to win back their respect—was through literature in the Russian language permeated with the true Jewish spirit. The exceedingly salutary results which would ensue from writings of this nature were to him quite indisputable. The tragedy was, however, that those Russian Jews who

were permeated with the truth of Judaism could not write Russian, and those who had acquired a secular education and had mastered the Russian language had broken with traditional Judaism. So that the production of such writings seemed unimaginable. Rav Hirsch suggested that if this was the case, then perhaps it might be proper to translate into Russian works written in the German language for this purpose. The translation, if necessary, could even be done by a non-Jew. This idea met with Rav Yisroel's full approval, and he asked Rav Hirsch to specify a few suitable works for this purpose. Rav Hirsch suggested the works of Salomon Plessner." At this point, I allowed myself to enquire whether the writings of Rav Hirsch, himself, would not be especially qualified, particularly such a work as *The 19 Letters*. Rav Hirsch replied that it would naturally please him greatly if, through a translation of his writings, this great undertaking could be accomplished. Neither was fundamentally opposed to a Hebrew translation. I later heard this from their own mouths. But they believed that the great benefits which they hoped would result from the propagation of the spirit of these writings could be effected more easily and more permanently if the remedy was given in the same form as the disease had been transmitted. On the way home, Rav Yisroel asked me to procure for him that very evening a copy of *The 19 Letters* and to read through it with him so that he might be able to form an opinion for himself. That was, however, easier said than done. At that time, Rav Yisroel had hardly begun to read German, and so we read until deep into the night and for still another few days after that, until we finished the first letter. Another few weeks passed before we finally completed the book. Rav Yisroel summed up his opinion of it, "The book must not only be translated into Russian, but also into *loshon ha-kodesh*."