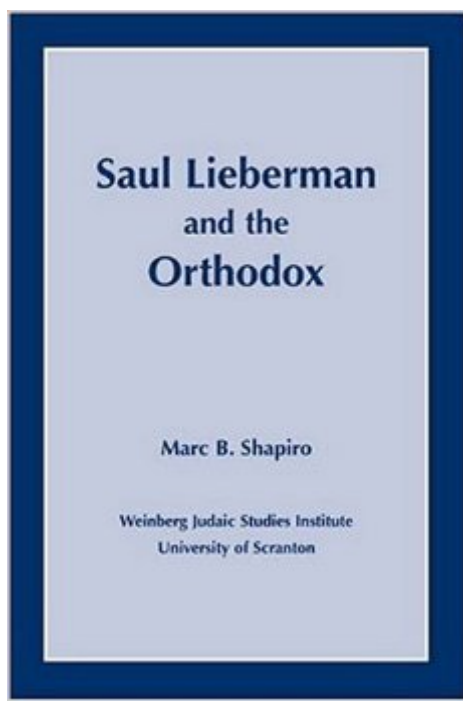


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Saul Lieberman And The Orthodox



Synopsis

One of the foremost scholars of the Talmud in the last century, Saul Lieberman (1898–1983) is also an intriguing and controversial figure. Highly influential in Orthodox society, he left Israel in 1940 to accept an appointment at the Jewish Theological Seminary, a Conservative institution. During his forty years at the Seminary, Lieberman served in the Rabbinical Assembly as one of the most important arbiters of Jewish law, though his decisions were often too progressive to be recognized by the Orthodox. Marc B. Shapiro here considers Lieberman's experiences to examine the conflict between Jewish Orthodoxy and Conservatism in the mid-1900s. This invaluable scholarly resource also includes a Hebrew appendix and previously unpublished letters from Lieberman.

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Customer Reviews

Mainly, Shapiro's focus is on the history of the relationship of the general Orthodox leadership--i.e. The Council of Torah Sages (Moetzei Gedolei haTorah), Rabbinical Council of America, and The Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada (Agudas haRabonim)--with Orthodox rabbis who worked for/with non-Orthodox institutions. Shapiro also devotes a few pages to the Conservative scholar, Dr. Louis Ginsburg, and his relationship with the Orthodox community (as long as Shapiro was at it, I would have been interested to see some information about Dr. David-Weiss Halivni, the talmudic genius who quit the Jewish Theological Seminary of America over the issue of women becoming rabbis and is currently attempting to forge a "Traditional"

denominational road between Conservative and Orthodox). Shapiro largely dedicates the pages to Saul Lieberman (the G'RaSh), the ingenious Orthodox Talmudic scholar who had permission from two universally recognized rabbinical figures to work at the JTSA and, while there, composed an infamous treatise of the Tosefta. Although Shapiro's facts are quite interesting and do indicate Orthodoxy's fundamental shift to the right, I think he reads way too much into things. He quotes a lot of 19th century Chareidi rabbis as working with people who graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau as similar to the Saul Lieberman case. I don't think it's so simple to do so. Many rabbis probably considered the JTSB an "Orthodoxish" institution at the time (in fact, the first two presidents of the Orthodox Union were H.P. Mendes and Bernard Drachman, two JTSA stalwarts; it is especially worthy of notice that the latter was a graduate of JTSB and quit his shul when it got rid of the mechitza). One of his main focuses is on titles, which many would argue are not indicative of a rabbi's position on a person's philosophy; however, it is extremely interesting that some of the most respected right-wing rabbis addressed Ginzburg--who, by Orthodox standards, was undoubtedly a heretic--with some very respectful terms. That being said, Shapiro debunks many myths which are embedded in the book "Saul Lieberman", as well as introducing the reader to the following: the tremendous respect which the Orthodox community had for Lieberman (as opposed to Ginzburg and Dr. Mordechai Kaplan); recently found documents which reveal why Lieberman decided to work at the Seminary; Rabbi Samuel Belkin's alleged recommendation of Lieberman as a decisor of Jewish law; the constant respect showed by moderate left-wing Rabbis Joseph Soloveitchik and Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg (the Seredei Ish) to Lieberman; an interesting story delineating somewhat the positions of the moderate right-wing Agudath Israel's Rabbis Yaakov Kaminetsky and Aaron Kotler; different decisions in Jewish law in relation to working at a Conservative institution (although, here too, I think Shapiro makes some mistakes. For example, he seems to believe that according to a certain opinion in Jewish law which feels that one cannot teach Torah to somebody who does not deserve to learn it, outreach would be impossible. But this opinion is not necessarily referring to a halachic "Jew captured in the land of Gentiles," but a student at a Conservative seminary.); how many Chareidi scholars have managed to quote Lieberman (including an Artscroll!), often while debasing/ignoring his rabbinical status; and more. All of this makes for a fascinating read.

This book has only 51 pages of English text, so it is really more of a journal article than a traditional "book." But for what it is it is interesting: it describes the relationship between Saul Lieberman (a Talmudic scholar who came from an Orthodox background to teach at a Conservative seminary in

1940) and Orthodox Jews. Major Orthodox scholars took a wide range of positions towards Lieberman: some anathemized him, others continued to rely on his scholarship, while still others split the difference in a variety of ways (for example, by citing his scholarship without mentioning him). Shapiro has lots of interesting little sidebars about the Orthodox/Conservative relationship, painting a general picture of increased polarization. In the early 20th century, Conservative and moderate Orthodox synagogues were barely distinguishable. But Conservative rabbis gradually became more and more willing to make halachic decisions without giving the most traditional Orthodox rabbis veto power, and Orthodox rabbis responded with hostility by treating Conservatives as schismatics. In the second half of the 20th century, the two groups became more polarized, Orthodoxy becoming much more strict, Conservatism less so.

Made me more interested in reading the biography. I am a fan of the author. He is intellectually honest and has a very diversified knowledge

Great classic read. Author clearly always has an agenda but I've become used to it

thank you

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