

The *Yekke* from Uman¹

by Yisrael Kashkin

It happens usually by the second conversation when the Russian computer programmers at work (and nearly every company has them) ask me about my name. “Are you Russian? I mean your name sounds Russian.” “My family is from the Ukraine,” I say, helping them to a moment where life makes sense as hunches about complete strangers are confirmed. However, the feeling fades as I share the timetable, “My grandparents immigrated in 1906 and 1923.” I never fail to observe what seems like a shift from a kind of sociological union to a palpable sense of alienation. They know that a hundred years is a long time. After a hundred years, I will not be like them regardless of the similarities in our names.

And they are right. I am not Russian, or Ukrainian, or even Eastern European. I am American, as were my parents — American Jews. And not only that, being raised during the Cold War, I was inculcated with a suspicion of Eastern Europe. I was taught fear, particularly of the USSR. We were good. They were bad. I certainly did not identify with them, neither their government nor their culture. I didn’t know anything about their culture.

While I have learned since to question the moral generalizations, particularly with regard to the people, I have come to see the vast differences between the USA and Eastern Europe. It may not be a matter of good versus bad, but it is a matter of West versus East. That distinction does not boil down to just free-enterprise democracy (I’m talking about the 1970s when the USA still had one) versus totalitarianism. It involves also a view that is significant in my eyes, even as I cannot say I have ever heard anyone else approach it this way: America is a Germanic country.

How so? Consider this. Aside from the fact that German Americans, some fifty million strong, are the largest ancestral group in the country, colonial American society was set up mostly by Anglo-Saxons, who themselves descend from Germanic peoples that emigrated to the British Isles in the fifth century. The Encyclopedia Britannica sums it up as follows:

Anglo-Saxon, term used historically to describe any member of the Germanic peoples who, from the 5th century ce to the time of the Norman Conquest (1066), inhabited and ruled territories that are today part of England. According to the Venerable Bede, the Anglo-Saxons were the descendants of three different Germanic peoples—the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—who originally migrated from northern Germany to the island of Britain in the 5th century at the invitation of Vortigern, king of the Britons, to defend his kingdom against Pictish and Irish invaders.²

In other words, the Anglo-Saxons that people generally associate with the British had historical ties to Germany. Oldenburg, the city of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch’s first rabbinic post, is located in the

¹ *Yekke* is a colloquialism for German Jew. The term possibly originates in the German word *Jacke* (with the J pronounced as a Y) which means jacket as German Jews tended to wear shorter coats (jackets) than Eastern Europeans. Another theory posits that it stems for the Western European pronunciation of the name Jacob as *Yekkef*. (“Yekke,” Wikipedia) There are other explanations for the term. My apologies to those in the German Jewish community who are not fans of it. The usage here obviously is with affection and esteem as you shall see.

² “Anglo-Saxons,” Encyclopedia Britannica.

Lower Saxony region of Northern Germany.³ One genetic study at the University College of London tracked a chromosome that is found in nearly all Danish and North German men to about half of British men.⁴ While anthropologists debate the percentages of the British populace that trace to the Anglo-Saxons, the sociological discussion is more relevant to my thesis. The Germanic Anglo-Saxons ruled the British Isles for centuries, and rulers tend to dictate cultural norms.

Even British Kings George I and II were born in Germany, spoke German, and belonged to the House of Hanover.⁵ The names England and English derive from the name of the Germanic tribe the Angles, which is fitting since English itself is a Germanic tongue with French and Latin frosting on top.⁶ Of the 100 most commonly used English words, 97% are Germanic; of the 1000 most commonly used English words, 57% are Germanic.⁷ Look at this example. Here's one way to say, "Hello, my name is Harold" in German, English, French, and Russian.

German: Halo mein numen ist Harold.

English: Hello, my name is Harold.

French: Je m'appelle Harold.

Russian: Здравствуйте, меня зовут Гарольд

See what I mean?

It should be no surprise that the British and the Germans have much in common. One sees it in their orderliness, rationalist mindset, industriousness, and emotional reserve. Similar too is the Anglo aristocracy that set up the USA, laid down its primary culture, and continues to run the place. While the USA is composed today of many ethnic groups, it is governed mostly in an Anglo style. A half-century ago, even popular entertainment followed that style, but that changed after the 1960s.

The term Germanic is not limited to Germany proper. Germanic languages are spoken in such places as Holland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, culturally similar countries from a global perspective, and sources of immigration to the USA, particularly the Midwest. All are considered Germanic peoples.⁸ Switzerland and Belgium too are largely Germanic. Technically, English and German belong to the West German family of languages along with Dutch and Afrikaans. North Germanic languages include Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, Icelandic, and Faroese, which is spoken in the islands off the coast of Norway.⁹

This is not to say that England, Germany, and the United States are culturally identical. The Germanic Anglo-Saxons merged with Celtic people of the British Isles. The British colonialists cohabited the New World with French settlers, Native Americans, Africans, Dutch, Irish, and, of course, Germans. As the USA formed and evolved millions of immigrants from all over the planet joined them. Moreover, centuries passed between the 5th century invasion by the Anglo-Saxons and

³ Gertrude Hirschler, "Samson Raphael Hirsch: His Life and Work," *The Pentateuch* (New York: Judaica Press, 1986), p. xvii.

⁴ "Are the English really Germans or Spaniards?," *The Telegraph*, <<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/edwest/100093184/are-the-english-really-germans-or-spaniards/>>

⁵ "Hanover," *English Monarchs* <<http://englishmonarchs.co.uk>>.

⁶ "English – Definition and More from the Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary," Merriam-webster.com. 25 April 2007. Retrieved 4 November 2012 in "English," Wikipedia.

⁷ Nation, I.S.P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge University Press. p. 477. ISBN 0-521-80498-1 in "English Language," Wikipedia.

⁸ "Germanic Peoples," Wikipedia.

⁹ "Germanic Languages," Wikipedia.

Elizabethan England and then again between King George III and US President Dwight Eisenhower (now there's a German name). Germans are more intense than the other two. The British have the best sense of humor. Americans are the least formal of the three. But they all start to look quite similar when you compare them to the Italians, Greeks, Ukrainians, Turks, Indians, Chinese, Eskimos, Arabs, or Africans. And then there's the Dutch, the Scandinavians, the Flemish, the Luxembourgers, the Icelanders, Liechtensteiners, and the Swiss. They differ from the Germans in many respects, but all are Germanic.

Even though my ancestors are from the Ukraine, I am more Western and Germanic than Eastern European. Many Jewish Americans of Eastern European extraction can claim the same since peak immigration occurred at the turn of the last century. In those days, immigrants were encouraged to Americanize. The situation might be different for the people who attended *yeshivos* in New York City and lived in enclaves there, but for those who moved to the suburbs and attended public school, the culture was quite distinct from that of Eastern Europe. In my schools, the literature classes consisted of British and American authors and our history classes British and American leaders, the latter being of Anglo descent. We studied the material year after year. We never read a Russian author in my public schools.

Granted, America has many sub-cultures, some not Anglo at all. I can take you to neighborhoods in Metropolitan New York City such as Spanish Harlem and Chinatown in Manhattan or Little India in Jersey City to demonstrate the point. However, I was raised in the suburbs, and my culture was defined by the public education system which took its cues from the universities which themselves are Anglo-Saxon in style, at least they used to be. Consider the archetypal professor in a tweed jacket with elbow patches – the British gentleman. So, too, are most corporations Anglo-Germanic in style with their command and control organizational structure.

New Englanders and Midwesterners in particular can lay claim to Anglo-German influences – New England being Anglo and the Midwest being German. Take a gander at a map of the New English counties of Essex, Bristol, Berkshire, and Norfolk, names as British as can be. You'd think I were naming regions in England, but no, they are in the Northeastern United States. In the census of 1790, 62% of the US population reported British ancestry¹⁰ with Massachusetts, Vermont, and Rhode Island reporting 82, 76, and 71% respectively. Today the percentages are lower of course, but in the 1980 US census 49 million Americans reported British ancestry and a similar number reported Irish ancestry. The Midwest is still distinctly Northern European. In the 2000 census, 38 percent of Minnesotans listed their ancestry as German, 17 percent as Norwegian, 12 percent as Irish, and 10 percent as Swedish. That's 2/3 of the state reporting Northwestern European ancestry. Wisconsin and Iowa both reported around 40% German ancestry.¹¹ I attended college at the University of Michigan, which itself was one of the first American universities to be founded on the German model of research institutions.¹² Midwestern culture was forged largely by Northwestern Europeans, Teutons of various sorts, particularly Germans and Swedes, and of course New Englanders who headed 'West.' One really sees it in Midwestern culture from the college football marching bands to the well organized cities and

¹⁰ US Census of 1790, <<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/tab01.pdf>>

¹¹ "Heritage travel: Germany," Midwest Weekends, <http://www.midwestweekends.com/plan_a_trip/history_heritage/heritage_travel/heritage_germany.html>

¹² "Henry Philip Tappan," Wikipedia. The parents of Henry Tappan, UM's first president, were of Prussian and Dutch descent.

educational systems¹³ to the conservative culture. I once heard 1950s era basketball player Bob Cousy commenting on all the letters he received from coaches in the Midwest who complained about his flamboyant ball passing style and dribbling. Milwaukee was once referred to as the German Athens due to all the social and cultural clubs established by the community and education minded German immigrants.

I believe that the chances are good that you never before witnessed a person go to such lengths to portray America in such a way. Even the typical American, even many sociologists, likely never considered all this. So why me? The answer is because I became Torah observant at age twenty-five and in doing so entered a new culture that happened to be Eastern European. It felt alien to me a quarter of a century ago and it still does to a large extent. In analyzing the reasons why, I came to see this aspect of America.

Of course, I have to distinguish the changeover to mitzvah observance from the cultural changes. *Frei to frum* is a major overhaul in behavior and thought even as I often noted in the early days how “new” ideas seemed familiar to me. But I think at this point I can do a fair job of separating the different types of life changes and still say that the Eastern Europe style is alien to me in many respects.

Just this week, I received a phone call from a long, lost elder cousin. He was born in Cuba in the 1930s after my great-uncle immigrated there from a shtetl in the Ukraine. One brother gained entrance to the United States and the other to Cuba where he stayed until the communist takeover. My cousin was raised there and absorbed some of the best features of the Latin personality. He is easygoing and super-friendly, almost musical in his speaking manner. Certainly, I observed myriad universal Jewish qualities in my cousin and traces of Eastern Europe as you’ll find in me. But you can hardly call him an Eastern European even though his father, a wonderful man, was very much an old world *Yid* from the shtetl. In talking to my cousin after a break of four decades, I could see how much we are shaped by the societies in which we are reared even as we retain Jewish identity and practice as he has. I have made similar observations of South African Jews whose parents are from Lithuania, British Jews whose parents are from Poland, and French Jews whose parents are from North Africa. We absorb much from the societies in which we live.

I have observed a curious phenomena. Many Russian Jewish *baalei teshuvah* thrive in the yeshiva world, looking completely at home. For one, they embrace the isolation from the general culture. After all, they don’t even want you to call them Russian. “I am a Jew from Russia, not a Russian Jew,” they’ll say. Now, how many American Jews don’t want to be called American? Even those who make *aliyah* often still refer to themselves as American. Same with the British, Canadians, Australians, and other Westerners. One can see in these recent immigrants from Russia how Eastern European Jewry in the 19th century downplayed concepts like ‘light unto the nations’ and ‘*tikun olam*.’ This can happen when an entire nation is cast into an apartheid situation like the Pale of Settlement and mistreated there.

¹³ Some argue that the whole notion of a public education, funded and administered by the government, comes from the Germans. Elsewhere, schooling was a private matter. “Henry Philip Tappan,” Wikipedia. This may be one reason that the Midwest developed such strong public schools, as writer Kurt Vonnegut often noted, and such strong state universities. Likewise, some argue that the notion of compulsory peacetime military service and general militarism come from the Germanic kingdom of Prussia, were instituted by Kaiser Wilhelm, and lead to the World Wars. (Irving Gordon, “World History Review Text,” (New York: Amsco Publications, 1988), p. 206. America seems to have inherited much of this militaristic sensibility too.

By contrast, many American *baalei teshuvah* were attracted to Torah because of those ideas. One of the pillars of education in the USA is civics. Scores of American youth envision for themselves careers in the public service. This is very American. Certainly before the 1970s it was. It was German too. Civic duty and national identity — those were important parts of the culture in Germany. Certain nefarious people manipulated that value for wicked purposes as we know. One sees those values addressed in a constructive way in the writings of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch:

Thus God calls upon the Jews carried off into captivity in Babylon to settle there, to further the good of that country as citizens and subjects, to pray for its weal — the country which had forcibly taken them to live in its midst. He demands that every Jew find his own well-being only in that of the country, and, even as for his own, to work and pray for the welfare of the country — and yet Israel was not to spend longer than seventy years there! Thus for all time did God lay down Israel's duty towards those countries and nations to which, far from being brought forcibly, they have freely emigrated, in which there is no predetermined time for the length of their stay, in which each salutes the soil which gave him birth, in whose princes and Governments everyone recognizes the safeguard of his material well-being, and whose weal and woe Israel has now shared for thousands of years. Let us repeat — in whichever land Jews shall live as citizens, as inhabitants or enjoying special protection, they shall honour and love the princes and Government as their own, contribute with every possible power to their good, and fulfil all the duties towards prince and land which a subject owes to his prince, an inhabitant to his land, and a citizen to his country. (*Horeb* 96, 607)¹⁴

Rav Hirsch knew how to speak to German Jews, to emphasize the parts of Torah that speak to them, to reassure people that the Torah does not intend to stamp out positive values such as contributing to one's society.

He knew how to speak to American Jews too. When I first read this passage from *Horeb*, I was thunderstruck. You mean I don't have to abhor my society? I can view my work colleagues as compatriots? I can care about them? This was so unlike the message I got from many in my community. However, I was not able to develop the hostility that seemed a requirement to Torah observance. I realize now that the clash of values was not between me and Torah but me and Eastern Europe. And please understand that I'm not criticizing the Eastern approach. I grasp how it was appropriate for its situation. I'm saying only that it may not be the answer to every situation.

Russian Jews (I mean Jews from Russia) are not as comfortable with the aversion to secular studies found in the Haredi world as Russians in recent decades, unlike on the shtetl, have been raised with Dostoevsky and lots of science. But they are not uncomfortable with the organizational style, or lack of organization, found often in that world. I have spent a lot of time in *shtiebels* and even large synagogues that were run with the lovable informality of *shtiebels*. By contrast, the first time I walked into K'hal Adath Jeshurun in Washington Heights, the main synagogue of the German Orthodox

¹⁴ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb*, 96,607, translated by Isadore Grunfeld (New York: Soncino Press, 1994).

community, I was dazzled by the cleanliness and order of the place. No wires sticking out of the ceiling. No tables perched dangerously on their sides against walls where children might wander. No half-eaten trays of kugel on the table or used coffee cups on the window sill. Their bank of light switches is numbered and color coded. It was a thing of beauty. The *tefillah* schedule is accurate and displayed outside the front door. The *siddurim* are grouped by type as they sit neatly on the shelves.¹⁵ I cannot tell you how many times I have tidied up the *sefarim* in *shuls* around the world only to find them a mess again days later. In KAJ, I felt at home. I felt like I was back in the Midwest. In my house, the books are ordered by subject. My collection on Rav Hirsch is ordered chronologically according to original publication date.

There are many differences aside from these. The incentive apparatus for observance is another. I have found in swaths of the Haredi community a focus on divine wrath. There's one book on *Agadata* in my library where every page consists of another threat. The *Agadatos* themselves do not necessarily contain the threats, but the explanations do. I heard a lot of that kind of talk in yeshiva too, even *yeshivos* for *baalei teshuvah*. It may work successfully for many people. However, it is not productive for some, particularly when administered in large doses. I know of people who literally suffered nervous breakdowns from the continuous feeling of failure and terror. Moreover, the "terror of Heaven" approach does not go well with the American sensibility of optimism, responsibility, and achievement as primary motivations in life.

Wonderfully, I do not see a terror-based approach in the writings of Rav Hirsch, not an emphasis on it. I have come across openly threatening talk towards people who take advantage of the innocent and the helpless (*Horeb* 353 for example), but not so much more than that. Certainly, Rav Hirsch discussed divine judgement and personal accountability (*Siddur, Pirkei Avos, 3:1, Horeb 8, Collected Writings, Vol. II, p. 398*). He even translated passages from *Sefer Chasidim*, which, while presenting love of and obedience to God as the primary motivations for its stringent call to piety (*Sefer Chasidim 62,63*), reference concern over divine reward and punishment as well (*Collected Writings, Vol. VIII*). However, overall Rav Hirsch's approach was multi-faceted, utilizing love and awe of God, self-respect, and fear of Divine retribution. He did not resort to fire and brimstone at every turn as some people do, particularly contemporary people. Now, I am no expert on German Orthodoxy as a whole. My exposure has been mostly to Rav Hirsch. However, the Gaon Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg was such an expert and he said the following in a discussion of Medieval European Jewry and the effects of persecution, pogroms, banning of Jews from trades, and expulsions.

Judaism no longer drew direct sustenance from life; it no longer was synonymous with the abundant power which dwells in the Jewish soil. Rather, it began to be viewed as being nourished by fear — of death and of awesome punishments in the world to come. It is true that belief in reward and punishment is a fundamental of Judaism, and indeed, no religion worthy of the name can dispense with a concept which logically follows from the idea of an omniscient and omnipresent Supreme Being,

¹⁵ R' Joseph Breuer wrote, "Physically, the Kehilla's German-Jewish character is immediately visible in the Synagogue. Extensive chapters in the Shulchan Aruch stress the vital importance of cleanliness, order, and dignity in the Synagogue. Thus, these aspects in themselves have little to do with a specific "German Jewishness." "Our Way," *Rav Breuer His Life and Legacy*, (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim, 1998). In other words, the cleanliness of the German Orthodox synagogue is rooted in the halahka. It is not merely a reflection of German traits. However, German Jews excel in observing the *halachos* on this matter.

as clearly elucidated by Saadia HaGaon in his *Emunot V'deirot*. However, the use of this belief as a central pillar or religious feeling and the sole motivating force for the fulfillment of one's duty served only to cast a pall over religious sensibility and weakened any spiritual vitality, as decried by the Chassidic masters. (The World of Hirschian Teachings, pp. 102-3)¹⁶

I had become so accustomed to the punishment approach to Judaism that I was surprised to find that there could be another. In Rav Hirsch I found another. In customizing his approach to best serve German Jews, he served Americans too. As Rav Weinberg points out, Rav Hirsch accomplished this by returning to a traditional Jewish outlook. He didn't invent something new. Rather, he brought us back to where we stood before persecution "cast a pall over religious sensibility."

The same goes for Rav Hirsch's embracing of the positive contributions of general culture. He explained his view as follows:

Insofar as the Jew is a Jew, his views and objectives become universal. He will not be a stranger to anything which is good, true and beautiful in art and in science, in civilization and in learning. He will greet with blessing and joy everything of truth, justice, peace, and the ennobling of man, wherever it be revealed. He will hold firmly to this breadth of view in order to fulfill his mission as a Jew and to live up to the function of his Judaism in areas never imagined by his father. He shall dedicate himself with joy to every true advance in civilization and enlightenment. But all this on condition that he be never obliged to sacrifice his Judaism at any new level but rather fulfill it with even greater perfection. (R' Hirsch, Statement Against Reform, 1854)¹⁷

I have observed over the years that the mandate in some circles to disregard and discard all worldly *chochmos* puts tremendous pressure on one's Torah study to replace it all. For beginners for whom the foreign language and style of Torah study may present challenges, this can be quite problematic. It sets up a person for a huge letdown. Moreover, it simply is not healthy to discard experiences of truth, in particular religious truths, even if they come through worldly *chochmos*, as the Rabbeinu Bachya tell us they can (*Duties of the Heart*, "Introduction").

For me this idea achieves peak relevance with the music of Ludwig Van Beethoven. I recall occasions studying Gemara during weekly visits to Lakewood, where I would get absorbed in the whole outlook down there and then go into a semi-panic, agonizing over the prospect that I would have to dispose of all my Beethoven records. They mean a great deal to me those records. They provide something of a religious experience, particularly the last movement of the 9th symphony where Friedrich Schiller's moving poem "Ode an die Freude" or "Ode to Joy" is set to choral music. The poem paints a vision of world harmony under the unifying force of religious faith. Beethoven launches this poem into the

¹⁶ Yecheil Yaakov Weinberg, "The Torah of Life, As Understood by Rav S. R. Hirsch," *The World of Hirschian Teachings*, ed. Elliott Bondi, (Nanuet, New York: Feldheim, 2008) pp. 102-3.

¹⁷ Mordechai Breuer, "Samson Raphael Hirsch," *Guardians of Our Heritage*, ed. Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung, (New York: Block Publishing Co., 1958) p. 290.

stratosphere with a musical composition that is joyous, penetrating, thunderous, and otherworldly. The last verse is as follows:

Brothers, above the starry canopy
There must dwell a loving Father.
Do you fall in worship, you millions?
World, do you know your creator?
Seek him in the heavens;
Above the stars must He dwell.

Rav Hirsch offered kind words specifically for Schiller (you can see why from the passage just quoted) and saw in his poetry a Jewish message of brotherhood and hope. I know from the recently published ninth volume of his *Collected Writings* that Rav Hirsch would never require me to disparage or discard Schiller's poetry, nor likely the music of Beethoven. It is such a relief.

As Rav Shimon Schwab tells us, Rav Hirsch did not create his *derech* out of thin air. He got it mostly from his rebbes (who happen to be German) who got it from their rebbes: "But Rav Hirsch also had behind him a solid mesorah from gadolim who showed him the way. From the time of Chazal through the period of the Geonim; the Rambam, the Chachmei Sepharad through the Talmidei Hagra all the way down to his own Rebbe the Oruch L'ner and his disciples. Rav Hirsch had his mesorah." (Selected Speeches, p. 243).¹⁸

According to Professor Marc Shapiro, openness to quality secular learning was nothing unusual in Germany.¹⁹ This makes sense given that there was much quality material. The same applies in the United States, which, until recently, displayed in many quarters a distinct concern for morality and faith and a knack for memorializing it in literature and law. I became Torah observant through that literature. I did not become *frum* as many do via *kiruv* professionals. Rather, I did it via "secular" studies which readied me for private contemplation where I was inspired to take it to the next level. This is consistent with Rav Hirsch's understanding of the benefits of high culture:

Culture starts the work of educating the generations of mankind and the Torah completes it; for the Torah is the most finished education of Man. The fig-leaf and apron, those first gifts which Man possessed on his way to education, were the first appurtenances of culture, and culture in the service of morality is the first stage of Man's return to God. For us Jews, *derech erez* and Torah are one. The most perfect gentleman the most perfect Jew, to the Jewish teaching, are identical. But in the general education of mankind culture comes earlier....Therefore Jews, too, are to attach themselves to, and love all good and true culture and by the ways and manner of their behavior and demeanour appear as

¹⁸ Shimon Schwab, *Selected Speeches* (Lakewood: CIS, 1991) p. 243.

¹⁹ Marc Shapiro, "Great Figures in Rabbinic Judaism", Classes on Samson Raphael Hirsch, www.TorahInMotion.org. See also Shnayer Leiman, *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures*, ed. J.J. Schacter (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1997) "Rabbinic Openness to General Culture in the Early Modern Period in Western and Central Europe," Sections on Isaac Bernays and Jacob Ettlinger.

educated people and show that being Jew is only a higher state of being a man. (Rav Hirsch on *Bereishis* 3:24)²⁰

Accordingly, Torah observance need not stand in opposition to the best of “secular” culture. It is the next step above it. They are not opposites. The *baal teshuvah* need not toss aside his secular education if that education was of a proper kind.

Interestingly, most of the intellectual material that led me to Torah observant Judaism was from British, German, Dutch, and German American writers, composers, and artists such as Blake, Donne, Milton, Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Mozart, Beethoven, Vonnegut, and Steinbeck. I learned from them morality, compassion, intellectual discipline, dignity, and order fused with religious feeling. Other societies possess these traits to varying degrees, but these men expressed it with a sensibility that rang true for me given that my cultural background was similar to theirs. I found confusing wholesale disparagement of such people and their work with charges like “It’s all emptiness and lies” and “It’s all *narishkite*”. These were the people who brought me to Torah observance. I have *ha-karas ha-tov* for them. As you can imagine, I take comfort in Rav Hirsch’s recognition that such thinkers may offer not only isolated truths but serve as building blocks in a general religious mortality for society and individuals.²¹ Rav Hirsch stresses of course that “the knowledge of the Torah and the understanding we derive from it is to be our principle concern and... must be the yardstick by which we measure all the results obtained by other spheres of learning.” (R’ Hirsch on *Vayikra* 18:5)²²

Steven M. Lowenstein’s *Frankfurt on the Hudson*, which is a history of the German Jewish community of Washington Heights in Manhattan, discusses other Germanic qualities such as thrift.²³ Germanic peoples are known for it. Along with thrift comes savings. The book talks about immigrants who espoused the philosophy of “saving for a rainy day” even deep into their elder years when that rainy day had come.²⁴ Accordingly, the Israeli style of living on credit or the American kollel style of living with no income and no financial plan is quite alarming to many culturally Germanic Americans. People go forever without saving a penny and without even noticing how every month their bank account debits exceed their credits.

Being practical-minded comes into play here too. As Russian immigrants encountered German immigrants at the turn of the last century, each formulated generalizations about the others. Polish born Educator Israel Friedlander summed them up as follows:

²⁰ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, Genesis 3:24, translated by Isaac Levy (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1989).

²¹ I recall conversations at *Shabbos* tables where I addressed the famous question “So how did you become *frum*?” by referencing some of these thinkers and watching my hosts wince at the utterance of their names as if I had named Egyptian idols. My hosts seemed to have been trained to hold nothing but contempt for gentile thinkers of any kind. They couldn’t believe for a second that writings from the non-Torah Observant community could hold any value whatsoever.

²² Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, Leviticus 18:5, translated by Isaac Levy (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1989)

²³ The Wikipedia article “Prussian Virtues” lists the following: austerity, bravery, courage, discipline, frankness, godliness, humility, incorruptibility, industriousness, loyalty, obedience, punctuality, reliability, restraint, self-denial, self-effacement, sense of duty, sense of justice, sense of order, sincerity, subordination, and toughness. Interestingly, Wikipedia does not have an article on Russian virtues but does have one on the “Russian Soul.” Certainly, Prussians have soul and Russians virtue. Both terms concern human ideals, but approach it in a different manner.

²⁴ Steven M. Lowenstein, *Frankfurt on the Hudson* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

The German Jews were deliberate, reserved, practical and sticklers for formalities, with a marked ability for organization; the Russian Jews were quick-tempered, emotional, theorizing, haters of formalities with a decided bent towards individualism (Israel Friedlander “The Present Crisis of American Jewry,” 1915)²⁵

Sociological generalizations are considered not “politically correct” these days, but we all know they often contain grains or piles of grains of truth. German Jews are indeed concerned with the practical. Rav Hirsch uses the word “practical” more than a dozen times in letter Eighteen of his book *Nineteen Letters*. So are the British and the Americans practical. Having a practical plan for *parnassah* – I cannot fathom how a young person can proceed without it. But that view may stem from my American-Anglo-Germanic training because there are hoards of people with different backgrounds who do exactly that.

The leaning towards practicality can play an enormous role in an entire religious philosophy. In the *Nineteen Letters*, Rav Hirsch, apparently basing himself on the *Kuzari*, challenges a notion that developed in parts of Medieval Spanish Jewry that the goal of man was philosophic perfection for which *mitzvos* were a handmaiden, rather than the reverse. In Rav Hirsch’s view this approach was the result of an attempt to reconcile Judaism with Greek thought. Aristotle had said, “The highest individual perfection is speculative wisdom, the excellence of that purely intellectual part called reason.” (Comp. Aristotle, Ethics, I, 6.) Professor Harry Wolfson described this encounter with Greek thought as follows:

Like Philo, the philosophers of the Middle Ages aimed at reconciling Jewish religion with Greek philosophy, by recasting the substance of the former in the form of the latter. The principles upon which they worked were (i) that the practical religious organization of Jewish life must be preserved, but (2) that they must be justified and defended in accordance with the principles of Greek philosophy. Thus Hellenic theory was to bolster Hebraic dogma, and Greek speculation became the basis for Jewish conduct. The carrying out of this programme, therefore, unlike that of Pauline Christianity, involved neither change in the practice of the religion, nor abrogation of the Law. There was simply a shifting of emphasis from the practical to the speculative element of religion. Philo and the mediaeval philosophers continued to worship God in the Jewish fashion, but their conception of God became de-Judaized. They continued to commend the observation of the Law, but this observation lost caste and became less worthy than the "theoretic life." Practice and theory fell apart logically; instead there arose an artificial parallelism of theoretic with practical obligations.²⁶

²⁵ Israel Friedlander “The Present Crisis of American Jewry,” 1915 in Steven M. Lowenstein, *Frankfurt on the Hudson* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989). Friedlander (1876-1920) was a founder of the Young Israel movement.

²⁶ Harry Wolfson, "Maimonides and Halevi: A Study in Typical Jewish Attitudes Towards Greek Philosophy in the Middle Ages" in Michael Makovi, “The Kuzari as Contrasted With Rabbi S. R. Hirsch's Conception of Tiqun Olam - The Place of Universalism and Morality in Judaism.”

This outlook was hugely influential on *kelal Yisrael*, in Rav Hirsch's view negatively so as it led to a devaluation of *mitzvos*. It seems to me that Eastern European *yeshiva* culture in general more enthusiastically embraced "the speculative element of religion." As Israel Friedlander described it, the Eastern Europeans were "theorizing", the Germans "practical." The term in this sense conveys the meaning of something that one puts into practice. Not surprisingly, Rav Hirsch stressed the importance of putting study into practice, writing, "You must study for practical life — that is the fundamental principle of the law. With attentive mind and with receptive heart you must study in order to practice. You must aim at learning from the law a way of life, which is its true teaching; only then can you learn it properly, only then will it disclose to you its inmost meaning." (*Horeb* 75, 493)

The term 'practical' has more basic meanings obviously. I am of the opinion that one of the keys to success in life is the pursuit of practical goals. The world famous athlete Michael Jordan, who was as successful as one could be in his field of endeavor, said the following:

I approach everything step by step....I had always set short-term goals. As I look back, each one of the steps or successes led to the next one. When it happened, I set another goal, a reasonable, manageable goal that I could realistically achieve if I worked hard enough....All those steps are like pieces of a puzzle. They all come together to form a picture....Not everyone is going to be the greatest....But you can still be considered a success....Step by step, I can't see any other way of accomplishing anything.²⁷

I find these words remarkable because Michael Jordan was a natural born basketball player, gifted in every area of the game. If anyone could just leap to the top it would be him. Nevertheless, he still based his success on having practical and reasonable goals. One of my perennial frustrations with the *frum* world over the years has been how both sides of the fence, ie Haredi and Modern, saddle people with unrealistic life goals. I often reference the verse from *Devarim*, chapter 30: "This mitzvah that I command you today is not too far removed from you and it is not too distant. It is not in the heavens ... It is not across the ocean ... it is very near to you; [it is] in your mouth and in your heart to perform it." In my mind, both the goals of perpetual *kollel* and *aliyah* are distant, are far removed from the average person, the latter being literally across the oceans. Hirschianism too is very challenging. As Rav Shimon Schwab noted, "*Torah Im Derech Eretz* is not a *kulah* but a *chumrah*." (Not a leniency but a stringency.)²⁸ In other words, the goal of *Torah Im Derech Eretz* to bring holiness to all aspects of one's life, including the 'secular' parts, even while engaging general society, is formidable. However, I can do it right in my American town, with my job. I do not have to fabricate a million dollars out of thin air or miraculously, without an income source, support a family with children in private school while living in communities where housing prices far exceed regional averages. I do not have to cross the ocean and build a life on the other side of the world without training in the predominant industries, without fluency in the language, and without personal connections, in a vastly different society whose

<<http://www.scribd.com/doc/18668231/The-Kuzari-as-Contrasted-With-Rabbi-S-R-Hirschs-Conception-of-Tiqun-Olam-The-Place-of-Universalism-and-Morality-in-Judaism-Michael-Makovi>>.

²⁷ Michael Jordan, "I Can't Accept Not Trying: Michael Jordan on the Pursuit of Excellence." (San Francisco: Harper Collins).

²⁸ Cited by R' Yisroel Mantel, KAJ, "60th Anniversary Gathering." <<http://kajinc.org/wordpresskaj/>>.

very existence is threatened on a daily basis by a billion enemies. *Torah Im Derech Eretz* is practical. I can pursue it in my current life setting. I can pursue it in sequential stages. It may be difficult and challenging, but it is not unreasonable, not fantastical.

Aside from the Germanic trait of practicalness, Friedlander mentioned also emotional reserve, deliberation in action, and formality. Lowenstein elaborates:

Among the many formal values that were highly praised were dignity, discipline, punctuality, structure, and order. Spontaneity was less prized than stability. Many German Jews expressed disapproval of the loud wailing at eastern European funerals as undignified; at their own funerals, weeping was restrained and silent. German-Jewish immigrants, even the Orthodox, viewed the boisterous dancing of Hasidic and other eastern European males and religious celebrations as bizarre and primitive if not downright abnormal. (Frankfurt on the Hudson, ebook, Loc 2480)

The book goes on to describe actual confrontations at *Simchas Torah* celebrations where the old-timers from Germany struggled with attempts by the American born youth to bring Eastern European style boisterous dancing into KAJ and other German Orthodox synagogues in Washington Heights. As it stands now in the 21st century, shtick and exuberant dancing at weddings and other gatherings seems, well, Jewish. But as I am learning, it is Eastern European Jewish (maybe Yemenite too). German Jews conducted themselves differently. And once again, so do Americans and Brits (at least prior to the rock'n'roll era, which had a different set of influences). Most people appear to enjoy the enthusiastic displays at *frum* weddings. I am glad it is there to inspire them and give them joy. However, these wildly emotional displays are not beloved by all, at least not when experienced on a regular basis. I enjoy people from all kinds of cultures, especially Russian, enjoy stepping into their world to experience their perspective and the good they have to offer. But most people need to spend most of their time in their own culture, lest they become confused, as many are today in this melting pot of a planet.

I have been intrigued by the emotionalism of even intellectuals in the yeshiva world. It certainly is not something I saw in my college professors. Many *shiurim* today, and certainly public talks, are delivered with tremendous emotion, with shouting even, lots of it. When many people speak, they raise their voices from beginning to end. It is strange to me even after all these years. Several decades ago, I had the privilege of spending time with several German Orthodox *rabbanim*, namely Rav Shimon Schwab, Rav Naftoli Friedler, and Rav Shimon Hirsch. I gravitated to all of these men and found that their demeanor was different from what I observed in much of the Eastern European yeshiva world. There was more restraint in their speech, less raw emotion. I liked it. Some people prefer the open passion and that is fine. Neither is better. But I prefer what I saw in these *rabbanim* which was a more cultivated passion, a decorum. It was, like so much of German Orthodoxy, more familiar to me.

It is a strange experience for a Jew to wake up one day and recognize in himself a German identity, seemingly out of nowhere. In the aftermath of the Holocaust the word German has become quite charged for Jews, for understandable reasons. The word is a difficult one for me too. I recall my discomfort when my grade school brought in a German language teacher for a week long language sampling program. My grandparents lost family members in the Holocaust; although, notably, they lost even more to Russian pogroms. Nevertheless, the word German is a trickier one. But as I explained up

front, the adjective Germanic describes not just the culture of Germany but that of Northern Europe including Holland, Scandinavia, England, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and Iceland. The Danes who are famous for protecting Jews during World War II are Germanic, as were the Dutch business associates of Otto Frank, Anne Frank's father, who assisted her family as they hid in the attic, as was the Swede Raoul Wallenberg, who, by the way, studied at the University of Michigan before he risked (and likely lost) his life saving Jews during the Holocaust. America is not Germany. It is Germanic, at least the parts where I grew up. And for people like me, Rav Hirsch's *Torah Im Derech Eretz* offers terrific possibilities. Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, ever sagacious, told his students in America, "I cannot understand how it is possible for an American yeshiva student to be Jewish without The Nineteen Letters." (Klugman, 1998). The Nineteen Letters, Rav Hirsch's first published book, explained Torah Judaism to the Western world, particularly to German Jewish youth. Coming from Eastern Europe, Rav Shraga Feivel could see how Americans would take to its approach, would need its approach.

In my view, contemporary Haredi and Modern Orthodox societies in all their various forms are offshoots of Eastern European Judaism. They absorbed elements of *Torah Im Derech Eretz*, particularly outside of *Eretz Israel*, and benefited enormously from the practical infrastructure that German Jews established via *kashrus* and other organizations in the USA. However, they are essentially Eastern European at their core, with arguably Americanism and assorted modernity mixed in. They have kept many Jews in the fold and produced *tzadickim*, scholars, communities, organizations, and a sizable literature. I admire and feel a debt of gratitude to both. However, for many years, I leaped from one to the other in search of a home. I liked the seriousness of the Haredim but could not handle their hostility to general society. I liked the appreciation of secular studies in Modern Orthodoxy but was frustrated with the flimsiness of the filtering process. I liked the aversion to feminism amongst the Haredim but could not fathom how women went to work, leaving children in daycare, to support their husbands in *kollel*. I liked the Modern Orthodox inclusion of *Nach* in the educational curriculum but could not wrap my mind around the image of teenage boys and girls studying it in the same classroom. I applauded the Haredi suspicion of Zionism as a central motivation in religious life but suffered from the focus on Divine wrath as its alternative. Round and round it went. Then came German Orthodoxy, an approach to Torah observant Judaism which, unfortunately, one does not hear much about anymore. One has to seek it out. For me it resolved nearly all of the confusion vis a vis *derech*. It too is idealistic and passionate, but in an entirely different way than *Haredism* or Modern Orthodoxy. Alas, it is not Russian, Polish, or Lithuanian Jewish at its core. It is German Jewish with its discipline on all sides, its sense of balance and proportion, its pragmatism, and its concern for piety, propriety, politeness, and community.

One may legitimately question whether contemporary American culture is concerned with piety, propriety, politeness, and community. The same can be asked of contemporary Germany. What person who has laid his eyes on television or the NY Daily news could answer in the affirmative? One wonders if any society in history, other than Germany in the 1930s, has changed as much as has the USA (and the West in general) over the last half-century. It's truly night and day, just an astonishing collapse in values. Incredibly, Rav Hirsch warned us about the mutability of 'Hellenic culture,' ie. culture that draws from the blessing of Noah's son Japheth to ennoble human kind through the pursuit of knowledge, beauty, and symmetry in contrast to the fear, ignorance, and violence of idolatrous, pre-Hellenic societies. Rav Hirsch's lengthy discussion of this complex topic can be found in the chapter "Hellenism, Judaism, and Rome" in *Judaism Eternal II*. He tells us as follows:

The Hellenic culture only stimulates the intellect, only creates the thirst for knowledge and truth, but is not capable in itself of assuring knowledge and producing truth. The mind indulges in surmises and conjectures, forms fanciful and hypothetical assumptions in order to solve the enigmas with which man is confronted both by the world outside and within himself and the solution of which his yearning soul passionately seeks. And as long as Hellenism assumes that the human mind alone-which, as reason, is created to "perceive" only the truth-simultaneously creates, reveals and dispenses truth, so long does the misty wisdom of the Hellenic spirit arrive at results which swing from one extreme to the other in everrecurring cycles, as has been evident in the history of human thought seeking wisdom for nearly 2,500 years in the Hellenic spirit. (Judaism Eternal II, p. 191)

Once upon a time, the USA, upon whose currency is emblazoned the creed "In God we trust," was largely a faith-based society as was Germany. Arguably, those days are gone despite some superficial activity that is merely reminiscent of days gone by. At minimum, the departure from religion correlates with the collapse. It is more likely the primary cause as it left us vulnerable to the wild "swings" of Hellenistic based culture. As Rav Hirsch said, "Hellenic culture contains only one single fraction of that truth which some day will bring salvation to mankind. It is only a small preparation for that happiness which will some day flourish on earth through Shem's "tents wherein God dwells"; and as long as it is not wedded to that Hebraic spirit, as long as it prides itself on being sublime and exclusive, it falls into error and illusion, degeneration and servitude." (Judaism Eternal II, p. 191) This is all most relevant for choosing educational strategies for the young people of today. I argue that Hirsch's Torah Im Derech Eretz is still needed if only because it is not possible to hide from a wireless society and its equally invasive government. The Czars actually granted Jewish communities in Russia a fair amount of autonomy in comparison to ours. However, the exact form of *Torah Im Derech Eretz* for the 21st century likely needs to differ somewhat from that which may suit the people of my generation even as the basic principles as outlined by Rav Hirsch still apply. I recognize sadly that the America I knew is largely but a memory. However, for me the memory is strong enough to inform my religious outlook.

My maternal grandmother was from Uman in the Ukraine – yes the actual Uman made famous by the Chassidic leader Rebbe Nachman. People often ask me if I have ever been there for Rosh Hashanah. I tell them that my dear *yiddishe bubbe*, who I adored as I did all my grandparents, ran out of there for fear of her life and I have no intention of taking us back. I will never forget her recollections of pogroms. I think for me Russia is a scarier place than Germany, given my family's experiences. My *bubbe* came to America in 1923 at age eighteen (even she spent most of her life in the USA, nearly eight decades) and I appeared forty years later. People ask me also when I share the kinds of thoughts I have shared here, "Are you a yekke?" They looked confused when I give them the same answer that I give the Russian computer programmers: "My family is from the Ukraine." *Frum* Jews usually follow in the *derech* and culture of their families. And that is basically what I am doing even as the dynamics are a bit complicated, the path more roundabout.²⁹ We are American and have been that way for a century. I would argue that my upbringing was more German than that of second generation German Jews from

²⁹ Complicating matters further is the likelihood that sometime before settling in the Ukraine my family lived in Germany as is true for most Ashkenazim. See Rabbi Binyamin Shlomo Hamburger, "Ashkenaz-Sfard," audio lecture, Rabbi <<http://yiwbo.org/Lectures.html>>.

Washington Heights as that community started merging with Eastern European yeshivish culture four decades ago. The America of my youth was much more distinctly Germanic for the most part. It should be no surprise that German Orthodoxy is the closest thing to it. So it seems to this *Yekke* from Uman.

(Yisrael Kashkin was born in New York City. He descends from Ukrainian Jews who lived in the shtetls of Uman, Romny, Vinnytsa, and Priluki. His writings on Jewish themes have appeared in Tradition, Conversations, and the Jewish Observer and the blogs of the Jewish Institute for Ideas and Ideals and Web Yeshiva.)

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