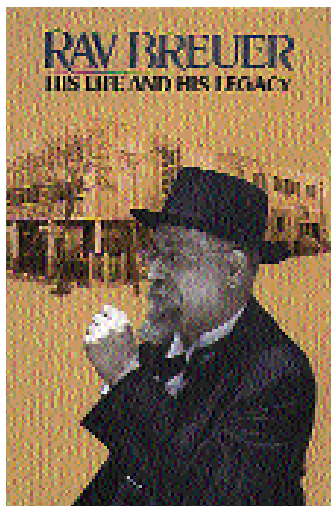


Rav Breuer

His Life and His Legacy

By Dr. David Kranzler and
Rabbi David Landesman



The Rabbi Dr. Joseph Breuer
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281 pages

Reviewed by
Rabbi Shelomoh E. Danziger

This readable, dynamic book is an instructive supplement to the Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch biography, published in 1996 by ArtScroll/Mesorah. Together they form what may be called the Hirsch-Breuer Saga. Historically and literarily the Hirsch story is not complete without the Breuer sequel. The Hirsch Realschule would have faltered in the course of generations without the establishment of the Breuer Frankfurt Yeshivah, without the yeshivah concept

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of intensive “learning” as basic to Jewish identity and survival. “Rav Joseph Breuer often commented that his father’s stance vis-à-vis *Torah im Derech Eretz* stemmed from the fact that R. Shlomo Breuer was in the position to complete [R.] Hirsch’s unfinished work. Rav Breuer stressed that any ideology has to be measured in the context of the times” (footnote on page 53).

Biographical and historical nuggets appear throughout the book. They reveal the strong historical sense of the authors, their painstaking research, numerous interviews and careful documentation. Also apparent is their objectivity. Dr. Kranzler and Rabbi Landesman, in the opinion of this Hirschian reviewer, have a genuine grasp of the *Torah im Derech Eretz* ideology. They seem to be adherents of this principle. Yet they view it in historical context and relate it to sociological factors, without, in consequence, negating its independent philosophical validity. The problems encountered in the application of *Torah im Derech Eretz* are not minimized. The weaknesses and failures of its adherents in certain times and circumstances are openly presented. This is not a sanitized book of ideology and events. But neither is it one of academic skepticism and supercilious non-involvement.

Other examples of this approach are the treatment of the areas of tension between Rav Hirsch’s sons and Rav Shlomo Breuer; between the latter and Rav Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk vis-à-vis the nature and function of Agudas Yisrael; the role of Jacob Rosenheim in Agudah politics, as well as his role in the anti-Breuer camp that opposed Rav Raphael Breuer’s succession to his father’s position of *Frankfurter Rav*.

In his Acknowledgments Rabbi

Landesman writes that “the message that they [i.e., the Breuer family] constantly and consistently conveyed was that the work was to be honest.” The author seems to have heeded this advice.

One might assume that the biographical details of the life of Rav Joseph Breuer are interesting (even fascinating) only to those readers who knew him or remember him. However, this is the biography of a celebrated *nav* of great erudition, palpable spirituality and integrity, monumental practical achievement and broad general knowledge. Even the general reader will find interest in the detailed history and development of this unique, spiritual personality, who is portrayed as a veritable *gadol* and *tzaddik*.

Some of us can confirm this portrayal. I remember one of my earliest encounters with him during the ’50s. He was giving a *derashah* and he used an expression which was a recurrent theme with him: “*Die Nähe der Shechina*” [“the nearness of the *Shechinah*”]. The way he said it, and the body language that accompanied those words, have remained with me as a vivid memory to this very day. It was this *kirvas Elokim* [nearness of Hashem] that sustained him in all the difficult phases of his life and in all the incredible achievements that are chronicled in this biography. In such a context, even the general reader will find the details interesting.

Rav Breuer was also a *tzaddik* vis-à-vis his fellow-man. “In the course of a lifetime his [i.e., Rav Breuer’s] *kevod habriyos* [respect for human dignity] [had] developed into a great art” (pages 263-4, from Rav Schwab’s *An Appreciation of Rav Breuer*). My last personal encounter with Rav Breuer was when my wife and I visited him. About an hour after we took leave of him, I

received a phone call from the Rav, who apologized for not having acknowledged my wife's presence in the study. Because of his failing eyesight, he had not seen her.

His Legacy

This book justly lays strong emphasis on the centrality of the *kehillah* concept in the ideology and accomplishments of Rav Hirsch in Frankfurt and of Rav Breuer in Washington Heights. *Torah im Derech Eretz* was implemented through the infrastructure of the *kehillah* — the “IRG” in Frankfurt, and “KAJ” in Washington Heights. The authors, in the Introduction, speak glowingly of Rav Breuer having established “a community that served as the paradigm for the subsequent development of full service *kehillas* across North America.”

Such a “subsequent development — of full service *kehillas* across North America” is certainly to be desired, but we see no signs of such development. The increasing mobility of modern society severely limits the reliability of the *kehillah* infrastructure as a critical factor in the perpetuation of the Hirsch-Breuer ideology of *Torah im Derech Eretz*. Changing neighborhoods are not “*kehillah* friendly.” There are additional factors in the sociology of the American Torah communities that militate against strong full service *kehillas* on a wide scale.

As quoted above, “Rav Breuer stressed that any ideology has to be measured in

the context of the times” (page 53). On page 168 we read the words of Rav Perlow (the *Novominsker Rebbe*), who was the *rosh yeshivah* of the *mesivtah* and *beis midrash* in Washington Heights. He writes of Rav Breuer:

He was an extremely reasonable person...[H]e realized that the kehillah could not exist in a vacuum. It could not be the oasis of Frankfurt in a sea of the yeshivah world... Rav Breuer understood that the times require a certain adjustment to the growth and development of the Torah community in America...

Part of that adjustment is the adoption of the yeshivah *derech halimud*, which is the dominant one today, and which defines one's Torah commitment in our time more than *kehillah* and *minhag*. Perhaps a way will be found to educate the youth in the yeshivah *derech halimud* in the context of *Torah im Derech Eretz* rather than in opposition to that principle. This would certainly seem to be the proper aim of any Hirsch-Breuer yeshivah.

With the waning influence of *kehillah*, perhaps an informal association of various communities will be formed, subscribing to the Hirsch-Breuer worldview of *Torah im Derech Eretz* (as expressed in Rav Hirsch's commentaries and writings), and bound together by gatherings and functions and a common periodical — a kind of greater KAJ.

A minor correction. On page 170 we read that Dr. Moller “retained the post of

president of the *kehillah* until his death in 1980, thirty days after the passing of his beloved mentor, Rav Breuer.”

Dr. Moller, originally of Hamburg, was a great-grandson of Rav Hirsch, and thus Rav Breuer's cousin. There were frequent policy disagreements between them that reflected the different orientations of Hamburg and Frankfurt. There was great mutual respect between them, but one can hardly speak of Rav Breuer as Dr. Moller's “mentor.”

A major omission. Much more emphasis should have been placed on the truly pivotal role played by Rav Naftali Friedler, z”l, in establishing the intensive yeshivah *derech halimud* in KAJ.

Rav Breuer — His Life and His Legacy is being bought eagerly by the many who have ties to Hirschian Orthodoxy. Indeed the book has a captivating flow of historical facts, biographical episodes and ideological analyses that explain the fascination. All who are interested in *Torah im Derech Eretz* will find it informative and thought-provoking. It is an engrossing book. **JA**

To obtain a copy of *For the Sake of Jerusalem* by Aharon Beir, translated and expanded by Bracha Slae, reviewed in the Winter 1998 issue of *Jewish Action*, contact G. Berger at 718-851-7192.