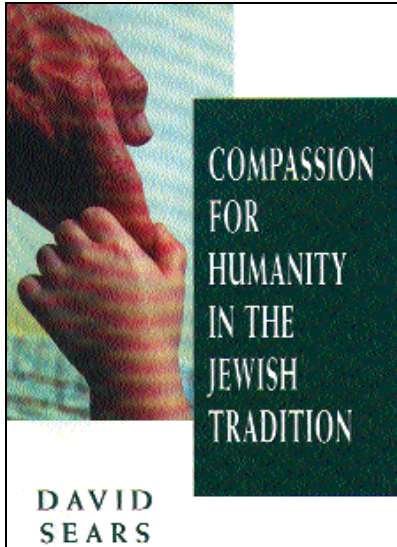


## Compassion for Humanity in the Jewish Tradition

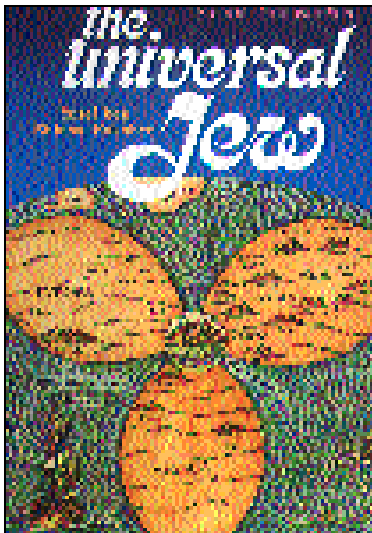
By David Sears



Jason Aronson Publishing Company  
Leonia, New Jersey, 1998

## The Universal Jew: Letters to a Progressive Father from His Orthodox Son

By Yosef ben Shlomo Hakohen



Feldheim Publishers  
Nanuet, New York, 1995

Reviewed by  
Professor Shalom Carmy

A high school principal, in the aftermath of the Rabin assassination, is called upon to report what his yeshivah is doing to foster a civil, humane ethos among the students. The answer is that he has instructed the *rebbeim* to deliver inspirational talks on *Chumash Bereshit*. As he reminds us, one of the great ideas in the Netziv of Volozhin's introduction to Genesis, in his classic 19th century commentary *Haamek Davar*, is that studying the behavior of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob towards the non-Jews they encounter provides a model for our own interaction with an alien world.

Among the examples he adduces are Abraham's prayer on behalf of Sodom and Isaac's readiness to be appeased by the Philistines who have tormented him. The questioner, who knows the Netziv and also the faculty, nods encouragingly and hopes for the best.

It is no accident that both books under review quote this passage of Netziv. Sears' volume is a useful and inspiring anthology of Jewish texts and stories highlighting the brotherhood of man in theory and practice. His sources range from Biblical and Talmudic material familiar to all but ever worth repeating, to modern figures like Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, Rav Kook and Rav Ahron Soloveichik. The anecdotes about *Gedolei Yisrael* are of an everyday and unsurprising nature; for that very reason they are educationally invaluable. Sears' own comments are brief and unobtrusive. There is a gentle but distinct Chassidic orientation; Reb Nachman and the Lubavitcher Rebbe are

especially favored. But for some remarks in the preface about universalistic critiques of Judaism and about the relative indifference of the "average Torah-observant Jews" to the preoccupations of this book, one would wonder why it is as needed as it is.

Though Yosef Hakohen covers much of the same territory, and in the same spirit, and contributes many valuable insights, he explores it from a specific vantage point. He writes as the son of a progressive father; and the father's participation makes this book more of a genuine dialogue than a routine exercise in epistolary popular theology. Unlike other "progressive" parents, this father never advocated assimilation. He is happy with the long ago decisions that he and his wife made, which put Jeffrey on the educational path that led him to become Yosef.

Dad's progressive heritage includes sympathy for the Stalinist utopia of the '30s, which is dissolved only by his discovery, after World War II, that Communist declarations about the flourishing of autonomous Jewish culture in the Soviet Union were a sham. Identification with the Soviet regime continues, however attenuated, in his reminiscences of the Rosenberg affair. In later years he takes up, for a while, with the Jewish Defense League, but turns away when he realizes that Meir Kahane is right wing rather than progressive. If one takes his testimony at face value, Dad, and those who thought like him, survived the show trials of 1930s with unruffled faith, were immune to stories of mass murder, and were not particularly disturbed by the Nazi-Communist pact of 1939, which made the Soviet Union Hitler's partner in the invasion of Poland.

From a common sense moral perspec-

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*Professor Carmy teaches Jewish Studies and Philosophy at Yeshiva University and is a consulting editor of Tradition.*

tive, the terror and imprisonment of millions of people, no matter what “higher” ideological justification is provided, and the bare-faced alliance with Hitlerism, should be cause for horror. To contemplate one’s own attraction to a movement so evil should be the occasion of mortification and soul-searching. A mode of thinking that is thoroughly universalistic, rather than merely progressive, might consider the crimes of Stalinism more appalling than the attempt by Soviet authorities to prevent Paul Robeson from singing Yiddish songs in Moscow.

In real life, of course, morality, even for the politically overcommitted, is primarily a local affair. Surely Yosef’s many stories of his parents’ everyday, sleeves-rolled-up kindness and commitment to their neighbors and acquaintances count for more than gullibility about events in faraway countries of which one knows little, and perhaps tries, for the sake of one’s illusions, to know less. I call attention to the matter of credulity because it explains why the standard term of praise in this book is “progressive” (sometimes radical; rarely, liberal), while “politically conservative” is a synonym for a Jew whose religious outlook is almost exclusively limited to particularistic ideas. We shall come back to this question later.

**C**ontemporary Orthodoxy, meanwhile, has its own reasons for mortification and soul-searching. Not the least is the degree to which attitudes of indifference, contempt and rudeness towards non-Jews have become tolerated in our community. Sometimes, when this mentality is translated into public behavior that cannot be ignored, or when the xenophobic habit is transferred to Jews from whom we feel estranged, we are forced to condemn it. We then set aside time for public and private self-examination — the Rabin murder was one such specter that haunted the rabbinical heads of Israel and America.

Many readers of these words are aware of, and disturbed about, the crisis which forms the background to these two books. Let me venture some further remarks on the subject, which may clari-

fy how books of this sort may improve the situation.

First, the problem is not one of information, but of spiritual health and balance. To be sure, the teachings of Judaism respecting the non-Jew are complicated by the tension between universalistic and particularistic elements. Many well-meaning discussions of the universalist element in Judaism are fatally flawed, and fail to convince, because they undervalue the fundamental concepts of *bechirat Yisrael* and *kedushat Yisrael* (the election and sanctity of the Jewish people). One goal of a sophisticated theological education is to develop the categories and capaciousness to do justice to the intricacies involved. But there is a higher sophistication, one that can see both the anthill and the mountain and know the difference between the one and the other. Rav Ahron Soloveichik has observed that, if a Jew is a racist, it is not because of the Torah he has learned, but because of the Torah he has not learned. This, I would suggest, is not because the greater scholar has access to some esoteric text or recondite dialectic as yet unknown to the bigot. It is rather because the mature student can resist the temptation to become fixated on one thread in a source and thus to distort the overall teaching of the Torah. For this reason, both Sears and Hakohen are to be commended for concentrating on the main highway of *halachah* and Jewish thought, and, in accordance with our present need, reminding us of what we should never forget.

Second, anti-Semitism is no longer an adequate excuse for rampant xenophobia. At the most superficial level, the atmosphere in which genealogists strain to produce a Jewish family tree for Hillary Rodham Clinton is far different from that in which a Jewish queen concealed her people and birth, or even the world of our parents, in which adversaries of FDR, Truman and Ike whispered or inveighed about their alleged Jewish blood. In the contemporary United States, the negative stereotypes and collective ill-will that cause real harm to individuals are more likely to be inflicted upon members of other groups.

This respite from persecution may be temporary, and, like most good things in life, it is incomplete, but this does not make it any less real. The greatest proof of its reality is the conduct of those Jews who are most likely to appeal to anti-Semitism as a reason for despising Gentiles. Were the fear of Gentile hatred truly a prime motive governing their attitudes and behavior, they would certainly not multiply the opportunities for provoking it through careless and gratuitous slurs.

Hakohen, in keeping with the biographical framework of his book, touches upon anti-Semitism. His tone is generally optimistic, as when wearing a *yarmulke* initially provokes hostility, which is quickly transformed into respect. At several points he expresses the opinion (to my mind, correct) that, in a pluralistic society, the Jew who is open about his identity is a better neighbor and co-worker to the analogously situated non-Jew — and hence more progressive — than is the homogenized Jew.

Can we then disregard as marginal the perpetrators of ethnic slurs? Can we dismiss as “wild weeds in the garden” the purveyors of ethical cynicism and militant trash? Would that things were so simple. From time to time, we are sickened not only by the blowhard sniggering away *chazarat hashatz* in the back of the *shul*, but also by the blowhard inveighing away at the front. Most of all, when we fail to condemn unacceptable attitudes and behavior, when we — we who do know better! — even manage a faint smile as the offender looks about him, inviting our approval, is our guilty silence merely disgust or cowardice, or is it the feeling, however irrational, that the blowhard has struck an authentic chord?

**F**or the sake of self-understanding, I must, at this point, introduce a very unpleasant observation. The Rambam (*Hilchot Deot* 6) emphasizes the importance of community for the development of virtue. If you find yourself in a corrupt society, leave; if you

can't leave, keep to yourself. Consider the culture in which we find ourselves: its popular entertainment; some of the values enshrined in the law of the land; the character of its most emulated individuals; the convictions consciously inculcated by its educators. Is this not the kind of culture from which we ought to separate ourselves? And if the culture is so corrupted, how can one not indiscriminately despise people who partake in that which is spiritually diseased?

Please don't misunderstand me. My observation is psychological, not (God forbid) normative. I do not hold that despising a culture justifies despising its carriers. To begin with, my own work has brought me into direct and indirect contact with many individuals of sensitivity and integrity, outside the orbit of Orthodox Judaism, whose thought and character, even as it requires of me careful scrutiny and critical evaluation, compels respect and even enthusiasm. In fact, some of them see more deeply into the moral failures of our society than does the average unreflective Orthodox Jew, which, as I have often argued, is one religious reason for getting a broad liberal arts education. I should be the last person to denigrate their efforts. Yosef Hakohen learned at his parents' knees what every child should know: that within every group there are better people and worse. He tells of ordinary rabbis and ordinary Jews who succeed in transmitting something of their sanctity and wholesomeness to their Gentile neighbors. He enjoys speaking about his participation in the universal language of folk music, with all its variety, which enables him to build bridges to Irish, Latino and other performers. Each reader can, I hope, supply his, or her, own examples.

Consider, moreover, the evidence from the behavior of *Gedolei Yisrael*. Individuals like Rav Moshe Feinstein and Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky walked the same streets that we call home. The singular beauty, the sheer gracefulness displayed in their casual encounters with Gentiles, recounted in these two books and elsewhere, dazzle the witness and survive transfer to the printed page. It would be ridiculous to say that the observant Jew

who finds himself despising Gentiles is somehow more heedful of the Rambam's message, or more sensitive to the defects of Western culture.

And yet the psychological challenge remains. How can we reach out, with compassion and respect, not only to certain individual Gentiles who happen to be near to us, but to a society whose fabric we regard as rotten through and through?

**A**fter the destruction of Sodom, Abraham lived in Gerar (Genesis 20). The king, Abimelech, attempts to take Sarah as his wife, until God informs him that she is married to Abraham. Abimelech then remonstrates with Abraham, accusing him of unconscionable behavior, placing him in an incriminating position. Abraham remains silent. Abimelech renews the interrogation: Why did you do this? And now Abraham levels with him: He knew that there is no fear of God in this place and he concealed his relationship to Sarah lest he be murdered on her account.

This incident may be instructive for us. Abraham is certain that Gerar is a place without *yirat Elokim*. It is doubtless a society from which he would wish to keep his distance. He cannot help despising its culture. Abimelech is an individual. He is not beyond criticism: a truly scrupulous man would have taken precautions. Yet he is not a moral monster. He engages Abraham in moral dialogue, and Abraham cannot answer him immediately. Perhaps, as the Netziv comments, he found the king's initial questions peremptory, even bullying, and thus impossible to respond to in a civil manner; perhaps he was forced to consider the possibility that he had indeed been unfair to the Philistine.

Is Abraham's predicament unlike ours? On the one hand, a society that is, on the whole, bereft of the fear of God; on the other hand, many individuals, decent enough in their own way, not without ideals, often thirsty for spiritual and moral edification. Think of our public entertainment: should we be nauseated by its dominant character or encouraged

by the large number of people who share our disgust? Should we despair of the conduct of our officials, or take heart in the revulsion they arouse, or give up hope again because the revulsion accomplishes so little? Like Abraham in his discussion with the king of Gerar, we have no easy formula to deal with such situations.

Abraham prayed for Abimelech. Offhand, this prayer was not as dramatic as the previous prayer for Sodom. After all, Abimelech was innocent, and Abraham was acting at his request, itself prompted by divine instruction, rather than on his own initiative. But, in a way, the prayer for Abimelech is the more significant one. For here Abraham was interceding on behalf of a man towards whom he might have cultivated a grudge, and who might himself harbor resentment against Abraham. Abraham's petition for Sodom did not change the outcome: Sodom was destroyed. God did hearken unto his entreaty for Abimelech. And as *Chazal* remark, noting the juxtaposition of verses, the prayer for the house of Abimelech serves as a prelude to the birth of Isaac: by praying for his neighbor, Abraham himself receives what he prayed for.

**T**he word "progressive" in Hakohen's book conjures up a particular American political configuration on the left of the spectrum. But literally the word denotes a belief in progress. The progressive believes that the world is getting better, and, more significantly, that conviction is taken to provide the basis for the progressive's activity in the world. Both of the books under review have much to say about the Jew's responsibility to the world, and the need to act in a manner that sanctifies God's Name in the world. They have little to say about how the desired actions are, on a consistent basis, played out in the real world. The stories they tell are cheerful and optimistic. Evil, when it appears, is the anti-Semitism of yesteryear, or the faraway guns of Bosnia disturbing Yosef Hakohen's Jerusalem *Seder*.

**I**t is easy to speak optimistically about the universalistic themes of Judaism when one brackets the radical evil and ambiguous good that characterize this corrupt world we inhabit. The secular belief in being progressive took hold as the traditional religious belief in the real world of sin and redemption was rejected. The history of the 20th century displays the fruits of the secular belief in progress in all their hellish glory.

The secular progressive, who lives up to his ideals, can respect the humanity of others, can treat them with compassion and civility because he or she is convinced that we are all good at heart and aim at the same things. Since such a conviction of human innocence includes oneself, it can also spare the progressive some of the discomforts and shame of self-examination before God. Too many average, Torah-observant Jews know better, at least when it comes to the goodness of the Gentile. Thus they are prepared, at best, to go their own way, "the way of Torah, until the Messiah comes and brings the long night of exile to an end," if I may quote Sears. At worst, one gets the cynicism and *Chillul Hashem* with which we are becoming unhappily familiar.

The alternative is a sober realism that recognizes our estrangement from the world and often from ourselves, and cultivates no illusions about the goodness of the society that surrounds us. We can see the present tendency of society, and turn away from it decisively, yet make real in our lives the universalistic teachings of the Torah. We believe in God, not in progress. Therefore we refuse to despair of the fellow human beings we meet. We know the meaning of God's having made man in His image, and therefore strive to resist the temptation to stereotype and denigrate. We know what God wants of us, and therefore cannot withhold our help and our prayers from our fellows.

This is the path that Abraham charted for us in his ambiguous encounter with the Philistine king. May the two books under review bring us closer to that path. 