

**An Unfinished Revolution:  
The Life and Legacy of Rabbi David Hartman  
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Early July, 2010, was the first day that I set foot in an institution I would quickly come to think of as a second home. It was a busy day at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem; everywhere I looked people were engaged in animated discussions, and there was a sea of green and grey and blue uniforms – it seemed as if the Institute had been invaded by the Israel Defense Forces. I quickly learned that all officers in Israel who reach a certain rank are now required to take a two-week long seminar on Jewish identity as part of their training – and that two days of that seminar, dealing with pluralism and democracy... take place at and is run by the Shalom Hartman Institute.

My friends, the Jewish world lost a giant this past week, a monumental figure whose importance to contemporary Jewish life, whose impact in Israel and in North America and in the entire Jewish world was enormous, but whose legacy might be hard to convey to those not familiar with his work. Rabbi David Hartman, founder of the Institute named after his father, passed away in Jerusalem last Sunday. He was 81.

I am not among the students and disciples who had known Reb Dovid for many years. I heard him in person only over the past few years. I will try to share with you something of his story, but listen first, if you will, to the

testimony of others. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, now President of the Union for Reform Judaism, writes that “I would not be a rabbi if I had not studied with Rabbi David Hartman.” One Conservative colleague I sit with said that reading Rabbi Hartman’s book “*oy and Responsibility* changed his life forever, and another Conservative rabbi indicated that the book *A Living Covenant* transformed [his] thinking about God, revelation and the meaning of Israel in Jewish religious consciousness.” An Orthodox rabbi writes that “he saved Orthodoxy from itself,” a philosophy professor calls him “one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” and secular Israelis speak of how he opened a window, and then a door, into the traditional world for them. And I... he was suffering in these past few years, and not in his prime, but still he often took my breath away. And when I read *The God Who Hates Lies*, there were times when I put the book down and cried.

Who is this man, this enigmatic revolutionary thinker and builder, who had such an impact on those who knew him?

The simple story begins this way: Rabbi David Hartman was born on September 11, 1931 into an ultra-Orthodox family, in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. He was immersed in the yeshiva world – he studied in Lakewood *and* at a Chabad-Lubavitch yeshiva, which means that he was exposed to both the Litvish, or Lithuanian, and the Chasidic branches of Charedi Judaism. He went on to Yeshiva University, receiving rabbinic ordination from, and then becoming perhaps the preeminent disciple, of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik,

known as the Rav, perhaps the single most important Orthodox rabbi of the past century. Soloveitchik urged his student to delve into secular studies as well, and it was while studying philosophy at Fordham and later McGill, and through encountering the spiritual journeys of those with very different backgrounds, that David Hartman's world really opened up. "I was," he writes with characteristic honesty, "often struck by an awareness that my Catholic philosophy instructors were inspiring far more religious connection and consciousness than my rabbis at Yeshiva."

In many ways I might say that what happened to David Hartman is that he reality and the real lives of those around him entered into his theoretical and theological consciousness, and he was willing to call a spade a spade. He led congregations in the Bronx and then Montreal. The stories he tells of his congregational work are deeply moving, especially his openness to the times when moral choices come into head on conflicts with religious tradition – I think he may actually have performed the marriage of a lonely, life-long bachelor who finally met the woman of his dreams, but he was a Cohen and she was a convert, and they could not marry according to Orthodox tradition. This is what he wrote about it, in *The God Who Hates Lies*: "The notion of telling these two very serious Jewish seekers that they must deny themselves the happiness of marriage because of this now-obscure, ancient principle seemed unacceptable as the ground for destroying their dream to build a new life. I told Peter that I would be honored to perform the wedding."

This is an Orthodox rabbi? Yes, actually – but what an Orthodox rabbi he was! He lived by and struggled with halacha – Jewish law, but developed the very-Reform sounding idea that Jewish tradition must be evaluated and embraced or challenged through the crucible of, well, the moral judgment of each individual Jew. Or at least that’s what I heard him say in his last major book.

But, again, what was the power, what the charisma, that led people to use such reverent phrases about him as saying that they were privileged to “sit at his feet.” Or to refer to learning with him as “Hartman Torah.” Those are strong words; this is a loyalty that goes beyond being grateful that someone was a really good teacher. This is language of reverence, the utterance of disciples. Why?

It is because as modern as he was in his outlook, David Hartman was a rav in the old sense – he challenged, he probed, he poked, he stirred up the status quo... and he did so with love, love, love. He saw the whole person, not just the tools or techniques of tradition. He was, in other words, not just a passive teacher, but an active guide. Another scholar, eulogizing him this week, recalled how his life, too, had been changed by one encounter: after delivering what he thought was an erudite and adequately footnote-filled sermon in some synagogue lecture hall somewhere, David Hartman punctured his pride and deepened his life with one question: “Did you say what you meant, and mean what you said – or did you just want to sound good?”

Scholarship with meaning, depth and honesty, vision and values – this is what the Shalom Hartman Institute is about, to me. Rabbi Hartman made aliyah with his family in 1971, following the intuition that the reality of Israel brings something new to Jewish life, a response to history that entails a new level of responsibility to our people on the part of every Jew. (There is so much more to say about David Hartman’s vision of Zionism, his understanding of Israel and its relationship to Jewish values, but that is worth an entirely separate discussion – or an entire semester onto itself.) In 1975 he founded the institution named after his father around a Beit Midrash, a study hall that was the source of conversation and exploration, for academics and intellectuals and open-minded rabbis of all stripes.

The pluralism of the place evolved organically out of Hartman’s thought. If we are truly in a living covenant with God, Hartman taught, than that covenant has two partners, both of whose realities must be taken into account. Avi Sagi writes: “In contrast with Yehsayahu Leibowitz [perhaps the leading religious thinker in Israel in the previous generation], who reasoned that the believer must sacrifice his principles in the name of ‘love God and fear Him,’ Hartman comes to the opposite conclusion.” Since the covenant is with a real being, it validates the existence and the principles of the real human being. It follows from this that the covenant is a meeting between the past and the present and the present that renews the past. This understanding underpins the development of a pluralistic worldview, founded upon respect for the

believes and the principles of human beings. The covenant with God is, in a deep sense, a covenant that validates difference and diversity.”

And it is the embrace of diversity, the preaching of pluralism, that landed Hartman in such hot water in Israel, and in the eyes of the ultra-Orthodox. To have built an institution that lifts up the learning, and defends the dignity, of all branches of Judaism and those who are on no branch but just searching for roots... what a *chiddush!* What a radical innovation!

Friends, remember: there is really nothing else remotely like this! Where all branches of Judaism come together in this country – uneasily and unevenly – it is often on matters of public policy or social concern. It is not for learning, exploration, chevruta (partnership learning), and vulnerability. It is for agendas, not growth.

The machon, the institute that David Hartman founded and which is carried forward by his son Rabbi Donniel Hartman, it is having an awesome impact in Israel and in North America. It has transformed the teaching of rabbis and the language of lay leaders here, in the promotion of inspiration and aspiration, a visionary Judaism and a values-based approach to Israel... and in Israel as well, in terms of how Judaism is taught to secular Israelis, and how Israeli society balances the question of being a Jewish and democratic state.

But. For all the impact it is having, David Hartman’s vision is, for now, an unfinished revolution. *Ein navi b’iro*; there is, it is said, no prophet in one’s own city. It remains the case, for now, that David’s writings are studied more

in English than in Hebrew. One of the more powerful voices among the young students of Rabbi Hartman, Micha Goodman, notes that Hartman probably fits into the category, along with Mordecai Kaplan and Abraham Joshua Heschel, as an American voice of Judaism, better known in America than in Israel – just as the great Israeli teachers of Judaism, Rav Kook the Elder, Rav Kook the Younger, and the aforementioned Yeshayahu Leibowitz, are better known in Hebrew, and in Israel, than they are in the English-speaking Jewish world.

Maybe. Maybe. But I believe there is room for the building of bridges in every place. For a nuanced Judaism, one open to the world and steeped in traditional learning, a place that puts people first... I believe the message will continue to spread, here... and there.

We read in the Torah portion this week: “*v’asu li mikdash, v’shachanti b’tocham*; let them make me a Sanctuary, that I might dwell among them.” The words may have referred, originally, to a place of prayer. But to me, the place where I have felt God dwell among us the most... I think it is in the House that David Built. In the Beit Midrash, the Study Hall of the Shalom Hartman Institute, were the honesty of scholars who speak from the heart, and the warmth of friends who wrestle with ancient words in partnership with each other... that was my reminder, in mid-life... of what Judaism is, and maybe once was, and can be again.

We lost a giant this week. My only hope is that my words reach some of your heart, and you hear them as an inspiration... to take in some of the teachings of this great man. To study, to learn, to be open, and to grow.

Shabbat Shalom.