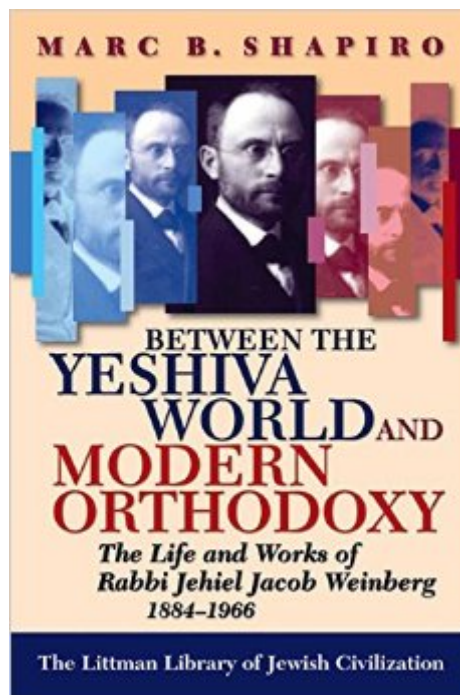


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Between The Yeshiva World And Modern Orthodoxy: The Life And Works Of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1884-1966



Synopsis

Compellingly and authoritatively written, this biography illuminates the dilemmas that Europe's Jews have faced over the past century. The discussion of the inner struggles of one of twentieth-century Judaism's most enigmatic religious leaders - a figure who became a central ideologue of modern Orthodoxy despite his traditional training in a Lithuanian yeshiva - elucidates many institutional and intellectual phenomena of the Jewish world, and especially in pre-war Europe, that have so far received little attention.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

To the reader interested in cultivating a religious outlook or in figuring out "how we got here", Marc Shapiro's book is indispensable. Shapiro devotes two hundred-plus pages to effectively capturing the genius and complexity of the historically pivotal Rabbi Jehiel Weinberg. The author paints his Weinberg against the dizzying circus of conflicting alternatives that were once available to the intellectually curious traditional Jew: the Mussar Movement, Haskalah, Zionism, and enlightened German Orthodoxy. The interactions between competing Jewish interests are sometimes comical, oftentimes nasty. If Shapiro is correct, Weinberg is among only a handful of Orthodox Talmudists who truly embraced western culture and critical thought in all endeavors, including religion -- almost welcoming the tension that accompanies such an openness. Rabbi Weinberg battled for an enlightened Orthodoxy and cared for its community of adherents for most of his life, always maintaining his principles in the face of adversity. The volume highlights Weinberg's many run-ins

with elitist colleagues in the east to whom Torah im Derekh Eretz was a silly philosophy of last resort, as Weinberg himself once thought. One is extremely troubled by the uninformed opinions of certain rabbis who rejected a synthesis of Judaism and western culture without ever having tasted the latter. The thoughtful reader comes away with the impression that any attempt at reconciling old school Lithuanian Orthodoxy with its secularly educated western counterpart is doomed to fail. Bear in mind, though, that this volume is far removed from the hagiography that many have come to expect for the glorification of legendary figures.

Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg 1884-1966 was one of the Torah giants of this century. He was the preeminent European posek (Halachic decisor) in the post-war period. This biography tells his own personal life story but also provides an insight into the struggles of various streams within the Orthodox world for position and predominance during his lifetime. A product of the world of the Yeshivot and of the Mussar movement he also was educated as a scholar at the University of Giessen. There he was taken under the wing of a great Gentile scholar of Judaism Paul Kahle. There too he taught a class in Torah to non-Jewish students. His immense learning won him the respect of scholars throughout the world of Jewish learning. Shapiro makes it clear that Weinberg was an advocate of what he himself exemplified the combination of Torah learning and higher secular studies. And that Weinberg was troubled in his last days at the thought of a Jewish world of learning so narrowly focused as to lose its capacity to have influence in the real world. He believed for instance that certain kinds of secular knowledge would be necessary to make the state of Israel viable and independent. Shapiro does not provide a deep psychological analysis of Weinberg's character but does tell the basic biographical story including that of his unfortunate marriage. He indicates that Weinberg lived his life in great loneliness, especially in his last post-war years in Montreux where he headed a small Yeshiva. This is in a way an unusual biography of a Torah giant as it is not a hagiography, but provides a solid historical accounting. It is again especially instructive in the picture it gives of the Orthodox Jewish world, its divisions and conflicts.

I went to a modern Orthodox shul when I lived in Washington, and I now go to a shul in Jacksonville that is somewhat more "yeshivish" (i.e. not Hasidic, but less liberal than my prior congregation) in orientation; this intellectual biography of R. Weinberg gives me a better idea of the intellectual roots of both wings of Orthodoxy. Both modern Orthodoxy and Yeshiva orthodoxy have their roots in 18th and 19th century Europe. In Germany, relatively modern thinkers such as Samson Raphael Hirsch and David Hoffman favored a synthesis of Orthodoxy and modern culture, embracing art and

literature to the extent compatible with halacha. These ideological ancestors of modern Orthodoxy argued that Judaism could (in the author's words) be a "decisive spiritual force for humanity" and "provide answers to the problems of morality and social justice which confront modern society." By contrast, in Eastern Europe, rabbinic scholars based in yeshivot (educational institutions devoted to Torah study, comparable I suppose to rabbinic seminaries today) tended to favor isolating Jews from the secular world, and focusing purely on Torah study as opposed to secular learning. So now when I go to shul and hear a rabbi telling us to "love the world" or to be suspicious of the "nations of the world", I hear the voices of rabbinic intellectuals who died a century or two ago. Some more specific things I learned: *The level of hostility between some yeshivot and Zionism. In the Slobodka yeshiva where Weinberg studied, forty students sought to form a Zionist group. The administration forced them to disband by not just threatening to expell them from the yeshiva, but also to revoke rabbinic ordinations of students who had already received them.

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