

Politics of Exclusion in Judaism

Saul Lieberman and the Orthodox Part 2

Tensions

Lieberman, on the other hand, was...in all respects an Orthodox Jew. Yet despite the fact that Lieberman's focus was almost exclusively on scholarship and not on religious developments in the Conservative movement, this did not lessen the anger in the Orthodox world at what was regarded as a betrayal on Lieberman's part and a blow to Orthodox attempts to portray the Seminary as a false version of Judaism.

Aaron Pechenik recalled that Jacob Levinson, a prominent New York rabbi active in the Mizrahi movement, asked him to organize a meeting of leaders of Mizrahi and Agudat ha-Rabbanim to discuss Lieberman's teaching at the Seminary. According to Pechenik, R. Meir Bar-Ilan, Lieberman's father-in-law who was in New York at the time, explained that he was opposed to what Lieberman was doing, but that his son-in-law felt that he had no choice. In Palestine he simply did not have the economic security that would enable him to devote himself to scholarship.

It is indeed true that at the Seminary Lieberman was freed of his financial concerns and his workload was very light, meaning that he was able to focus on scholarly pursuits. In fact, this was the reason Lieberman himself gave Pechenik for remaining there. In addition, in one of Lieberman's letters to Ginzberg from before he came to the Seminary, what stands out is Lieberman's desire to work in an environment conducive to scholarship. Yet it is possible that these were not the only reasons Lieberman chose to join the faculty and continue at the Seminary. Lieberman's haredi brother claimed that he went to JTS in order to spread Torah among the students there. In line with this, Penina Herzog, R. Isaac Herzog's daughter-in-law recalls that she was told by Lieberman that he regarded it as "his task to train American Jews to make a commitment to study and observe the mitzvot." In a letter to Gershom Scholem, written shortly after he arrived in the United States, Lieberman wrote that he understood the mindset of the Seminary students, "and it appears that with a proper approach it is possible to draw them near to Torah and Judaism."

Whatever the primary reason may have been that convinced Lieberman to throw in his lot with the Seminary, he certainly must have known what the response would be in the Orthodox world; it obviously would not have been that important to him. Yet it is also possible that Lieberman was himself conflicted about his choice, for it was he who wrote: "One should not search for *shelemut*, not in people and not in the world. Some who appears

complete, without inner contradictions, one must examine whether he is even alive." (Shapiro, 17-18).

Guilt by Association – Mordechai Kaplan

Although Agudat ha-Rabbanim did not make any public comment when Lieberman first arrived in New York, five years later the organization felt it could no longer remain silent, due to the rising controversy around Mordechai Kaplan. Kaplan's views were already well known, and he had been teaching at the Seminary for many years. Yet matters reached a head in 1945 when the Reconstructionist Foundation published its Sabbath Prayer Book, coedited by Kaplan. This book stated, among other heresies, that "the Torah is a human document and not one supernaturally inspired." In response to this Agudat ha-Rabbanim excommunicated Kaplan and participated in a public burning of the prayer book. One of Agudat ha-Rabbanim's leaders, R. Israel Rosnberg, proclaimed that Kaplan was even worse than the Reformers.

Because Kaplan was on the faculty of the Seminary, the Orthodox spotlight once shone on Lieberman. In the September 1945 issue of *Ha-Pardes* (p.31), the rabbinic journal associated with Agudat ha-Rabbanim, an open letter was published, directed to "ha-Rav ha-Gaon R. Shaul Lieberman, gavra raba ve-ish ha-eshkolot." "Yelamdenu Rabbenu," the letter asks, is it permitted to be on the faculty of the Seminary together with Kaplan, who is intent on destroying all that is holy in Judaism? The letter, written in the first person plural, continues by noting that this question was also relevant a few years before, when Lieberman first joined the faculty and the rabbis wondered, "Why would a *kohen* enter a cemetery?" (That is, why would a figure such as Lieberman teach in a non-Orthodox institution?) The letter adds that this step led to great consternation in Orthodox circles. Yet what was a question before is now a cause for complete wonderment. How can Lieberman work side-by-side with Kaplan, who desecrates all that is holy and has been put in *herem*? The letter continues that they have heard that Lieberman treats Kaplan as one who has been excommunicated, but adds that this is not a solution. The letter concludes by stating that since they have so much respect for the learning and personality of Lieberman, they have therefore published this open letter. "We are concerned for his honor, which is the honor of the Torah."

Although it had been five years since Lieberman assumed his position at the Seminary, it is obvious from this letter that he was still regarded as a valued colleague by America's rabbinic elite, a fact that would soon change. Lieberman also regarded himself as part of the Orthodox community, and would do so for the rest of his life (Shapiro, 19),

It seems that the report that Lieberman treated Kaplan as excommunicated was true, at least in the beginning. According to Kaplan, in the days following his excommunication Lieberman avoided him, leading Kaplan to assume that Lieberman was, in fact, obeying the *herem*. Yet this approach apparently did not last long, for in October 1945 an open letter to Kaplan signed by Lieberman, Ginzberg, and Alexander Marx, appeared in *Ha-Doar*. While very critic of Kaplan's new prayer book, it also states that in contemporary times rabbis should avoid use of the *herem*, since rather than serving to help matters, its use leads to a desecration of God's name and a disgracing of the Torah. The letter concludes, "This is not a time to be silent, and we say to Dr. Kaplan: 'What have you to do with halakha? Confine yourself to aggadah.'"¹ Not surprisingly, the editor of *Ha-Pardes* thought that this sentence was ridiculous, since Kaplan had no place in *any area* of Jewish life or thought, most certainly not in the realm of aggadah, which contains matters of great theological importance. (Shapiro, 20)

In the issue of *Ha-Pardes* following the open letter to Lieberman, there is a short note stating that the "Gaon R. Shaul Lieberman" had requested that his reply remain private, only the last sentence was published, in which Lieberman asks R. Samuel Pardes, the editor, that he has received a letter in which Lieberman attempts to justify his remaining at the Seminary. Needless to say, those who were aware of this note wondered how Lieberman defended himself, yet all attempts to locate his letter were unsuccessful.

Shortly before I [Shapiro] published the second volume of the collected writings of R. Jehiel Jacob Weinberg (aka the Seridei Aish), I was fortunate to discover this very letter among the papers of R. Dovid Lifschitz, who himself was active in Agudat ha-Rabbanim.²

In this letter, Lieberman expresses his pain that the open letter was published. He goes on to state that if the heads of Agudat ha-Rabbanim thought that it was forbidden for him to teach at the Seminary, why did they not summon him to appear before a *beit din*. Lieberman further states that before he accepted the job, he consulted with three universally recognized sages in Jerusalem. Although he does not reveal their names, he says that he is prepared to do so if necessary.

According to Lieberman, only one of these sages refused to give a ruling. The second said that he did not see any clear prohibition against accepting the position at the Seminary. This is perhaps understandable; after all, there is no prohibition to teach non-Orthodox Jews. In accordance with this, R. Moses Feinstein ruled that as long as one is not pressured to teach anything in opposition to tradition, and especially if one needs the money, it is

¹ Reference to statements made to R. Akiva in B. Chagigah 14a, B. Sanhedrin 67b

² Shapiro's citation for the letter is *Kitvei ha-Gaon Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg*, ed. Marc B. Shapiro (Scranton, 2003) vol. 2, pp. 449-450.

permitted to teach at a non-Orthodox Talmud Torah.³ The third sage said to Lieberman: You are the man, go and be successful, but only if you do not remain at the Seminary permanently (Shapiro, 21).

In his letter, Lieberman states that at the Seminary he is permitted to teach what he wishes. He also mentions that if another two or three Orthodox teachers joined the faculty, they could turn it into a wonderful place...and he would later successfully recruit a number of outstanding Orthodox scholars to join the faculty, either as permanent appointments or as visiting lecturers. Lieberman adds that since the Seminary officially recognizes the authority of the *Shulhan Arukh*, as long as this remains the case he hopes that much good will result from his presence there. "I say, with all due responsibility, that I am sure that my presence at the Seminary prevents the outbreak of a great dispute which would lead to a terrible *hillul ha-shem*."⁴

As mentioned, Lieberman did not want this letter to be made public, although copies must have been circulated among at least some members of Agudat ha-Rabbanim, which is undoubtedly how one came to be found in the Lifschitz papers. As to why he did not want it publicized, Spiro and Schochet suggest that this was because "he opposed the public discussion of sensitive matters such as his relationship with JTS and the Orthodox perception of the Conservative school." In my note to this letter I offer a different possibility: Lieberman did not want his employers to know that despite his presence at the Seminary, he regarded himself as bound to the Orthodox leaders.

Whatever his reason, although Lieberman's response to the open letter no doubt allayed some of the suspicion and anger directed at him, its effect was only temporary. In fact, even for those who accepted the legitimacy of what Lieberman stated in his letter, there might still have been reason to develop a negative view of him in the coming years. To begin with, contrary to the instructions given Lieberman by the unnamed sage, he *did* remain in the United States permanently. Also, the permission given to him was to teach at the Seminary. Yet in 1949, Lieberman became dean of the Rabbinical School. In other words, his imprimatur and prestige were now behind every rabbi produced by the Seminary, and his signature was on their *semikhah* (Shapiro 22-24).

References

Shapiro, Marc B. Saul Lieberman and the Orthodox. Scranton: University of Scranton Press. 2006

³ Igrot Moshe Y.D. 1:139

⁴ Shapiro adds in note 83, "At the end of his life, faced with the new religious direction taken by the Seminary, Lieberman urged his students to stand in strong opposition to women's ordination, "to prevent the last ember of *halakhah* from being extinguished."