



*Life in Two Worlds—“the Middle Way”*

Submitted by Ephraim Chamiel

This is a complex and ambitious dissertation that seeks to analyze the thought of three Jewish religious thinkers whose work falls primarily in the second third of the nineteenth century. This was a period rent with strife between the Reform movement and its Orthodox opponents over numerous issues engendered by the encounter with modernity. Chamiel poses the three figures, Zvi Hirsch Chajes, Samson Raphael Hirsch and Samuel David Luzzatto, as those who sought to forge a “middle way” between Reform and Orthodoxy by embracing facets of modernity without relinquishing tradition. While each of the three sought to achieve this by navigating a unique course, quite different from his two fellows, nevertheless, they share the ambition to chart a “middle way”, by tacking between the camps to their left and to their right. How each accomplished this is traced through four key issues: 1) the role of the Bible in Judaism and subjecting it to modern Biblical criticism; 2) tradition and the possibilities of religious reform; 3) the Haskala and rational authority; 4) emancipation, peoplehood and restoration to the Land of Israel.

After an introductory chapter outlining the basic problems confronting Judaism in the nineteenth century and a brief biography of each of the thinkers, Chamiel proceeds to take up the four issues in the subsequent chapters. The modern period saw the rise of the importance of the Bible in contrast to the Talmudocentricism of traditional Jewish society. Both Hirsch and Luzzatto authored Biblical commentaries that enjoy great popularity to this day. A central issue was the use of modern critical tools to analyse the Biblical text. Chamiel analyzes well the fine distinctions, in particular Luzzatto’s method where he takes issue with other scholars, Lawrence Kaplan in particular, over how to categorize him in terms of fundamentalism and tradition. The third chapter, to my mind is the best in its analysis of how tradition was to be understood and the rejection of religious reforms. Chamiel reviews the various

traditional views on the divine revelation of the Torah at Sinai and charts the differences between the three thinkers in their understanding of the Oral Law, and layers within the Oral Law that were thought to have been also revealed at Sinai and not of human origin. Particularly striking is the analysis of Chamiel of Hirsch’s insistence that not only was the Oral Law (though not the Aggadot) divinely revealed, but that it preceded in time the Written Law. The following chapter takes up the question the Haskala, both as an educational program of secular studies, and the authority of a rational universalism confronting the authority of a particularistic revelation. Chamiel fully understands the complex interplay between the traditional structures of knowledge and the subtle but important shifts of the three thinkers in matters such as secular studies. The concluding chapter treats notions of exile, the valuation of the Land of Israel, the universal ethical mission of a unique people and the expectation of a restoration to the Land. Maimonides and Judah ha-Levi are the seminal medieval sources for the three, but Chamiel notes the impact on their thought of Moses Mendelssohn’s notions of a Jewish political culture that sees restoration as a distant reality, and has a positive take on exile as an opportunity to realize the universal mission of the Jews while devaluating the Land of Israel. Finally, Chamiel draws the various strand of his analysis together characterizing each of the three thinkers and how, if you want, they squared the circle in their unique way.

Chamiel dissertation is a valuable contribution to the understanding of these three thinkers. He has read extensively the relevant primary and secondary literature, and put to good use his tight focus on a restricted number of issues that restrains his otherwise admirable tendency to range wide. I found particularly impressive his command of the traditional, pre-modern thinkers and their impact on nineteenth century thought. He has treated complex issues in a clear lucid language and the tables are most useful in keeping track of the various positions on key issues. This certainly is an original dissertation. It is first and foremost an analysis of thought and philosophy, although he is also careful to trace the historical record, especially in the case of Luzzatto, noting a clear development and change over time.

As a historian, my approach would be quite different to these problems, and yet I appreciate the fact that Chamiel’s different disciplinary analysis, especially his enlightening comparisons have yielded valuable in-depth insights that would perforce be missed in a more straightforward historical account.

My conclusions:

1. This dissertation merits to be certified as a doctoral dissertation without any changes.
2. I do not request that my identity be kept confidential.

The table:

1. Quality of background control of sources, etc	very good
2. Quality of methods, etc	good
3. Quality of writing:	very good
4. Originality, innovation	good

Summa cum laude? No

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