

PROF. SHIMSHON ROSENTHAL : IN MEMORIAM

By *MOSHE DAVID HERR*

Almost two years ago, Rabbi Shimshon Rosenthal, Professor of Talmud at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and one of the leading Talmudic researchers of our generation, died an untimely death.

Shimshon Rosenthal was born in 1915 in Strassburg and grew up in Köln. Ironically, his father left Strassburg after the French conquest of Alsace-Lorraine in World War I because he preferred to live under German rule and did not wish to become a French citizen. Within less than two decades, his family had to flee Germany, which had become Nazi. In 1934 he emigrated to Jerusalem, where he studied at the *yeshivah* (Talmudic-rabbinical academy) *Merkaz ha-Rav*. Upon receiving Rabbinical ordination, he served as the rabbi of "Kibbutz Rodges" from 1937-40. After a number of years in the Rabbinate and teaching in secondary schools in Jerusalem, he became the first supervisor of the institutions of "Religious Youth Aliyah." In 1944 he founded the "Seminar for Religious Youth Aliyah Leaders," which he headed for more than ten years. During the same period he studied at the Hebrew University, in the departments of Talmud, Jewish Law and Classics, receiving his doctorate in Talmud in 1959. In 1955 he began to teach at both the Hebrew University and at Bar-Ilan University. From 1959 to 1962 he was Visiting Professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. But he refused to stay in the United States, despite many entreaties, and in 1962 he returned to the Hebrew University, where he was promoted to full Professor in 1970.

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Rosenthal passed away at the height of his scholarly activity, when he was still young in spirit and filled with plans for the future. While he only published about fifteen scholarly articles in his lifetime, these are all *paucissima sed maturissima* (few but fully ripened). In these, as well as in his major works, which he did not see published during his lifetime, Rosenthal is revealed, first and foremost, as a major figure in the field of “lower” philology: questions of the version and readings of the text.

The literature of the Talmud is unlike that of classical Greece and Rome. The latter is available to us in critical editions, based on manuscripts, which have been printed for generations — the fruit of deep classical philological research dating back to the beginnings of the Renaissance and of Humanism in Europe, while philological research in Rabbinic texts is still in its bud. After some abortive attempts in the 19th century, our century has seen substantial, concrete progress in this field. Nevertheless, that which is lacking is still greater than that which has been done, so that the greater part of Rabbinic literature is still unavailable to us in critical editions. For this reason, Rosenthal imposed upon himself strict abstinence and nearly total forbearance from publishing in any of the other areas of Rabbinic research, such as “higher” criticism (i.e. source criticism) or the history of Jewish law (*Halakha*), even though he manifested deep interest in those areas as well. Moreover, he was graced with extraordinary learning and total mastery not only in Rabbinic literature, in which his knowledge was truly overwhelming, in the fashion of the old-style “house of learning” (*Bet ha-midrash*), but in Classical literature, Semitic languages, Middle Persian languages (these latter acquired through great diligence, as was his way, when he was already a professor) and methods of philological-historical research, as well. However, with infinite patience, he subordinated all of this vast knowledge to one purpose, which he himself defined in his exhaustive and outstanding essay about Prof. Saul Lieberman, whom he saw as his mentor. “Interpretation precedes, and must precede, source criticism.”¹ Further, “if Talmudic criticism is to be spared from the danger of renewed scepticism, which would uproot it entirely, it must overcome its desires — and wait until it can rely upon an introductory exegesis worthy of the name . . . precise, exhaustive and comprehensive, which goes down to the last detail . . . according to its version, its language and its subject.”² Such was Rosenthal: an exegete, whose exegesis is expressed both in his Talmudic lexicographical research, on questions of language, and in his Talmudic philological research, on questions of text. He knew that there is one historical truth, but there is more than one textual truth. However, he decided that one cannot seek the absolute historical truth

1. “The Teacher” (Heb.), *PAAJR*, 31 (1963), p. 56.

2. P. 57.

until one has reached the textual truths. Moreover, even with regard to those Rosenthal was filled with a sense of extreme prudence and perfectionism. He was thus wont to sift his teaching many times, both before writing and afterwards, and would delay it for years without publication.

In his articles, which deal with seeming trifles and petty details, he not only asks the right questions but proposes solutions that are to-the-point, appearing as a path-finder and a model going far beyond the narrow, particular concern of those articles. Thus, in his article "Was Rav, the Fraternal Nephew of Rav Hiyya, also his Sororital Nephew?"³ which *prima facie* deals, as its subtitle states, with only "One Detail in the History of the Recension of the Babylonian Talmud (Pesahim 4a)", he discovered that this detail "not only teaches about itself."⁴ It demonstrates, not only that the text of all the manuscripts and printed editions is confused here and "there is little possibility of ever uncovering the simple, original text";⁵ not only that there are two "textual truths" — two basic texts — here, neither one of which was preserved in its proper form in even one manuscript; not only that Rav was not, as is usually thought, R. Hiyya's fraternal nephew, but *only* his sororital nephew; but also, and principally, he illustrated "the free character of the text of the Babylonian Talmud,"⁶ which was already "fluid" by the time it had been set down in the Talmud — that is, in the Babylonian *yeshivot* (academies) themselves. Thus, this matter helps to "reveal several of the gnawing doubts which are the lot of anyone who dares attempt to make a critical edition of the Babylonian Talmud."⁷ Thus Rosenthal laboured, and through great effort and precision, entailing the analysing of various readings and textual traditions, achieved a general synthesis.

Alongside his erudition and prudence, Rosenthal possessed great sharpness, and did not recoil before radical or daring conclusions, as long as he was capable of proving them properly. Is not his very statement that we may never be able to know, regarding the Babylonian Talmud, "at what point the editing ends and the textual versions and traditions begin"⁸ most radical and non-routine? However, he also knew how to prove positive conclusions. Thus, in his article "The Interpretation of *Mishna Ta'anit* 1:1-2,"⁹ he attempted to show exactly how the difficult and composite text at the beginning of *Mishnah Ta'anit* came into being.

3. *Henoch Yalon Jubilee Volume*, Jerusalem, 1963, pp. 281-337.

4. P. 331.

5. P. 326.

6. P. 329.

7. P. 331.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Yad RA"M* (E. M. Lifschitz Memorial Volume), Jerusalem, 1975, pp. 261-270.

Despite his retreat into lower philology and lexicography, he did not completely neglect other areas, even in his publications. In his article "For the Most Part,"¹⁰ dealing with an area bordering on Jewish Law and on philosophy, he defined that which distinguishes Maimonides and Aristotle, and even interpreted Aristotle's own approach, while in his article "The *Giv'at ha-Mivtar* Inscription"¹¹ he attempted to demonstrate that a tomb inscription discovered in Jerusalem and dated from the 1st century C.E., written in Aramaic using Early Hebrew (i.e. Phoenician) script, was Jewish. Even though he clearly saw the possibility of connecting the two names on this inscription to the last remnants of the Hasmonean dynasty, and mentioned this in passing, he resisted it and dismissed it, in a thoroughly balanced and responsible discussion.

Most of Rosenthal's major works, including all of his books, were left behind in his *nachlass*, as I have hinted above. Of these, particularly worthy of mention are his critical editions, with comprehensive introductions, of tractates *Pesahim* (Chapter 1) and *Temurah* of the Babylonian Talmud, and tractate *Neziqin* (divided into three "bavot" or "gates") of the Palestinian Talmud, based on a Spanish manuscript which he discovered. One hopes that all of these, as well as several articles which he left behind, will appear and will benefit the public — and then everyone will be able to see the full stature of this great scholar.

In light of his approach to research — that of the "master of one trade" out of his own free choice and stern self-discipline, and not out of *force majeure* — one might think that Rosenthal was a scholar-recluse, who separated himself from the community, having nothing in his life but the "four cubits" of *Halakha* and research. Nothing could be further from the truth. In his youth, when he was still almost completely within the boundaries of the world of the *yeshivot*, he refused to conform to the typical pattern of that world, of withdrawal and exclusive devotion to learning. He joined the *Haganah* (Defense Militia) in which he was active until the War of Independence, in which he participated. Some time later, he became a member of the religious *kibbutz* movement (*ha-Kibbutz ha-Dati*), and even after he left, to study and to teach, he continued to serve as the rabbi of the movement until the creation of the State. During those same years, he published a number of halakhic rulings on timely questions, such as the milking of cows on the Sabbath and laws relating to tree grafting and to agriculture. Even after many years, when he had totally left the rabbinate, he didn't

10. *Perakim*, 1. (1967-68), pp. 183-224.

11. *Ibid*, 2 (1974), pp. 335-373; abbreviated English version in *Israel Exploration Journal*, 23 (1973), pp. 72-81.

abandon his interest and involvement in public matters, particularly in questions of state and religion. While he was still within the *yeshivah* world, he was ambivalent towards it, taking a critical stance from within. For many years, he was a member of the "Torah and Labour" Movement (*Torah va-Avodah*)¹² but here, too, he didn't always swim with the stream. In the years following the creation of the State he was not happy with the direction of that movement, and in the course of time became one of the founders of the "Movement for Torah Judaism" to which, as a Directorate member and the chairman of its committee for "Problems of State and Society according to *Halakha*," he was tirelessly dedicated for many years. Among other ideas, he proposed constructive plans for the separation of religious institutions from the State and the creation of institutes for Rabbinic training.

He was, of course, active in the academic world as well. From 1964 to 1971 he was the academic director of the Schocken Institute for Judaic Research, and he also headed its Department of Talmud, which included a staff of several young Talmudic scholars. He was also a member of the Academy of the Hebrew Language.

Rosenthal was a complex man, with contradictory inner inclinations which were not easily integrated. He did not come to the world of research as a youth, and his course in it was far from easy. However, he was always happy to exchange views with others, both in scholarly matters as well as in worldly affairs. He was strict in his observance of religious precepts (*mitzvoth*), but was opposed to religious coercion. He received both students and colleagues with a warm style and cheerful countenance. His language, in both speech and writing, was that of the Sages, and even his ordinary conversation was Torah. His views were definite, but this did not prevent fruitful cooperation with those of differing views and sometimes, in the course of argument, he even accepted the views of others.

A versatile man has left us, one who was both a Talmudic scholar and classicist, one of the "lions of the group." "May your eyelids look straight before you, may your eyes be enlightened by the light of the Torah and your face shine like the brightness of the firmament . . . and may your steps run to hear the words of the Ancient of Days."¹³

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12. Later known as "*ha-Poel ha-Mizrahi*."

13. TB Berakhot 17a.