



BENZION HALPER

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By

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We have come together, colleagues, disciples and friends of Benzion Halper, to talk with one another of the scholar, the man, and the friend who so early was called from this school of learning, which he loved and adorned, to that Academy on High to which so many from other lands and from this land and, alas, from our own young College have preceded him.

I would that to-night we meet not in mournful mood, to express our grief, but rather to place on record, as far as we may, the life, the services, and the character of this man, so that all of us may be encouraged and comforted by the story of his achievement and stimulated to walk along the difficult path which he trod with so firm and unfaltering a step.

It happens that by reason of peculiar circumstances I am in possession of exact details concerning his early career, which I find in his own letters. He arrived in this country on the seventh of December, 1911, and on the eighteenth of that month he wrote me this account of his career: "I am a native of Russia, where I studied a great deal of Talmud. In 1901, I came to England, and after serving my apprenticeship as a carpenter and a com-

*Address delivered at the meeting in memory of Benzion Halper at the Dropsie College, Philadelphia, May 6, 1924.

mercial traveller, I matriculated at the University of London in 1904. I took my B. A. with First Class Honors in Semitics in 1907, and two years later passed my M. A. with a mark of distinction. In 1910, I was elected first Gilchrist Scholar in Arabic at the University of London, and spent a year in Egypt." And then he added that he had published an article on the "Participial Formations of the Geminate Verbs" in the *Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* for 1910, and in a later number one on the "Notions of Buying and Selling in Semitic Languages," which formed a specimen chapter of a book that he intended to write.

Later, through the accident of the War, I received a more definite statement from him concerning a portion of his early career. He went to England in the summer of 1914, and, like many another, found difficulties in the confusion which occurred in the early months of the War. I quote, in part, a letter he wrote me on August 21, 1914, which indicates how much more correct his vision was at that early date with regard to the conflict just started than was that of some of the greatest European, statesmen who had looked for its early termination: "The gigantic War," he wrote, "which threatens to devastate Europe, will no doubt affect even poor, peaceful mortals like myself. In England aliens who are not enemies are scarcely in danger of being molested... I may, however, encounter some difficulty in embarking for the States, for the steamship companies usually ask for documents of identification. As you perhaps know, my position from the point of view of international law is rather anomalous. Russia would consider me as a deserter, and England knows me not.

I swore off my allegiance to Nicholas II, Czar of Russia, and made my application for the citizenship of the United States, but can claim no protection from the latter. I should therefore be extremely obliged if you would be kind enough to secure for me some sort of document which would serve as a means of identification and protection. The following details would probably be necessary for this purpose: I was born in Zhosly, government of Wilna, on the 15th of April, 1884, and came to England on the 22nd of January, 1901. I arrived in New York on the 7th of December, 1911, and made my application for American citizenship on the 9th of December, 1913." These statements are autobiographical, if brief, but they bring out more clearly than a good many pages could the habits of accuracy which were a passion with Doctor Halper, and which permeated his entire scientific activity.

It is pleasant to be able to record that when these facts were laid before our Department of State, the then Counsellor of the Department, Mr. Robert Lansing, furnished a letter of introduction to our diplomatic and consular officers in England, offering if necessary to send special instructions to the American Ambassador in London to give such assistance as he could toward facilitating Doctor Halper's return to the United States.

Other facts concerning his early career I learn from tributes published in the *Jewish Chronicle* of London by the Reverend Doctor A. Cohen and Mr. J. H. Taylor. From the former's statement it appears that Doctor Halper, like other youths in Russia, received his early education first in the Heder and then in the Yeshiba; that it was his original intention to study in Germany, but that

after a very brief stay in Frankfurt he came to England; and that during the period when he was engaged in various efforts to earn a livelihood, including work in a factory in Manchester, he succeeded in preparing himself for matriculation at the University. He found little time for study in Manchester, and so he came to London, where he supported himself by doing some literary work for the Hebrew weekly *Hayehudi* and giving private lessons. Beside studying at the University of London, he was also a student at Jews' College. Mr. Taylor, one of his contemporaries at the University, writes of him as follows: "He saw ahead with a lightning rapidity, leaving us all behind, and at once became one of the most brilliant students Jews' College ever produced. It is with tenderest memories of affection and gratitude that I recall the hours he spent with me in elucidating the most difficult passages in Syriac, which baffled even older scholars than himself, and the time he freely gave me in philological studies and the Bible, of which he was a master."

And from a letter written by Doctor David de Sola Pool of New York we have further insight into Doctor Halper's career as a student. He writes: "I knew him first some twenty years ago, when he was a student in London, and then I, who was only little his junior in years, marvelled at his amazing knowledge. He came to us without a classical training. He knew no Latin, while the rest of us were doing graduate Latin work. Our Professor indicated to him the best text-book, told him to work through the beginning lessons, and return in a week for help and supervision. At the end of the week he returned, with the whole book—a year's work—mastered!"

Professor Hoschander, who made his acquaintance in 1905, in London, gives testimony with regard to his qualities as a student. He tells us that Doctor Hirschfeld frequently called attention to Halper's remarkable knowledge of Arabic and that Doctor Büchler prided himself upon his Hebrew learning, in which he excelled all the other students.

At the age of twenty-six, this young man, born in Russia, cast upon his own resources at sixteen, fighting his own way for an education in a strange land, had acquired not only a command of the language of the country of his adoption, but even a wide reading in it, a knowledge of its niceties lacked by many a native, and a literary style. He knew Hebrew literature in all its branches, classical Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, and modern Arabic, had a working knowledge of three or four other Semitic languages, and was not merely a linguist or student of literature but an exact and profound philologist. What a marvellous intellectual outfit, power of concentration, and of sacrifice, such a statement implies!

England, with its long-settled Jewish community, its great Hebrew treasures at the Bodleian and the British Museum and in private possession, the wonderful Genizah collection at Cambridge, which after Doctor Schechter no one was better fitted than Doctor Halper to explore, had no place for this young man, and so he turned his steps to America, which has from its very earliest days shown itself hospitable to the learned men of all countries.

He came in the middle of a term, when no academic possibilities were open to him, and that great man, Doctor Solomon Schechter, whose own career was beset with difficulties, and who always appreciated scholarly abilities,

set Doctor Halper to work in classifying and copying the Genizah fragments in the Seminary Library. He joined the Dropsie College as a Fellow in the autumn of 1912. He had already prepared a considerable work on the Scansion of Hebrew Poetry, which he intended to offer as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. His position here as a student was merely formal; excepting that there were legal requirements under our charter, he might have been granted the degree of Doctor of Philosophy out of hand, for he was already a man of mature learning. But he always had the hope of learning more, if not in content then in method of teaching, and during the period of his Fellowship he most rigidly attended every course that was given in the College, even of the most elementary nature, in order that there should be no distinction between himself and any other student.

The first task that I set him was the examination of a collection of Genizah fragments which I had purchased in Cairo in March, 1891. This collection had been examined by several of the most distinguished scholars of England and America, and one or another fragment had been identified and published. At the end of two months, Doctor Halper rendered a report on this collection, in which among other things he called attention to its most important manuscript, which had been overlooked by all the others—the greater portion of a lost work, the Book of Precepts, *Sefer Ha-Mitzwot*, of Hefes ben Yaşliaḥ, which he found in the Arabic in this collection, piecing various fragments together and securing almost three-fourths of the entire work. And he decided to forego as a thesis the work on the Scansion of Hebrew Poetry which he had

written, and with amazing industry and rapidity copied the Arabic text of Hefes, translated it into Hebrew, and wrote a valuable introduction. Inside of one year, that is, by June, 1913, he had completed this task. Again for purely formal reasons, his degree was not conferred upon him until 1914, but he had done everything that was required or could possibly have been required in the one year of his stay at this college. Thus he began his active and fruitful life in our midst, first as Instructor and later Associate Professor, holding in addition the office of Custodian of Manuscripts, for which he was peculiarly fitted.

His contributions to Jewish science subsequent to the publication of the edition of Hefes were of high importance and produced with great rapidity. The work on *Post-Biblical Hebrew Literature*, undertaken at the request of the Jewish Publication Society, which appeared in two volumes in 1921, beside superseding previous chrestomathies, was not merely a collection of selections from existing editions of Hebrew Literature intended for the student, but also contained hitherto unpublished texts, thereby rendering itself of importance to original scholarship. Incidentally, the selection and arrangement present a bird's eye view of the development of Hebrew literature. The notes, the glossary, and the translation have placed within the reach of teachers and students an admirable work for the study of the outline of Hebrew literature, and teachers and schools in English-speaking lands will miss a great opportunity if they do not take advantage of these labors of our departed friend.

His last important work to see the light under the auspices of this College, *Descriptive Catalogue of Genizah Frag-*

ments in Philadelphia, which was hastily put to press during his illness in order that he might have the pleasure of seeing it, represents studies which he carried on in Philadelphia during a period of nearly twelve years—painstaking examination of every fragment from the Genizah in public or private possession in this city. Each fragment was most carefully described, in many cases so fully that his description will serve as a complete guide to any future editor. How much of labor went into the examination and description of these nearly five hundred pieces, all of them fragmentary, many of them faded and difficult to decipher, only those who have engaged in similar work may appreciate.

In the prefatory note to this volume, he emphasized the importance of the publication of the manuscripts found not only in the Genizah of Cairo but in other Genizahs of the Orient, saying that he regarded the publication of catalogues such as the one upon which he had been engaged as preparatory to the task which "would undoubtedly throw a flood of light upon Jewish history, would enhance our knowledge of the various branches of Jewish literature and would clear up many obscure phases."

During this same period he published an Autograph Responsum of Maimonides, and from time to time succinct and capable reviews of current Arabic literature and Hebraica and Judaica in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, beside issuing his notable essay on the Scansion of Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry, to which I have already referred.

The last great work upon which he was engaged, not entirely finished, though I hope it may still be prepared for publication, was an edition of the Arabic Responsa of

Maimonides, based largely upon a manuscript sent to him by Professor Simonsen of Copenhagen, which he had copied, edited and translated into Hebrew. It was to have been published by the Mekize Nirdamim, and will undoubtedly prove a most important contribution to the responsa literature, beside throwing new sidelights upon the political social and economic conditions of the Jews under Mussulman rule in the thirteenth century. He had also prepared an edition and Hebrew translation from the Arabic of the Poetica of Moses Ibn Ezra, which has just been published by the Stybel Publishing Company, and an article in Hebrew on Judeo-Arabic literature, which is soon to appear in *Hatekufah*.

During this period he wrote numerous articles for the Hebrew periodicals, prepared a new text and translation of the Pirke Abot, the Ethics of the Fathers, and had under preparation an edition and translation of the Pesikta.

To my Colleague, Doctor Joseph Reider, I owe the following statement of the great services which Doctor Halper rendered to modern Hebrew literature:

"While struggling for a secular education in London he came in contact with Isaac Suvalski, the lamented editor of *Hayehudi*, who, finding in him a kindred spirit, encouraged him to write articles in Hebrew on learned subjects near to his heart. He began to write articles on his favorite subjects, such as the Bible and biblical criticism, Hebrew poetry, and Arabic literature, subjects little familiar to the average Hebrew reader. Of particular interest was a series of articles on medieval Hebrew poetry, in which he endeavored to expound the complexities of the Arabic meter to throw light on medieval

Hebrew poetry. These articles, scattered in the pages of *Hayehudi*, later grew into the elaborate treatise on 'The Scansion of Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry.'

"In later years, when he had settled in America, he found time, with all his feverish activity in the field of scholarly research, to contribute popular articles on learned subjects to the modern Hebrew press. It was at this time that Mr. Abraham Joseph Stybel, in his effort to revive the Hebrew language in the Diaspora, founded the *Miklat* in New York, a journal devoted to Hebrew learning and literature. Doctor Halper immediately enlisted as a collaborator, and during the brief period of the journal's existence (from 1919 to 1920) contributed a number of lucid articles and trenchant reviews, among the former being a very fine essay on Arnold B. Ehrlich, one of the foremost of modern Jewish commentators on the Bible, and a critical appraisal of the many-sided work of Doctor Simon Bernfeld, the Nestor of Hebrew letters. At the same time he contributed casual articles to two other Hebrew publications, *Hatoren* and *Luah Ahiever*, of New York. He supplemented his literary activity by active participation in the councils of the Tarbuth, an organization established some years ago to foster Hebrew education and modern Hebrew literature in America. During his last years he was the leader of the Tarbuth in Philadelphia, and at its meetings he frequently delivered addresses encouraging the study of the Hebrew language and literature.

"Dr. Halper's articles and reviews in the *Miklat* made such a favorable impression in Hebrew-speaking circles here and abroad that when the *Miklat* went out of existence Mr. Stybel invited him to collaborate in *Hatekufah*, the am-

bitious Stybel quarterly, published in Warsaw. Dr. Halper responded with a series of lengthy articles, each one of which could form a book in itself. The first (in Vol. 18) is a critical review of Doctor Jacob Mann's interesting book, *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphs* in which Doctor Halper exhibited his customary acumen in pointing out discrepancies and in suggesting plausible solutions of seemingly insurmountable difficulties. The second (in Vol. 19-20), entitled *Alim Balim*, deals with the newly discovered treasures of the Cairo Genizah and their ultimate importance to Jewish history and literature. It is an exhaustive treatment of the Genizah literature, such as may have existed in other languages but never before in Hebrew.

"His Hebrew was pure and altogether graceful. In the course of years he developed a practical, matter-of-fact style, purged of all flowery rhetoric, which presents such a contrast to the so-called Melizah style of the old and some of the new Hebrew writers. He could never tolerate redundancy in speech, but always went to the heart of the question under discussion. His acute philological sense kept him from using doubtful innovations; he culled his words for difficult modern concepts from ancient Hebrew sources, such as the Talmudim and Midrashim, and from medieval philosophical and ethical writings. It is indeed remarkable how he chanced off-hand upon happy words and phrases for which another would seek for hours and sometimes days, and it is this which explains his remarkable fertility and versatility. The same enthusiasm and rapidity which characterized his scholarly work are evident also in his Hebrew articles, which served only one purpose, to

popularize the knowledge of Jewish matters through clear and lucid Hebrew exposition."

Such a record of industry, carried along with teaching Arabic, Mishnah, Modern Hebrew Literature, and Hebrew Conversation, would have apparently more than occupied the time of even a very vigorous man. But in addition he had for the past eight years served as Editor of the Jewish Publication Society. He put its manuscripts into shape, and saw them through the press. He aided the numerous authors whose works were published during that period with advice and suggestions, both in the matter of scientific accuracy and of style, and went far beyond the usual requirements of an editor in his efforts to be useful and co-operative.

It was during this same period that the Hebrew Press of the Jewish Publication Society was developed. To this, both in mechanical details and editorial work, he gave constant and intelligent aid, joyful at the opportunity to furnish to American scholars and institutions this great instrument for the promotion of Hebrew publication in his second adopted country, which he had come ardently to love.

I am sure that in this rapid survey of his career I have not done justice to any of his scientific work, and have overlooked a good deal of it. But even all these labors by no means represent the man. They point to the fact that he was endowed with unusual intellectual power and profound learning and that he employed this power to great advantage in his chosen field of research. But in addition to this, unlike many of our specialists, he had a wide sympathy with all humanistic studies, with the

field of art and music, with the great political and social movements of the day, and more even than sympathy, in many cases considerable knowledge. It is really to be wondered that a man who obtained his education under such difficult circumstances and who carried his special knowledge so far at an early age should have found it possible to become acquainted with the masterpieces of modern literature, to have a sympathetic and even a critical view of the development of the fine arts and a high appreciation of music. And that there was something of the divine spark of the poet in him is evidenced by the fact that his interest in poetry was not confined to scansion or meter but that at odd times he actually wrote poems himself, of which I was entirely unaware, and which his modesty prevented him from bringing out for publication or even showing to his friends.

Doctor Halper was rigidly honest,. He never yielded an opinion which he held to be correct, no matter with whom he was dealing. He strove to arrive at the truth, and neither age, condition, nor weight of numbers, nor possible disadvantage to himself could move him even by a hair's breadth when once he concluded that he had attained the truth. Higher praise can be spoken of no man.