

# Rabbi Dessler's View of Secular Studies and *Wissenschaft des Judentums*

by Esther Solomon

## Abstract

Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler (1892–1953) is often portrayed as antagonistic to secular studies. However, his writings show more of an intellectual hierarchy that places Torah wisdom at the top and all other wisdom a distant second. R. Dessler expended great effort promoting Torah scholarship while generally refraining from disparaging secular studies. Looking at the writings of his predecessors in the Mussar (moralist) movement, one can see that there was no disapproval of worldly education there, either: In fact, R. Dessler and his predecessors were well-educated in many secular disciplines.

This essay looks to place R. Dessler's attitude toward *Wissenschaft des Judentums* within the context of his life's mission to advance talmudic study and his consequent unwillingness to countenance anything that detracted from furthering the learning of Torah. I argue that, whereas his extreme opposition to *Wissenschaft* was the result of his aversion to its aims, methods and conclusions, his nuanced relationship to Orthodox *Wissenschaft* was the result of the hierarchy through which he viewed secular as opposed to talmudic study.

## 1. Introduction

Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler (1892–1953) was a scion of the Lithuanian Mussar (moralist) movement and a great-grandson of its founder, R. Israel Salanter (1809–1883).<sup>1</sup> He was educated from age thirteen at the Kelm Mussar Yeshivah, which was supported by his family, and married the granddaughter

<sup>1</sup> This article is a subsection of my dissertation, being written at Bar Ilan University under the supervision of Professor Hanoah Ben Pazi and Professor Gershon Greenberg. I have greatly benefitted from their wisdom, erudition, and dedication. The article was vastly improved through the editorial skill and scholarship of Dr. Mirjam Thulin.

of the dean of the yeshivah, R. Simcha Zissel Broide (1824–1898).<sup>2</sup> In 1928, R. Dessler moved to England, becoming the founder and principal of the *Kollel* (yeshivah for married men) in Gateshead in November 1941, which was the first of its kind in England. He opened a yeshivah for younger men as an adjunct to the *Kollel* in 1944 and in the same year also founded the Gateshead Teachers' seminary for women, an ultra-Orthodox institution of higher Jewish learning, which became a prototype for many such institutions now in existence. In 1948, he relocated to Israel, becoming the *mashgiach* (spiritual principal) of the Ponevezh Yeshivah in B'nei Braq, a position which he maintained until his death in 1953.<sup>3</sup> R. Dessler's thought was popularized in a five-volume series entitled *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* (An Epistle from Elijah), which has become a fixture of the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) library.<sup>4</sup>

The academic literature is inconsistent regarding R. Dessler's perspective on secular studies. There are those who claim that he studied Freud and Kant and could quote both verbatim.<sup>5</sup> There is one opinion that he read Dale Carnegie and even used a basic concept from his book in a lecture at Ponevezh Yeshivah.<sup>6</sup> This would indicate that R. Dessler felt positively about secular studies and was ready to acquire general knowledge himself. However, there are also those who depict R. Dessler as antagonistic to secular studies.<sup>7</sup> Some opinions suggest that R. Dessler was a representative of the "anti-*madda*

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Claussen: *Sharing the Burden. R. Simchah Zissel Ziv and the Path of Musar*, Alabany 2015, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Esther Solomon: R. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler. Not Quite a Mussar Traditionalist, in: *Da'at* 82 (2016), pp. CVI–CVII.

<sup>4</sup> Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler: *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu*. 5 vols., Jerusalem 1955–1997. In this article, the respective volumes of *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* will be referred to as MM1, MM2, MM3, MM4 and MM5; Yonason Rosenblum: *Rav Dessler. The Life and Impact of Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler the Michtav m'Eliyahu*, Jerusalem 2000, p. v.

<sup>5</sup> Tamar Ross: *Ha-Adam Ve-Koakh Bechirato Ha-Mussarit Be-Mishnat Ha-Rav Dessler. (Man and his Power of Choice in the Thought of Rabbi E.E. Dessler)* in: *Da'at* 13 (1984), p. 114; Jonathan Garb: *Mussar as a Modern Movement*, in: *Third International Conference on Modern Religions and Religious Movements in Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Bábí-Bahá'í Faiths*, March 2011, Hebrew University, Tikvah Working Paper 01/12, Lecture 6, 32 pp., here p. 6; Louis Jacobs: *The Jewish Religion. A Companion*, Oxford 1995, p. 120. More on this topic later in the article. See also Ze'ev Lev: *Al Ha-herem al Gidulo shel Gadol. (Regarding the Ban on The Making of a Torah Giant)*, in: *HaMa'ayan* 50 (2010). <https://www.machonso.org/hamaayan/?gilayon=15&id=743> (last accessed February 14, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Yoel Katan: *Qabel Ha-Emet Meemee She-Amra*, in: *HaMa'ayan* 32 (1992) 3, pp. 54–56; MM4, 243–245.

<sup>7</sup> Norman Lamm: *Torah Umadda*, New Jersey 1990, p. 71.

(anti-science) position,” and that for him, involvement in *madda* (science) was somehow “un-Jewish.”<sup>8</sup>

What, in fact, was R. Dessler's position regarding general knowledge? This article will demonstrate that R. Dessler's perspective was controversial for his time and remains so today: He supported engagement in secular studies and approved of its acquisition by the general public, yet he valued the learning of Torah more. The equivocal nature of his attitude has led some scholars to the conclusion that he opposed the attainment of secular knowledge per se. I argue, however, that R. Dessler's prime motivation was his veneration of Torah learning and his desire to revive the traditional Torah wisdom that was lost during World War II. This perspective will then be used to explain R. Dessler's relationship to *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

## 2. R. Dessler's Refusal to Allow the Opening of a Teachers' Seminary

The primary sources brought in to demonstrate R. Dessler's supposed opposition to secular studies are two letters that he wrote in response to a question posed by his students.<sup>9</sup> They had asked about the permissibility of opening a teachers' seminary for Orthodox men near the Gateshead yeshivah, of which R. Dessler was the dean. In his response, dated May 15, 1951, R. Dessler expressed his reluctance to support the creation of an institution for higher secular education in Gateshead. This was despite the fact that it was clear to him that the institution would be run according to Halakhah (Jewish law) and that the only people admitted would be those who had already chosen not to stay in the yeshivah. R. Dessler wrote that the existence of such a seminary might lead a person who could have been in yeshivah to abandon it in order to get a degree.<sup>10</sup> He added that, even were that person to stay, his learning would be tainted with thoughts of the secular education which the seminary had taught him to want but that he was not getting.<sup>11</sup> He makes no mention of the conventional reasons for disallowing secular studies: the fear that exposure to *madda* is dangerous to religious people, the belief that only Talmud and

<sup>8</sup> David Shatz: Practical Endeavor and the Torah u-Madda Debate, in: Torah U-Madda Journal 3 (1991–1992), pp. 123–124, 148 n87.

<sup>9</sup> MM3, pp. 355–360. The sources will be addressed later in the article.

<sup>10</sup> MM3, p. 355.

<sup>11</sup> MM3, pp. 355–356.

Halakhah are religiously valid subjects of study, and the concern about wasting time that could be better spent learning Torah.<sup>12</sup> The only point to which he alludes in his letter is how the teachers' seminary would detract from the educational endeavors at his yeshivah.

R. Dessler's arguments in these letters appear quite clearly to be expressing opposition not to secular studies per se, but rather to the introduction of a college for Orthodox students near the Gateshead yeshivah, an institution which he had worked to establish. Support for this view comes from R. Dessler's comment that the reason he could not allow the opening of a teachers' seminary was specifically because the yeshivah was the only such institution then worldwide.<sup>13</sup> As a result of the Holocaust, virtually nothing had remained of the yeshivahs that had existed in Europe prior to World War II. Almost none of the American yeshivahs had been founded yet.

### 3. Orthodox Forerunners:

#### R. Samson Raphael Hirsch's View of Secular Studies

In the same letter of May 15, 1951, R. Dessler comments on the worldview of the disciples of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), called *Torah im Derekh Eretz* ("Torah with the way of the land," a phrase from Mishnah Avot 2, 2).<sup>14</sup> R. Hirsch used the expression to refer to an educational ideal that incorporated secular knowledge into Torah studies. R. Dessler writes that this approach was somewhat imperfect as far as the complete acceptance of the Torah's perspective was concerned.<sup>15</sup>

R. Hirsch's view of secular studies was radically different from that of R. Dessler, even from the perspective that R. Dessler was in favor of them.

<sup>12</sup> Lamm, *Torah Umadda*, pp. 47–48.

<sup>13</sup> MM3, p. 357.

<sup>14</sup> Regarding R. Hirsch, see Shnayer Z. Leiman: *Rabbinic Openness to General Culture in the Early Modern Period in Western and Central Europe*, in: Jacob J. Schacter (ed.), *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures. Rejection or Integration?*, New York 1997, pp. 180–201; Benjamin Brown: *Breuer, Hirsch and Jewish Nationalism. Change and Continuity – Principle versus Supra-principle*, in: *Journal of Jewish Studies* 64 (2013) 2, pp. 383–402; Matthias Morgenstern: *Rabbi S. R. Hirsch and his Perception of Germany and German Jewry*, in: Steven E. Aschheim/Vivan Liska (eds.), *The German-Jewish Experience Revisited*, Berlin 2015, pp. 207–230; Marc Shapiro: *Samson Raphael Hirsch and Orthodoxy. A Contested Legacy*, in: Adam S. Ferziger (ed.), *The Paths of Daniel. Studies in Judaism and Jewish Culture in Honor of Rabbi Professor Daniel Sperber*, Ramat Gan 2017, pp. 129–152.

<sup>15</sup> MM3, p. 356.

For R. Dessler, secular studies were at most an addendum to the all-important activity of studying Torah.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, R. Hirsch is generally understood to have advocated a synthesis of secular and Jewish studies as a first-choice position, because that perspective “represents the ancient, traditional wisdom of our Sages that has stood the test everywhere and at all times.”<sup>17</sup> He believed that only through Judaism could the secular be elevated to the point where it achieves its ultimate purpose, and only through secular study could Torah knowledge be fully appreciated and properly understood.<sup>18</sup>

What is interesting here is how R. Dessler concludes that R. Hirsch's approach was flawed. As evidence, he cites the fact that it did not produce *Gedolei Israel* (Torah giants or people of great Torah learning).<sup>19</sup> R. Dessler was convinced that the development of such individuals was the primary reason for the existence of any yeshivah, and therefore considered the Hirschian system a failure for not having done so.<sup>20</sup> R. Dessler believed that a system that does not produce Torah giants was invalid; he was concerned regarding its impact on Torah learning worldwide.<sup>21</sup> This idea gains further support through R. Dessler's embrace of secular studies for those not learning in yeshivah.

<sup>16</sup> MM3, pp. 47–49.

<sup>17</sup> Samson Raphael Hirsch: Nineteen Letters, trans. by Bernard Drachman, Jerusalem 1969, p. 98; Samson Raphael Hirsch: Horeb, trans. by Isidore Grunfeld, Jerusalem 1994, p. 11. See the explanation of R. Hirsch's educational ideal in Shimon Schwab: These and Those, New York 1966, pp. 13–16; Samson Raphael Hirsch: Collected Writings, ed. by Elliott Bondi/David Bechhofer, vol. VI, Jerusalem 1990, p. 221.

<sup>18</sup> Mordechai Breuer: The “Torah Im Derekh Eretz” of Samson Raphael Hirsch, Jerusalem 1979, p. 9; Ephraim Chamiel: The Middle Way. The Emergence of Modern Jewish Trends in Nineteenth-Century Judaism Responses to Modernity (Hebrew), Jerusalem 2011, p. 198; Hirsch, Nineteen Letters, pp. 98–109; Hirsch, Collected Writings, vol. VII, pp. 86–100. See also Yehuda (Leo) Levi: Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. Myth and Fact, in: Tradition, 31 (Spring, 1997) 3, pp. 5–22.

<sup>19</sup> MM3, p. 356. This also indicates that R. Dessler thought of the yeshivah scholars as an elite. See also MM3, p. 357.

<sup>20</sup> MM3, p. 357.

<sup>21</sup> This position should be differentiated from that of, for instance, R. Yaakov Kamenetsky (1891–1986), who, one generation later, said that children should be taught general studies when still young. R. Dessler, in contrast, never discussed the practical benefits of secular knowledge. See Aharon Hersh Fried: Are Our Children Too Worldly? West Coast Conference of Agudath Israel of America, Palm Springs 1991, p. 43.

#### 4. R. Dessler on Secular Knowledge

When not connected to a yeshivah framework, R. Dessler's approval of secular studies appears unambiguous. In the 1930s, while serving as a rabbi in England, he explained that the more one understands the wonders of the universe, and of the human body in particular, the more one will gain appreciation of the wisdom of God.<sup>22</sup> In 1940, in the same capacity, he said that through our increasing knowledge of the galaxies and the workings of the body we discern the Divine. He further stated that in order to not perceive God in the wonders of nature one would have to have "an evil inclination of iron."<sup>23</sup> As for philosophy, in a letter to a private student in England in July 1938, he acknowledged positive aspects of Kant's thinking, while cautioning the student not to delve into philosophy and Kabbalah while he, R. Dessler, was away.<sup>24</sup> According to R. Dessler, however, the fact remained that Kant wrote complete heresy. He promised that when he came back, the two of them would sit together as usual and discuss all the young man's questions.<sup>25</sup>

Physicist Ze'ev Lev, also known as William Low (1922–2004), who later founded the *Jerusalem Institute of Technology*, studied under R. Dessler in the 1950s when he was giving talks to professionals, particularly physicians, in private homes in Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup> Lev wrote that R. Dessler once gave a class on the difference between Freud and R. Israel Salanter, in which he quoted sections of Freud by heart. In another class, he spoke about Kant, quoting him verbatim.<sup>27</sup> These anecdotes indicate that R. Dessler had great familiarity with modern philosophers and their works and that he felt it was beneficial to share this with at least some of his students.

In England, R. Dessler interacted with university students and sometimes their professors, answering their questions and suggesting a Torah-based

<sup>22</sup> MM5, p. 274.

<sup>23</sup> MM5, pp. 225, 274.

<sup>24</sup> The letter was written in England to a student there. It is dated in the Torah portion of the week, as typical in ultra-Orthodox circles. In 1938, the Torah portion of *Parshat Balak* was in the first week of July, see Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler: *Sefer HaZikaron*, vol. 1, B'nei Braq 2004, pp. 107–108.

<sup>25</sup> Dessler, *Sefer HaZikaron*, vol. 1, p. 108.

<sup>26</sup> William Low (Ze'ev Lev): Some Remarks on a Letter of R.E.E. Dessler, in: Harry Schimmel / Cyril Domb / Aryeh Carmell (eds.), *Encounter*, Jerusalem 1989, p. 205.

<sup>27</sup> Lev: *Al Ha-herem al Gidulo shel Gadol*.

approach to the issues that arose from their studies.<sup>28</sup> His ability to establish dialogue with these people points to his fluency with the thinking to which they had been exposed. Even within the walls of a yeshivah, R. Dessler sometimes utilized his erudition. For example, in Ponevezh, when interacting with students who had come from non-yeshivah backgrounds, his “wide knowledge of the modern world, including a familiarity with recent scientific discoveries,” broke down the stereotype of Torah scholars who were unfamiliar with the world around them.<sup>29</sup> It also seems that R. Dessler incorporated principles developed by Dale Carnegie in his book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* into a lecture given in Ponevezh Yeshivah.<sup>30</sup> While R. Dessler did not mention the book by name, the similarities are striking.<sup>31</sup> Obscuring his source allowed him to teach his students the content that he deemed important without sanctioning the pursuit of secular knowledge as a worthy pastime for yeshivah students.

All told, it seems that R. Dessler generally approved of secular studies. However, he kept any familiarity with secular knowledge discrete around his yeshivah students, even when he was teaching them secular sources. R. Dessler never publicly recommended secular studies to his yeshivah students, neither in Gateshead nor in Ponevezh. Instead, he wanted the students to focus on pure Torah learning. This dichotomy became manifest when, for example, R. Dessler censured a friend who planned to send his children to college. In a 1940 letter, R. Dessler tried to convince him to opt for full-time yeshivah instead, saying that the only way to acquire real knowledge of Torah literature was to be completely devoted to it and to eschew all other forms of study.<sup>32</sup>

R. Dessler's seemingly contradictory positions can be reconciled through his own notes from 1941, in which he teaches that wisdom is only valuable

<sup>28</sup> Rosenblum, Rav Dessler, pp. 24, 302, 312–313. Meir Lambersky/Betzalel Karlinsky/Yitzchak Roth: *Mechaneh Ledorot, B'nei Braq* 2009, p. 375.

<sup>29</sup> Rosenblum, Rav Dessler, p. 302.

<sup>30</sup> Dale Carnegie: *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. New York 1936; Katan, Qabel Ha-Emet, pp. 54–56. MM4, pp. 243–245.

<sup>31</sup> Katan quotes R. Aryeh Carmell, saying that R. Dessler did read Carnegie, albeit in abridged form, see Dale Carnegie: *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, in: *Reader's Digest* 30 (1937) 177, pp. 130–144. Katan, Qabel Ha-Emet, p. 244. The lecture by R. Dessler accords far more with the article than with the actual book.

<sup>32</sup> MM3, p. 339.

when used in service of the greater good, i.e. the revelation of God, but that wisdom for its own sake was like serving evil.<sup>33</sup> With such a statement, R. Dessler is perhaps unwittingly echoing the position of R. Hirsch.<sup>34</sup> This was also the understanding of R. Esriel Hildesheimer (1820–1899), who first opened a yeshivah in Eisenstadt, Hungary, in 1851 that included secular studies in the curriculum, and then in 1873 founded the *Rabbinerseminar für das Orthodoxe Judentum* (Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary) in Berlin integrating *Wissenschaft des Judentums* into its Orthodox curriculum.<sup>35</sup> All three men would have agreed that secular studies had to be subjugated to the overarching goal of advancing God’s agenda. The similarities, however, end there.

For R. Dessler, studying Torah was the top priority and studying anything else was less important.<sup>36</sup> He saw Torah study as the methodology providing the greatest connection to God, and thus as the ultimate vocation of the Jewish people.<sup>37</sup> While he stopped short of the view held by the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* (literally “living soul”), which implied that learning Torah was the *only* vehicle for that connection, for R. Dessler it was certainly the preferred approach for trying to achieve it.<sup>38</sup> This exclusive promotion of talmudic studies was not an attitude shared by rabbis Hirsch and Hildesheimer.<sup>39</sup> In R. Hirsch’s *Realschule*, a school he started in Frankfurt in 1853, not even ten hours per week were devoted to Judaic studies.<sup>40</sup> However, this was a concession to government decrees, as R. Hirsch had planned twenty hours of Judaic studies in the curriculum.<sup>41</sup> In

<sup>33</sup> MM1, pp. 65–66.

<sup>34</sup> Hirsch, *Collected Writings*, vol. VII, pp. 11–12.

<sup>35</sup> Michael K. Silber: *The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy. The Invention of a Tradition*, in: Jack Wertheimer (eds.), *The Uses of Tradition. Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, Cambridge 1992, p. 31; David Ellenson: *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the Creation of a Modern Jewish Orthodoxy*, Tuscaloosa 1990, p. 143.

<sup>36</sup> MM3, p. 185.

<sup>37</sup> MM1, p. 223; MM2, p. 41; MM3, p. 189.

<sup>38</sup> Ross, *Ha-Adam Ve-Koakh Bechirato (Man and his Power of Choice)*, p. 120.

<sup>39</sup> MM1, pp. 103, 105, 195–197, 317. Ross, *Ha-Adam Ve-Koakh Bechirato (Man and his Power of Choice)*, p. 120. Rosenblum, *Rav Dessler*, p. 316; Nurit Stadler: *The Sacred and the Profane in the Concept of Work. The Case of the Ultra-Orthodox Community in Israel*, unpublished dissertation, Hebrew University 2001 (Hebrew), pp. 69, 140, 152; Aryeh Carmell: *Torah Im Derech Eretz. Rav Hirsch and Rav Dessler*, *Dvar Yerushalayim Newsletter* (2008), [http://dvar.org.il/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=361:torah-im-derech-eretz&catid=2&Itemid=289&lang=he](http://dvar.org.il/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=361:torah-im-derech-eretz&catid=2&Itemid=289&lang=he) (last accessed February 14, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> Elyahu Meir Klugman: *Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*, New York 1996, p. 228.

<sup>41</sup> Klugman, *Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*, pp. 228–229. Joseph Elias: *Editor’s Notes to the Nineteen Letters*, in: Hirsch, *Nineteen Letters*, p. 320.



R. Hildesheimer's seminary, many compromises were made regarding Talmudic studies in order to facilitate the university training of the students.<sup>42</sup> Students in the fifth and sixth years were required to spend (only – E.S.) five hours per week on Talmud. The schedule of the rabbinical seminary in Berlin lends credence to claims that its students never achieved noteworthy expertise in Talmud study.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, R. Dessler felt that the only way to attain proficiency in Talmud was through long-term immersion. Despite this, he valued secular studies, at least for those not learning in a yeshivah. In this respect, he was echoing the sentiments of his predecessors in the Mussar movement.

### 5. R. Dessler's Ideological Predecessors

Eastern European Jewry, among them Lithuanian Jews (Litvaks), are characterized by certain traits, including Yiddish as a common language, a high degree of conservative religious commitment, and an ambivalent attitude towards enlightenment and modernity. Lithuanian Jews in particular were known for their extreme emphasis on rational thought.<sup>44</sup>

Characteristics of Lithuanian Jewry can be recognized in R. Dessler's attitudes.<sup>45</sup> In this respect, as in many others, his views were in accordance with those of his predecessors in the Mussar movement, specifically R. Simcha Zissel Broide and R. Israel Salanter. Lithuanian rabbis outside the Mussar movement sometimes echoed this relationship to secular studies. For instance, R. Naftali Zevi Yehuda Berlin (1816–1893), *rosh yeshivah* of the Volozhin Yeshivah, “was [...] familiar with many fields of Jewish literature, and ensured that his son Me'ir learned Russian.”<sup>46</sup> Despite these examples, the acquisition of secular

<sup>42</sup> Ellenson, Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer, pp. 156–157. In contrast, Louis Jacobs writes that in the Gateshead *Kollel*, the Talmud was studied twelve hours per day, see Louis Jacobs: *Helping with Inquiries. An Autobiography*, London 1989, pp. 48–49.

<sup>43</sup> Ellenson, Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer, p. 146.

<sup>44</sup> Mordechai Zalkin: *Lithuanian Jewry and the Concept of East European Jewry*, in: Šarūnas Liekis / Antony Polonsky / Chaeran Freeze (eds.), *Jews in the Former Grand Duchy of Lithuania Since 1772*, Oxford 2013, pp. 58, 61; Shaul Stampfer: *Families, Rabbis and Education. Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe*, Portland, Oregon 2010, p. 230.

<sup>45</sup> Garb writes that “[most of the prominent Mussar personalities were knowledgeable regarding the development of European thought.,” (Jonathan Garb: *Yearnings of the Soul. Psychological Thought in Modern Kabbalah*, Chicago 2015, p. 67).

<sup>46</sup> Shaul Stampfer: *The Lithuanian Yeshivahs of the Nineteenth Century. Creating a Tradition of Learning*, trans. by Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, Portland, Oregon 2012, p. 163. At the Volozhin yeshivah (1803–1892), secular studies within a yeshivah setting were seen as a waste of time

knowledge among Lithuanian rabbis appears to have been the exception and not the rule. Still, the Lithuanian attitude to secular studies seemed to have been more tolerant than that of Hasidism, whose leadership, for various reasons, was far more disparaging of general education.<sup>47</sup>

R. Dessler was a product of the Kelm Talmud Torah, the yeshivah he attended from the age of 13 until his departure to England at the age of 36.<sup>48</sup> His affiliation with that institution was strengthened by his marriage to the granddaughter of its founder, R. Simcha Zissel Broide.<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, he described himself as a product of Kelm and its doctrines.<sup>50</sup> R. Broide was known for the schools he had previously established: the Kelm Talmud Torah in 1865 that initially was an educational institution for young teenagers and later a yeshivah of the same name, and a Talmud Torah in Grubin in 1880.<sup>51</sup> Both introduced secular studies into their curricula.<sup>52</sup> In this way, R. Broide's yeshivas were similar to R. Esriel Hildesheimer's yeshiva in Eisenstadt.<sup>53</sup> Although R. Dessler never attended Grubin, his description of his long association with Kelm and its yeshivah make clear that he identified with its principles.<sup>54</sup> R. Broide was a proponent of secular studies, although he saw them as secondary to Torah study.<sup>55</sup> Thus, R. Broide's support for secular studies was an early mirror of R. Dessler's.

that could be better used for the study of Torah. However, they were not forbidden, see Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivahs*, pp. 160–165.

<sup>47</sup> David Biale/David Assaf/Benjamin Brown/Uriel Gellman/Samuel Heilman/Moshe Rosman/Gadi Sagiv/Marcin Wodzinski: *Hasidism. A New History*, Princeton 2018, pp. 491–492, 549. See also Avraham Mordechai Alter to Yitzchak Meir Levine, *Mikhtav Devar HaTzeirim VeHaBibliateken* (Letter Regarding the Youth and the Libraries), in: *Ossef Mikhtavim* (Collection of Letters), Warsaw 1937, pp. 50–51.

<sup>48</sup> Rosenblum, *Rav Dessler*, pp. 25, 113.

<sup>49</sup> Geoffrey Claussen, *Sharing the Burden*, p. 7; Rosenblum, *Rav Dessler*, p. 99.

<sup>50</sup> See MM4, pp. 328–331 where, in a letter to his daughter, R. Dessler traces their family's spiritual and biological roots to Kelm.

<sup>51</sup> Claussen, *Sharing the Burden*, pp. 13–15, 27, 29. Rosenblum, *Rav Dessler*, p. 403.

<sup>52</sup> Rosenblum, *Rav Dessler*, p. 42. Claussen, *Sharing the Burden*, p. 14. See also Low, *Remarks on a Letter*, p. 210; Dov Katz: *Tenuat HaMussar*, vol. 2, Jerusalem 1982, p. 197; Paul Johnson, *History of the Jews*, New York 1987, p. 328. Johnson writes that R. Broide believed in secular education but not cultural integration for his students; R. Esriel Hildesheimer differed from R. Broide in his views on integration, see Ellenson, *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer*, pp. 37, 54–56.

<sup>53</sup> See Ellenson, *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer*, pp. 36–37.

<sup>54</sup> MM3, pp. 346–349.

<sup>55</sup> Geoffrey Claussen: *Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv. The Moral Vision of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Mussar Master*, unpublished dissertation, Jewish Theological Seminary New York 2011, pp. 92–93.

The connection between Mussar and secular studies did not start with R. Broide but with his teacher, R. Israel Lipkin Salanter, the originator of the Mussar movement.<sup>56</sup> R. Salanter, too, engaged in secular studies and was supportive of gaining worldly knowledge, especially in natural sciences and foreign languages; he himself had acquired secular knowledge.<sup>57</sup> R. Salanter did not discourage his student, R. Broide, from opening schools that offered secular studies.<sup>58</sup> He also felt that R. Hirsch's *Nineteen Letters* should be translated into Russian to be available for Russian Jews who were embracing secularism.<sup>59</sup> After reading the *Nineteen Letters* for the first time, R. Salanter reportedly asked, "Where is there a heaven big enough for R. Hirsch?"<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, he felt that R. Hirsch's *Torah im Derekh Eretz* program was appropriate for German but not Russian Jews.<sup>61</sup> He apparently believed that the traditional yeshivah system of exclusive Torah study was preferable and, where possible, should not be exchanged for the *Torah im Derekh Eretz* system of R. Hirsch.

R. Salanter's positive regard for secular knowledge paled in comparison to his admiration for Torah study and those who studied Torah full-time.<sup>62</sup> For him, it was clear that a yeshivah represented a rarefied atmosphere of purity.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, from the outset of the Mussar movement, the approach to secular studies versus Torah study was always nuanced. R. Dessler, as an ideological descendant of rabbis Broide and Salanter, shared their approach: Torah study as the ultimate vocation, secular study as a secondary but respectable adjunct.

<sup>56</sup> Tamar Ross: Ha-Machshava Ha-Iyunit Be-kitvei Mamshikhav shel R. Yisrael Salanter Bitenuat Ha-Mussar (Moral Philosophy in the Writings of Rabbi Salanter's Disciples in the Mussar Movement), unpublished dissertation, Hebrew University 1986 (Hebrew), p. 8.

<sup>57</sup> He had studied science, probably to be able to answer the claims of Charles Darwin, see Zalman Ury: The Ethic of Israel Salanter and Moral Education in Jewish Schools, unpublished dissertation, University of California 1966, p. 93; Menahem Glenn: Israel Salanter. Religious-Ethical Thinker, New York 1953, pp. 69–70; Immanuel Etkes: R. Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement, trans. by Jonathon Chipman, Jerusalem 1993, pp. 244–245.

<sup>58</sup> Yakov Yechiel Weinberg: Responsa Seridei Aish (Remnants of Fire), vol. 4, Jerusalem 2003, p. 294.

<sup>59</sup> For this article, I have used the Hebrew translation: Samson Raphael Hirsch: The Nineteen Letters, ed. by Joseph P. Elias, Jerusalem 1995. On R. Hirsch and his book, see: Klugman: Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, p. 66; Etkes, R. Israel Salanter, pp. 246–247. Controversies still exist over whether or not the *Nineteen Letters* is based on Kantian philosophy.

<sup>60</sup> Klugman, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, p. 66.

<sup>61</sup> Etkes, R. Israel Salanter, pp. 247, 286–287.

<sup>62</sup> Claussen, Kelm School, p. 154.

<sup>63</sup> Etkes, R. Israel Salanter, p. 247.

## 6. R. Dessler and “Modernity”

R. Dessler never compromised his ideology regarding the primacy of Torah. This is an important disclaimer for those who would take his supposed support of secular studies to an extreme. After describing a 1933 conversation between R. Abraham Isaac Bloch (1890–1941), *rosh yeshivah* of Telz (Telshey) in Western Lithuania, and writer Thomas Mann (1875–1955), Jonathan Garb writes:

“This account, in and of itself, positions the Mussar movement in a context which is not Eastern but Central European, not insular and talmudic but entirely modern. [...] I believe that the modernity of one of the great movements of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century traditional Judaism has not yet been sufficiently recognized.”<sup>64</sup>

In his conclusion, Garb writes:

“My [...] view [...] is that one should see 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century movements such as Mussar [...] as forms of ‘multiple modernity.’ [...] In other words, when Bloch engages Mann or Dessler engages Freud, they are doing so from within European modernity, as an alternative form of modernity, rather [than] merely reacting in a conservative and defensive manner.”<sup>65</sup>

Garb defines the term “modernity” as an accelerated, self-aware progression. As such, it is not related to specific processes like secularization, progressivism, or liberalization. Rather, modernity is a process in which humankind is taking part.<sup>66</sup> This is similar to the definition of modernity given by Roni Weinstein, who describes it as “primarily a process of ripening within the Jewish context supported by a long cultural heritage.”<sup>67</sup>

Garb views the Mussar movement in general and R. Dessler in particular as part of this process.<sup>68</sup> He puts great stock in R. Dessler’s familiarity with

<sup>64</sup> Garb, *Mussar as a Modern Movement*, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Garb, *Mussar as a Modern Movement*, p. 6. By “multiple modernities” Garb refers to Shmuel Eisenstadt’s understanding of the interrelation of modernity with pre-existent cultures, see Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt: *Multiple Modernities*, New Brunswick 2002; Eisenstadt: *The Great Revolutions and the Civilizations of Modernity*, Boston 2006, pp. 162, 183.

<sup>66</sup> Jonathan Garb, *Modern Kabbalah as an Autonomous Domain of Research*, Los Angeles 2016 (Hebrew), pp. 7–8.

<sup>67</sup> Roni Weinstein: *Kabbalah and Jewish Modernity*, Portland, Oregon 2016, p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> Tikochinsky also describes Mussar as part of the development of Judaism in the modern period, see Shlomo Tikochinsky: *Renaissance Chinukhi Be-Ruach Tenuat Ha-Mussar Ha-Yehudit*, in: Yeshayahu Tadmor / Amir Freiman (eds.), *Chinukh: Mahut VeRuach (Education: Essence and Spirit)*, Tel Aviv 2012 (Hebrew), p. 260.

the ideas and vernacular of Freud and depicts the Mussar movement as the opposite of “insular and talmudic.” However, Garb’s thesis fails to account for other aspects of R. Dessler’s thinking.<sup>69</sup> While R. Dessler was able to “engage Freud,” he nevertheless rejected him as an authority. He was not embracing a new self-aware process of understanding, nor was he synthesizing an ultra-Orthodox theology with contemporary, secular reality. Despite his ability to use current terminology and thought patterns, R. Dessler fails the test of modernity because he does not willingly engage in its process. Regardless of how he is labelled, R. Dessler’s fealty to Torah as the ultimate arbiter makes him a traditionalist. As he was described by a former student, although he “could refer with ease to Einstein, Freud, Marx and Darwin [...] he was at heart an old-fashioned Mussarist.”<sup>70</sup>

## 7. R. Dessler and *Wissenschaft des Judentums*

The characteristics of R. Dessler as worldly, intellectual, and yet zealously guarding Torah learning as the exclusive focus of a yeshivah raises the question of how he dealt with the concept of an academic approach to the Jewish religion such as in *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. This requires some winnowing, because he almost never addressed it directly. In his autobiography, Louis Jacobs, R. Dessler’s former student, described his experiences at the Gateshead yeshivah:

“Of this [*Jüdische Wissenschaft*, E.S.], there was hardly a mention either at the Yeshivah or the Kollel. The whole modern scholarly enterprise was not so much negated as ignored completely [...] At the Yeshivah, a thick curtain was drawn to shut out any illumination that might come from outside the range of talmudic studies. Until I had begun to study formally at University even the names of [Nachman] Krochmal [1785–1840], [Leopold] Zunz [1784–1886], [Salomon] Rapoport [1873–1917], [Zacharias] Frankel [1801–1875], Shadal [Shmuel D. Luzzatto, 1800–1865], [Moritz] Steinschneider [1782–1856] and the other pioneers of historical studies were unknown to me.”<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Garb, *Mussar as a Modern Movement*, p.4. Garb bases his conclusions on Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler: *Sefer HaZikaron*, vol. 2, B’nei Brak 2004, pp. 103–108.

<sup>70</sup> Jacobs, *Helping with Inquiries*, p. 58.

<sup>71</sup> Jacobs, *Helping with Inquiries*, p. 63.

This is to be expected, given R. Dessler's zeal for yeshivahs remaining free from outside influences. However, his attitude went further in his open antagonism toward the original devisors of *Wissenschaft*. Many of its originators have been described as feeling disgust towards rabbinic Judaism and adopting an academic methodology in order "to subvert traditional norms and justify their proposed reforms."<sup>72</sup> The self-defined function of the original form of *Wissenschaft* was to profane Orthodox Judaism and the Torah by examining them as a man-made system.<sup>73</sup> Presumably, this was done in order to "counter Christian disdain and government suspicion [toward Judaism, E.S.] [...] Put differently, the embrace of German culture would facilitate assimilation."<sup>74</sup> Leopold Zunz, founder of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, "countenanced eliminating irrational or desiccated ritual and the introduction of new ritual where needed."<sup>75</sup>

The new discipline was openly antagonistic to the place of rabbis in Judaism. For instance, Zunz wrote an essay on R. Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040–1105), known as Rashi, in which his self-declared goal was "to strip... (him) of the nimbus of saga and mythology."<sup>76</sup> Additionally, Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), Zunz's younger companion in *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, wrote that "[i]ntellectual life at the academies of Palestine was characterized by dull languor. The Jerusalem Gemara is bare, meager and sober, though not lacking in legendary superstition."<sup>77</sup>

<sup>72</sup> See Immanuel Wohlwill's opening article from the *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, Berlin 1822, pp. 15–16, trans. as: Michael A. Meyer: Jewish Scholarship and Identity in Modern Germany, in: Peter Y. Meddling (ed.), *A New Jewry? America since the Second World War*, Oxford 1992, p. 182. See also Assaf Yedidya: *Orthodox Reactions to "Wissenschaft des Judentums,"* in: *Modern Judaism* 30 (2010) 1, pp. 69–94, here p. 70; Chanan Gafni: *The Emergence of Critical Scholarship on Rabbinic Literature in the Nineteenth Century Social and Ideological Contexts*, unpublished dissertation, Harvard 2005, pp. 221, 239, 240, 264–265.

<sup>73</sup> Regarding Zunz's sentiments, see: Ismar Schorsch: *Leopold Zunz*, Philadelphia 2016, pp. 15, 112, 114. For examples of how a *Wissenschaft* scholar could use the discipline to sanction evolving halakhic practice, see Bruce L. Ruben: *Max Lilienthal. The Making of the American Rabbinate*, Detroit 2011, pp. 11, 116. See also Yedidya, *Orthodox Reactions*, p. 81.

<sup>74</sup> Schorsch, *Leopold Zunz*, p. 33.

<sup>75</sup> Schorsch, *Leopold Zunz*, p. 82.

<sup>76</sup> Schorsch, *Leopold Zunz*, pp. 7, 43. See the original article, Leopold Zunz: *Salomon ben Isaac, genannt Raschi*, in: *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (1823), pp. 277–384.

<sup>77</sup> Harvey Hill: *The Science of Reform. Abraham Geiger and the "Wissenschaft des Judentums,"* *Modern Judaism* 27 (2007) 3, pp. 329–349, here p. 331. See also Abraham Geiger: *Nachgelassene Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 126, in: Max Wiener (ed.), Ernst J. Schlochauer (trans.), *Abraham Geiger and Liberal Judaism. The Challenge of the Nineteenth Century*, Philadelphia 1962, p. 166.

R. Dessler probably never read the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* texts. Nonetheless, their principal sentiments were well-known in the rabbinic world of which he was a part. While the movement evolved after its inception, the existence of such anti-traditional agendas was sufficient to make it unacceptable among members of the Orthodoxy. With this, the Orthodox were not alone. Kabbalah researcher Gershom Scholem's attitude toward *Wissenschaft des Judentums* is well-known and has resulted in repeated literary attacks.<sup>78</sup> According to him, the main motivation of the originators of *Wissenschaft* was to attain credibility in the eyes of non-Jews, a goal which he found contemptible.<sup>79</sup>

Thus, the enterprise of *Wissenschaft* was something with which we would not expect R. Dessler to identify.<sup>80</sup> In fact, he predictably disparaged *Wissenschaft* when discussing it at the Ponevezh yeshivah in 1951:

“In the world, there were always systems that opposed the Torah, like idol worship and Greek philosophy and those who followed them. They had ideological opposition to the Torah but did not use the Torah (itself) for the sake of [developing] their errors. In our times, we are witness to a strange phenomenon that has never existed previously. Heretics are using holiness as a base for their heresy, like those who create heresy from within the text itself, and those who utilize holy concepts like the land of Israel and the Hebrew language [for the sake of heresy].”<sup>81</sup>

R. Dessler continued:

<sup>78</sup> Alfred Abraham Greenbaum: The Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden in Jewish Historiography. An Analysis and some Observations, in: Michael Fishbane/Paul R. Flohr (eds.), Texts and Responses. Studies presented to Nahum N. Glatzer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday by his Students, Leiden 1975, pp. 173–185, here p. 183. On Scholem's criticism, see Amir Engel: Gershom Scholem. An Intellectual Biography, Chicago 2017, pp. 91–92. George Y. Kohler argues that Scholem's claims were the result of his aspiration to be seen “as the one and only founding father of [...] the academic treatment of Jewish mysticism”; see George Y. Kohler: Heinrich Graetz and the Kabbalah, in: Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts (forthcoming). I wish to thank Dr. George Y. Kohler for sharing his expertise as well as for sharing the manuscript of his unpublished article.

<sup>79</sup> Gershom Scholem: Mi-Tokh Hirhurim al Chokhmat Yisrael (Reflections on the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*), in: Devarim be-go, Tel Aviv 1975, pp. 385–405. Noam Zadoff writes that Scholem's perception was that the goal of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* was apologetic, see Noam Zadoff: Gershom Scholem. From Berlin to Jerusalem and Back, trans. Jeffrey Green, Waltham 2018, pp. 84–87.

<sup>80</sup> All definitions and attitudes presented here regarding *Wissenschaft des Judentums* are my own understanding and my own responsibility.

<sup>81</sup> MM4, p. 42.

“In the last generations, there are those who use the Torah itself, according to the crookedness of their intellects, for the sake of heresy. These callous, audacious forgers come to criticize, as if such a thing could be done, the Tanakh and the Torah in their entirety. And with their intelligence, which becomes twisted due to their bad character traits and their desires, they delve into the outermost parts of the Torah in order to allow themselves to renounce it according to their corrupt desire.”<sup>82</sup>

Hence, R. Dessler’s opposition to the original form of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* is far more encompassing than just wanting to keep his yeshivah free of it. He was opposed to and appalled by *Wissenschaft* for its own sake, viewing it as a function of evil. For him, nothing was more holy than the study of the Torah. The attempt to see it as something constructed by human beings, to examine it within an academic framework or to discredit it to any degree was, for him, the ultimate in sacrilege.

## 8. R. Dessler’s Attitude to Orthodox *Wissenschaft des Judentums*

R. Dessler’s opposition to *Wissenschaft des Judentums* is a reaction to one of the goals of its originators, i. e. to discredit Orthodoxy. However, over time, Orthodox forms of *Wissenschaft* developed. They provoked two diametrically opposite reactions within Orthodox circles: One denigrated *Wissenschaft* completely; the other co-opted it.<sup>83</sup> The most outspoken proponent of the first school was R. Samson Raphael Hirsch. His view was that because *Wissenschaft des Judentums* initially set out to desecrate Judaism, no aspect of it could be sanctioned.<sup>84</sup> According to R. Hirsch, one could not accept that part which was lawful separately from the unlawful, if one would thereby endorse the unlawful.<sup>85</sup> With this, R. Hirsch unabashedly rejected any potential contributions made by *Wissenschaft* because of the motives of its founders. All products of this enterprise were disallowed by association, even if they were

<sup>82</sup> MM4, p. 43. The translations are mine, E. S.

<sup>83</sup> Yedidya, *Orthodox Reactions*, p. 71; Ran HaCohen: *Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible. German-Jewish Reception of Biblical Criticism*, trans. Michelle Engel, Berlin 2010, p. 157.

<sup>84</sup> Samson R. Hirsch, *Collected Writings*, vol. VII, pp. 44–45; Hirsch, “Wie gewinnen wir das Leben für unsere Wissenschaft?” in: *Jeschurun* 8 (1861), p. 88. See also Gafni, *Emergence of Critical Scholarship*, p. 171.

<sup>85</sup> Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* 3 (1839), p. 516. (Translation in Breuer, *Modernity within Tradition*, p. 178).



produced by fellow Orthodox Jews. As he said, if one was forced to make a choice, then “[b]etter a Jew without science than a science without Judaism.”<sup>86</sup>

Conversely, R. Esriel Hildesheimer and R. David Zvi Hoffmann (1843–1921), the leaders of the Orthodox rabbinical seminary in Berlin, made use of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.<sup>87</sup> They engaged in the academic study of Jewish texts and practices, but their research was premised on the uniqueness of the Jewish people and the divine origin of both the Written and Oral Law.<sup>88</sup> Whenever there was a conflict between secular texts and approaches on the one hand and the Jewish tradition on the other, they invariably preferred the latter as per their own stated principles.<sup>89</sup>

Although R. Dessler never explicitly referred to Orthodox *Wissenschaft*, there are three anecdotal incidents that give us an indication of his perspective. The first is a statement by David Zvi Hilman (1926–2010), one of the original students of R. Dessler in Ponevezh. He writes that when R. Dessler noticed that Hilman mentioned in his notes something about “R. S[alomon] Buber,” (1827–1906), R. Dessler told him to remove the “R.” for rabbi.<sup>90</sup> Beyond that, R. Dessler expressed no further objection. R. Dessler’s words should be viewed in the context of his habit of weighing what he said with great precision and his self-declared practice of treating every person with respect.<sup>91</sup> Salomon Buber, grandfather of Martin Buber (1878–1965), was a Jewish Galician scholar who had written a commentary to the Talmud at a young age.<sup>92</sup> Buber was identified as one of the *Wissenschaft* scholars of his time and was known for his academic editions of traditional Jewish texts.<sup>93</sup> His dual motivation in this pursuit was to enhance the reputation of Jews

<sup>86</sup> Hirsch, *Collected Writings*, vol. V, p. 287.

<sup>87</sup> Yedidya, *Orthodox Reactions*, p. 79. Meyer, *Jewish Scholarship and Identity*, p. 185.

<sup>88</sup> Yedidya, *Orthodox Reactions*, p. 81. Breuer, *Modernity Within Tradition*, p. 183.

<sup>89</sup> Marc Shapiro: Rabbi David Zevi Hoffman on Torah and “Wissenschaft,” in: *Torah u-Madda Journal* 6 (1995–1996), pp. 129–137, here p. 135. See also Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivahs*, p. 161.

<sup>90</sup> Dessler, *Zikaron*, vol. I, p. 402.

<sup>91</sup> Rosenblum, *Rav Dessler*, pp. 216–223.

<sup>92</sup> Moshe Reiness: *Dor Ve-Chakhamav*. Cracow 1889, pp. 29, 30–32. Reiness corresponded with Buber and got his information about him from Buber himself. See Reiness’s letters to Buber in *Moshe Reiness: Mivchar Ketavim*, Eliezer Brodt (ed.), Beit Shemesh 2018, pp. 529–553.

<sup>93</sup> Phil Huston: *Martin Buber’s Journey to Presence*, New York 2007, p. 5; Stephen M. Panko: *Martin Buber*, in: Bob E. Patterson (ed.), *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*, Peabody Massachusetts 1976, pp. 3–5; Maurice Friedman: *My Friendship with Martin Buber*, Syracuse, New York 2013, p. 1. Yedidya, *Orthodox Reactions*, p. 85.

and their culture in the eyes of non-Jews and to broaden the range of subjects learned as “Torah.”<sup>94</sup>

R. Dessler would have opposed both of these goals. Regarding those who wanted to enhance the Jewish reputation in the eyes of non-Jews, he wrote that their real motivation was to enhance their own reputation and that they had internalized the “non-Jewish,” negative assessment of Judaism.<sup>95</sup> Far preferable for him was to learn about Judaism amongst Jews themselves. Regarding the second goal, the broadening of topics studied as “Torah,” R. Dessler’s objection is predictable given his stated purpose of engagement in Torah studies: students have to submit themselves to the text.<sup>96</sup> R. Dessler’s uncharacteristic words regarding Buber may be seen as indicative of his general opinion of Orthodox *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: while not forbidden, it is problematic.

The second incident that describes R. Dessler’s attitude towards *Wissenschaft des Judentums* is from Louis Jacobs, who referred to a scene from the year 1942, when the Gateshead kollel was in its infancy:

“The only occasion on which I can recall, for instance, R. Dessler at the Kollel making any reference to Jewish historical studies was when he was dismissive of Dr. Hertz’s Chumash [Torah edition]. ‘What can you expect,’ he remarked, ‘of [Solomon] Schechter’s disciple?’”<sup>97</sup>

In fact, R. Joseph Herman Hertz (1872–1946), later chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire, was not Solomon Schechter’s (1847–1914) disciple. He had graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) of New York in 1894 when Solomon Schechter was still at Cambridge; he did not arrive at the JTS before 1902.<sup>98</sup> The JTS, of which R. Hertz was the first rabbinical graduate, had initially been an Orthodox institution.<sup>99</sup> As a

<sup>94</sup> Yedidya, Bikoret Mevukeret, p. 86.

<sup>95</sup> MM3, pp. 118, 156.

<sup>96</sup> MM4, p. 56. See also MM3, pp. 14, 175, 191, 291–292, 323.

<sup>97</sup> Jacobs, *Helping with Inquiries*, p. 63.

<sup>98</sup> See David J. Fine: *Passionate Centrism. One Rabbi’s Judaism*, London 2016, p. 183.

<sup>99</sup> Miri Freud-Kandel: *Orthodox Judaism in Britain since 1913*, London 2006, p. 23. On the JTS and its moderate Reform status since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, see Robert E. Fierstien: *A Different Spirit. The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1886–1902*, New York 1990, p. 134. Herbert Rosenblum makes mention of Jacob Schiff’s (1847–1920) commitment to rapidly raise \$500 000.00 for the “reorganized institution,” calling it “an immense sum in 1892,” see Herbert Rosenblum: *Conservative Judaism*, New York 1983, p. 16. Jacob Schiff was a reform Jew as were the other members of the philanthropic group who rescued the JTS, see Marshall Sklare: *Conservative Judaism. An American Religious Movement*, New York 1972, p. 165. Michael

result of pending bankruptcy it was utilized by the reform movement in its attempt to Americanize Eastern European immigrants. The reform movement heavily funded the JTS, thereby preventing its closing, but established many conditions for that largesse: among them was the appointment of Solomon Schechter as president.<sup>100</sup> R. Dessler may have been unaware of these particulars, but his opinion was clear: he respected neither Solomon Schechter nor R. Hertz.<sup>101</sup> Can the Hertz commentary on the Chumash be considered *Wissenschaft des Judentums*? Some researchers make the claim that:

“... [t]he Hertz commentary did represent a serious effort to respond to contemporary scholarship on a range of historical and contextual issues; he even mentioned non-Jewish scholars in this work.”

While R. Dessler did not disallow the reading of R. Hertz's Torah edition nor speak against it, his disparagement is clear. R. Dessler's attitude toward Torah as the ultimate vocation and his intolerance of would-be detractors make his approach predictable. Interestingly, R. Dessler, as part of the Gateshead community, had his personal issues with R. Hertz, whose centrist Orthodoxy was antagonistic to the ultra-Orthodoxy of Gateshead.<sup>102</sup> R. Hertz's objections stemmed from his reluctance to support the creation of a bastion of ultra-Orthodoxy that would train and produce independent rabbis who would question his authority. The result was the active attempt on the part of R. Hertz to thwart the Gateshead initiative to create an ultra-Orthodox community free of obligation to the English chief rabbi.<sup>103</sup> Thus, R. Dessler's assessment of Hertz's Torah edition may have been influenced by his personal disputes with him.

Cohen makes no mention of Schiff, of his donation or of the Reform movement's interest in the JTS, see Michael R. Cohen: *The Birth of Conservative Judaism. Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement*, New York 2012.

<sup>100</sup> Freud-Kandel, *Orthodox Judaism in Britain*, pp. 23, 26.

<sup>101</sup> Steven Bayme: *Embracing Academic Torah Study. Modern Orthodoxy's Challenge*, in: *The Torah. A Historical and Contextual Approach*, <http://thetorah.com/embracing-academic-torah-study-modern-orthodoxys-challenge>. (last accessed February 26, 2018).

<sup>102</sup> Freud-Kandel, *Orthodox Judaism in Britain*, p. 79.

<sup>103</sup> Freud-Kandel, *Orthodox Judaism in Britain*, pp. 79–80; Geoffrey Alderman: *Modern British Jewry*, Oxford 1998, p. 356; Todd M. Endelman: *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000*, Berkeley 2002, p. 221.

A third incident in which R. Dessler commented on *Wissenschaft des Judentums* appears in a letter to his brother-in-law, R. Daniel Movshovitz (1880–1941), from January 1931:

“There is somebody named Dr. (Binyamin Menashe) Lewin [1879–1944] or Professor Lewin. He is apparently from the ultra-orthodox group [... and] learned science in Germany but is also well-versed in Torah and Rishonim [medieval rabbis], and, mainly, he studies antiquities. He is the greatest expert in our generation on the subject of the period of the Geonim [talmudic authorities]. He gathered all the writings of the Geonim... and has already printed three volumes... These contain [...] some things regarding variations in their texts but more importantly, the approaches of the Rishonim were revealed and made clear through this work.”<sup>104</sup>

Furthermore, R. Dessler describes in his letter a talk Lewin gave in London with the aim of forming a group that would examine ancient manuscripts for the purpose of publication. R. Dessler adds, “and *although this thing is very good* [...] I will be surprised if something comes out of it.”<sup>105</sup> While R. Dessler did not use the title rabbi for Lewin, his esteem of him is unequivocal. Clearly, R. Dessler appreciated Lewin’s scholarship and his efforts towards the understanding of neglected Jewish works.

R. Dessler expressed extreme opposition to the original form of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and did not even engage with its originators. His reaction to *Wissenschaft’s* Orthodox variant, however, demands further explanation. He discouraged his student from seeing *Wissenschaft* as a legitimate alternative to Talmud study because he advocated pure Torah learning, and he disparaged the insertion of Biblical criticism into a commentary on the Chumash because the evil and the sacred should not be mixed. In contrast, R. Dessler praised the work of Binyamin Menashe Lewin. This seeming inconsistency becomes clear when looking at R. Dessler’s knowledge hierarchy: For an academic to engage in academics, even in the academic study of Judaism, was a positive. Clearly, Lewin had not crossed red lines: He was not

<sup>104</sup> Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler to Daniel Movshovitz, January 15, 1931, in: Beit Chayeinu. Asufa Musarit be’inyanei Limmud Ha-Tora Ve-Ha-Musar (Home of our Lives. Collection Regarding Torah Learning and Morality), vol. 6, Ponevezh Yeshivah, B’nei Braq 2014, pp. 61–62. Translation E.S. Ultimately, the work mentioned in the letter became a twelve-volume study, see Binyamin Menashe Lewin, *Otzar ha-Gaonim*, 12 vols., Haifa and Jerusalem 1928–1940.

<sup>105</sup> Dessler to Movshovitz, January 15, 1931, in: Beit Chayeinu, p. 62. Translation and emphasis E.S.

a yeshivah student, and he did not include problematic works in his writing. One could conclude that R. Dessler would not have objected to the edited texts produced by Salomon Buber and like-minded people. In their works, the authors contrasted all existing versions of the edited text, similarly to Lewin.<sup>106</sup> True, R. Dessler did not want Salomon Buber to be confused with those he would call rabbis, i. e., in his eyes, scholars who spent most of their time learning Talmud. However, for someone not learning at a yeshivah, there was no indication that R. Dessler would have had any objection to academic study. As the individual whose presentation of Judaism has, arguably, attained the most popularity in the Haredi community, R. Dessler's attitude is significant because it gives us insight into the thought of a little understood faction of the Jewish population.<sup>107</sup> R. Dessler's relationship to *Wissenschaft* describes the normative Haredi approach to that subject as well. His style of generally ignoring it, while being fully aware of its existence, is commonplace in Haredi society today. Understanding R. Dessler's hierarchy, in which Talmudic study is considered far more important than any other discipline, explains why this is so.

## 9. Conclusion

R. Dessler's perspective can be aptly described as a celebration of Talmud study. Following from this position, it was R. Dessler's conviction that time spent on anything other than learning Talmud, though acceptable, was not optimal, while anything that detracted from its supremacy was intolerable.<sup>108</sup> He did not present a binary understanding of 'traditional' versus 'secular' literature. Instead, he promoted an inclusive vision that understood academic and philosophical discourses as a lower form of divine knowledge, with Talmud study as the highest form.

This view explains how R. Dessler could be conversant in secular studies and, at the same time, disallow the opening of a teachers' seminary in close

<sup>106</sup> Yedidya, *Orthodox Reactions*, p. 86.

<sup>107</sup> Rosenblum, *Rav Dessler*, p. v; Stadler, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 69, 137.

<sup>108</sup> Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler / *Sefer Mikhtav me-Eliyahu: Divrei Chokhma U-Mussar be-Avodat Chodesh Elul Ve-yerach Ha-Eitanim* (Letter of Eliyahu [Dessler]: Words of Wisdom and Tradition in the Services of the Month Elul and the Month of Eitanim), vol. 2, B'nei Braq 2009, p. 698; MM3, pp. 355–359.

proximity to the Gateshead yeshivah.<sup>109</sup> This was not due to the nature of the material learned, but rather to the implicit message that such an institution would convey to students of the yeshivah.<sup>110</sup> This attitude becomes even more clear if we look at how R. Dessler dealt with *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. While he was not openly antagonistic toward Orthodox *Wissenschaft*, he did not approve of it as a replacement for Talmud study: He encouraged it for academics but not for yeshivah students. Moreover, if the modern academic study of Judaism did not infringe on a yeshivah curriculum nor introduce students to Biblical criticism, it appears that he was in favor of it.

R. Dessler's promotion of pure talmudic learning has been misperceived as general antipathy to secular studies. He was knowledgeable in the secular realm, however, which sometimes led to the opposite misconception, i. e. that he generally supported modern thought, research, and philosophy. Nevertheless, R. Dessler was not a "modernist." His self-subjugation to the wisdom of Torah and its scholars did not fit with modernism, understood as a process of self-aware innovation.

Despite this, R. Dessler was avant-garde in packaging classic Torah concepts into a contemporary, scholarly wrapping, particularly when he was dealing with secularly educated students. He adopted an academic mindset on behalf of ancient Torah ideas in order to promote pure, unadulterated Torah study within the yeshivah walls.

<sup>109</sup> Rosenblum, Rav Dessler, pp. 24, 302, 312–313; MM3, pp. 355–359.

<sup>110</sup> MM3, pp. 355–357.