

...*Umetalmidai yoter mikulan (BT Ta'anit 7a).*

Five years of the Levisson Institute.

Prof. dr. Irene E. Zwiep: Address inaugurating the 2007-2008 Academic Year

It was the custom in Ancient Rome to organise a *lustrum* every five years, a purification ritual allowing the censor to purge the city of all that was evil. The high point was the *lustratio*, a procession in which the *felix hostia* (the 'fortunate sacrificial beast': the Romans were not lacking in humour) was led around before the slaughter. Today our arrangements for celebrating a *lustrum* are somewhat more subtle. Instead of compensating for our transgressions by shedding blood, we look back with satisfaction, modestly beat our breasts and search for suitable language in which to praise our colleagues. Such is precisely what I intend to do on the occasion of the five years that the Levisson Institute has been existence. And in so doing I hope I shall above all be paying homage to the etymology of the word *lustrum*, a word that continues to puzzle scholars to this day for it appears to be derived, in some unexpected fashion from the Latin verb *lustrare*, to enlighten. Let me put this differently: I would like in rapid tempo to shed light on five years of Levisson, and to do so primarily from the perspective of the Academic Committee, which I have chaired since its creation.

This Academic Committee – for a little clarity here is perhaps not out of place – is a body on which rabbis, representatives of various academic institutions and board members of the Liberal Jewish Community sit and together bear responsibility for the educational organisation and quality dispensed at Levisson. The committee's responsibilities include:

- drawing up the study programme (what a rabbi must know and be able to do, and how can we ensure that he or she learns that) and drawing up the key aspects relevant to the various academic and pastoral areas of competence;
- admitting students by means of intake interviews;
- safeguarding the progress the individual students make in their studies;
- monitoring pedagogic quality: do the modules make sense and are the lecturers of sufficient quality?
- Is the testing adequate and, last but not least,
- is the programme truly feasible?

That 'study feasibility' (a term that once derived from a Dutch government body) does in fact appear to be the Achilles' heel of a beautiful, but occasionally overly burdensome programme. cursory inspection suggests that the curriculum of Levisson's part time education appears to weigh more heavily than the average full time study dispensed by any Dutch university. Maybe food for reflection for the members of the AC during the upcoming Yom Kippur service...

- and finally developing a bureaucratic apparatus in whose absence any education, however small in scale, appears unable to function: recording study results, drawing

up examination regulations and protocols covering theses, formulating internationally recognised final terms (such that, in this context, the mere mention of ‘Dublin-descriptors’ is enough to trigger beads of perspiration on our Deacon’s brow) evaluating competencies and a whole range of other formal safeguards. It may thus be evident that the AC focuses on the form, content and quality of the teaching, the teaching staff and of the students; while finance and logistics, the secular side of pedagogy, clearly fall under another authority.

Sefer Yetsira

When, five years ago, the Levisson Institute was launched via a major press conference before a cohort of Dutch reporters, I compared its foundation (modesty is a virtue) to the *chiddush*, the Creation of the world out of the Nothing, as described in Bereshit 1. Of course everybody has for long worked out that, in this biblical preamble, God is not truly creating the world but is above all defining it in the most literal sense of the word. In ten statements (each time preceded by the verb *vayomer*, ‘and He said...’) He literally sets out the boundaries between the different building blocks from which He hopes to draw His cosmos: light is not dark, dry is not wet, day cannot be night, the list is well-known. That in so doing He should have created the world out of Nothing Himself is not something that can be read between the lines of Bereshit 1. But since Basilides of Apamea (3rd CE, born to a non-Jewish mother) we know no better, hence I thought my reference in every way justified.

And the comparison was inspired by my recollection of that empty sheet of paper that slowly filled up with details of the rabbinical study programme in the course of a series of discussions. The process took place in my rather neglected study in what was still then the Amsterdam University Library where, together with David Lilienthal (whom I hardly knew when we started) and Awraham Soetendorp (whom I only knew from his television appearances) and I tried to answer a question that had not been asked before: how are we to ensure that, preferably in the none-too-distant future, there should be a new generation of well trained liberal rabbis in the Netherlands? The result of our regular brainstorming was – in hindsight, disarmingly elementary – list of basic competences (‘surely a rabbi must have at least this one in his toolkit’). A list that over the years that followed has served slowly to define the contours of what you might wish to call a ‘Dutch liberal rabbinical curriculum’.

Five intensive years later, I am inclined no longer to deploy the language of Bereshit 1 to describe the evolution of the institute but rather that of the following chapter. ‘God formed (*vajitser*) man from the dust of the earth’ we read in verse 7. The terminology leaves no room for doubt: here no ideal blueprint is being formulated for the world, but is it acquiring its (literally) tangible form. The airy freedom that characterises the first chapter has gone; after the relaxed, theoretical *chiddush* follows the messy business of the *yetsira*, the hammering, bolting and banging to get to a new world.

In Bereshit 1 God still had it easy: His definitions were general and negative ($x \neq y$, light \neq dark, day \neq night), whilst we Academic Committee members had the task of setting down something specific and positive – and since Plato we know that so concrete an expression of the fallible world will always disappoint when set against the ‘ideas’ that, born in another, exclusively spiritual, reality, preceded it. Completing *chiddush* is an armchair exercise; yet *yetsira* is mechanical and requiring effort. It’s oil and elbow grease, experimenting with different levels of success (despite God’s omnipotence man, as we know, only enjoys partial success) and involves making mistakes so that – in the most favourable of cases – you can learn from them quickly enough so that your students can nevertheless benefit from them.

Which is precisely what has happened over the past years: that simple sheet of paper filled with key terms has been converted into a cohesive and well-stocked (= a euphemism, as I noted earlier) study programme. A programme that no longer only exists on paper, but that is composed of real lessons in real seminar rooms, with flesh and blood students and lecturers, and one that ends with demanding, perspiration-inducing examinations. A study programme that, if we dare express the hope, will ultimately generate a new flight of true rabbis whose understanding of Tanakh and halacha is just as great as their understanding of Jewish philosophy; who can teach and listen; who can wed and bury kehilla members with decency and in respect; and who have given careful consideration to what it is to be a Liberal Jew in the Netherlands, but who also have a broad perspective on the rest of the religious world.

Educating rabbis

Summarising things on paper is quickly done, but getting things done in practice is of course nothing like as fast. A quick look at the past fortunately shows us that was not just the AC’s doing that the Levisson Institute was not created in six days. Training rabbis is no sinecure, and over the centuries there are serried ranks of precedents featuring similar tensions and difficulties. Let me illustrate this with a little anthology, as incomplete as it is random.

Already in Antiquity our earliest predecessors (the ancient collective of rabbis that we know as a *hazal*) ran into the phenomenon that students might occasionally drop out because studying was simply not economically feasible for them. Talmud students could not go and work in the fields and career perspectives were wretched: in that earliest period the rabbinate was more a way of life than a recognised profession, let alone a paid one. Students would sometimes drop out as we can read in Kohelet Rabba, in which Ecclesiastes 7:28 (‘I found only one human being in a thousand’) is interpreted as follows: ‘A thousand begin with the Torah, one hundred carry on to the Mishna, ten continue on to the Talmud and but a single one will truly become a rabbi’. Dropping out, as we can see clearly, has always been with us. And just like our government, the *hazal* tried to do whatever was necessary to minimize it. They would

pay visits to wealthy communities hoping to raise student financing, and organised a kind of rabbinical popular university (*kallah*) during those seasons where there was no work to be done in the fields. But the cynicism of Kohelet Rabba speaks volumes: even in Antiquity, obtaining a *semicha* was for the rare exceptional person.

Sometimes it was not so much economic reality that stood in the way, but history itself. We find eloquent testimony to this at the beginning of the fifteenth century in Catalonia. In summer 1391 a series of bloody pogroms were carried out at the Church's instigation and these had led to mass forced conversions. One of the survivors was a man, later to become Juan de Aragon's court astrologer, known to us under a colourful series of names that, put together, elegantly illustrate his turbulent life: from Profiat Duran (his name in Catalan), via Israel ben Moses ha-Levi, to Honoratus de Bonafide, a cynical homonym that was to make clear that, following his conversion, Israel ben Moses had finally embraced the true (i.e. Christian) faith.

Externally Profiat Duran may have converted, yet internally he always remained a Jew. In 1403 he even wrote a manual setting out how his fellow crypto-Jews could continue to study traditional Jewish literature privately at home. The yeshivot, so we read there, had been closed by the Inquisition, so losing the ideal Jewish house of study, where tradition was a group experience rather than the object of solitary study. To make up for that gap, he formulated at least fifteen rules that would help his underground co-religionists to remember what they had read in the Talmud in the intimacy of their homes. Solitary studying is not the same as learning together, Duran argued, which meant that more assistance was required to drive the material deep into their hearts and so to internalise tradition.

In the nineteenth century it was an entire complex of factors (which can also be summarised under the term 'modernity') that drove changes in the traditional rabbinical training. To begin with, it had become necessary, since the Enlightenment, to train a new generation of rabbis who would be in a position to reconcile Faith and Reason that had by now become definitively incompatible variables. There was also increasing pressure, both from outside and from inside, to assimilate to the culture of the young nation states and to give shape both to the new (for instance, Dutch), and to the traditional (Jewish, until that time never explicitly defined) identity. I dislike the term challenge – few words in our vocabulary have been subject to such abuse and inflation – but in this specific case I am almost inclined to use it.

The Jewish answer to the double 'challenge' is more than well known (and the Reform Movement is a prominent part of it). It was formulated by the 'Wissenschaft des Judentums' which devoted itself primarily to the second part of the task: to develop a new, modern, European-Jewish identity. The clue to the answer – hence the term 'Wissenschaft' – lay concealed in the history of the Jewish people. By reconstructing that history the hope was to find what was uniquely theirs, or as the inimitable contemporary German term put it, 'das volkstümlich Jüdische'. That

historic, authentically Jewish component was then to serve as the basis for a new, reformed identity. European Judaism was, as it were, reborn.

As from the moment that 'Wissenschaft' set to work (and up until today) the habit has been to consider Judaism as a historic phenomenon, a dynamic culture in a series of ever changing contexts. But incorporating such an objective historic distance into one's own tradition has naturally far-reaching consequences for the manner in which one stands within that tradition. A splendid example of that alienation is immediately to be found in one of the earliest of studies written under the influence of the 'Wissenschaft': the detailed biography of Rashi that Leopold Zunz (1794-1886), in every respect the 'Wissenschaft's' founding father, published in Berlin in 1822.

In his voluminous work entitled 'Salomon ben Isaac, genannt Raschi' Zunz, for the first time in history, offers a reconstruction of the life of the man behind the commentary. Rashi here is painted as a man typical of the eleventh century, born to a well respected line of scholars, who earned his money from the wine trade in Troyes, but who preferred passing his time in his well-appointed library. Zunz identifies Rashi as a worthy exegete of his time who nevertheless will emerge at regular intervals as a backward creature of the middle ages, burdened by a package of norms and values at odds with those of the Enlightenment. Rashi, in Zunz' depiction, could not think universally, he was intolerance made flesh, deficient in linguistic skills and above all deprived of any knowledge of the modern scholarly process. Using this historically based but nevertheless scarcely objective assessments, Zunz succeeded in radically redrawing the past. Rashi, whose text had previously been timeless, (with a correspondingly timeless authority) is reduced to a historic figure with defects explainable by history, a product of another time and hence no longer relevant for today and tomorrow.

Whenever normative tradition becomes history, the process may confuse the individual believer. It is of course especially troubling for the rabbi standing in the tradition and within which tradition he or she must operate. Hence a compromise needs to be found rapidly between historic scholarship and religious thought. Zacharias Fraenkel (1801-1875), rabbi, 'Wissenschaftler' and head of the famed Jüdisch Theologisches Seminar in Breslau, developed around 1850 a curative methodology that would become known as historical-critical positivism.

Fraenkel was obliged to note that, much as the traditional approach of Talmud study might be the only true one, so undiluted a halachic approach had now become a giant bridge too far for the bulk of his students. The Talmud could also – and fortunately - be read as a source of historical information, and as such at two levels. On the one hand almost every sheet was rich in concrete allusion to historic facts, places, persons and usages susceptible to the fine analysis of the trained historian; on the other hand there were the innumerable sayings of famous rabbis, who each in their own fashion had been engaging in some form of 'Wissenschaft des Judentums', so Fraenkel

claimed. Expressed differently, Rabbi Akiva was for the modern student, despite the not insubstantial difference in age, his or her forerunner and *collega proximus*: as expert on halacha, and as co-author of an unbroken scholarly, historical discourse. Fraenkel's strategy of reconciliation may ring a trifle rhetorical and far-fetched to our twenty-first century ears, but we may state with quiet confidence that his historical-critical positivism did much to buttress Judaism in the turbulent third quarter of the nineteenth century.

Excellent students

Chazal, Profiat Duran, Zacharias Fraenkel — in the course of the centuries it was certainly not the bottom of the barrel that put its endeavours into safeguarding and developing rabbinical education. Without wishing to draw overly presumptuous parallels, I would like to say that this applies as well to those who have been lecturing at the Levisson Institute over the past years. From the beginning the institute has made intensive use of the expertise available in this country – compared to training courses abroad an enormous percentage of Dutch scholars have been closely involved in the programme. The unabridged willingness with which all these scholars (who normally speak of the burden of teaching versus opportunities for research) make such great efforts to be part of the programme, has been a source of astonishment to me, not to speak of the enthusiasm with which they talk about their courses and their experiences with the students.

If you were to ask me, the secret lies in the extra dimension that lecturing to future rabbis affords, relative to teaching in conventional, secular higher education. Is a prospective rabbi cleverer than a university student. Not necessarily. Are they more motivated? Not always – although, in my view, the culture of low expectations of students in general is less omnipresent than those in government would have us believe. Besides being older, are they better read and more thoughtful? That isn't the case either. What for me makes lecturing at the Levisson Institute so satisfying is the evident personal and professional significance that 'learning' and 'study material' have for every student. In conventional academia, finals are often the ultimate goal of the course – 'do I need to know this for the exam?' may often be the question most often asked in the country's lecture halls. You will not hear that question in a Levisson course: every detail, however small and insignificant, is attended to and adds the leavening of the 'rabbi' to that of the 'student'. And that does not happen in calm tranquillity, it happens in noisy, sometimes controversial discussions that often cannot fail to move the lecturer as well. If the ancient rabbinical saying ... *umetalmidai yoter mikulan* is valid somewhere, it is here, in the classrooms of the Levisson Institute.

The first week of September in the Netherlands traditionally marks the opening of the new academic year at all academic institutions. These ceremonies generally come accompanied by a decibel explosion from the world of government contributing its

own burlblings. Maybe you've noticed: rare is the academic you hear speak at such a ceremony (they are not even seated in the first row) but board chairmen, ministers, ex-ministers and policy-makers, most of whom have not set foot in lecture room for a long time. I listen to their vision of the global market and quality (or read them in comfort in the paper of an evening) and am reminded of the film *Glengarry Glenn Ross* by David Mamet, a US playwright. Not because our prime minister resembles Al Pacino and even less because policymakers make me think of the badgered real estate brokers populating Mamet's film. It is their use of what is always the same buzzword that evokes the association. In their despairing dialogues Mamet's protagonists have more or less exchanged every fourth word for the tired f-word, which makes watching a censored version of the film (on, say, a flight from Stockholm to Budapest) an experience in the intolerable. Policymakers have their own variant, more acceptable in polite society: their catchword for 2007 is 'excellent'. If we could drop that adjective from their addresses, maybe we could head straight for the bar after the opening words.

In his annual address even our prime minister, Professor Balkenende made a plea for excellence: he wanted to see excellent students, ambitious career types who would see off without scruples that detested culture of mediocrity and who knew how to infect the dreaming spires of Dutch learning with that old-fashioned buccaneer mentality. I would like to suggest to our prime minister that he, in his search for high fliers, fit in a stop at the Levisson Institute, for here he will, in my view, find the truly excellent students. As of old, students not of school but of life, *non scholae sed vitae*. Who do not hang on every word you say with finals in mind. Who may not score a starred first (but occasionally will), but can extend boundaries. Which allows their teachers to learn something as well ... *umetalmidai yoter mikulan*.

Five years after firing the starting shot the first generation of excellent Levisson students are about to graduate. A new flight of rabbis who, in part thanks to their training, can and will assume responsibilities for the Liberal Jewish faithful, for the Liberal Jewish communities and for the Liberal Jewish stream of thought in the Netherlands. The path leading them through their professional development was certainly no *chiddush*, no *creatio ex nihilo*, but a tale of carefully cultivating talent, oil and elbow grease, and of experimenting with varying degrees of success. But to good result. In the sixth year of this 'creation' the first generation will graduate. But I know the Dean of the Levisson Institute, and hence I am rather inclined to ask whether these graduates will finally be granted a modicum of peace in their seventh year.