

Arnold B. Ehrlich: A Personal Recollection

RICHARD M. STERN

I believe that, of those persons whom Arnold B. Ehrlich prepared for the rabbinate, I am the only one now living. Ehrlich was a profound biblical scholar whose work spanned the latter part of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century. I believe, too, that I am the last pupil he instructed. There were many before me. It was my privilege to study under his guidance from 1911 until his death in 1919. For many years his name had been all but forgotten by students and scholars in Semitic languages, except by that elite circle of research scholars seeking contact with all who have contributed in that field. In recent years, however, there appears to be a renewal of interest in his work and in the ingenuity with which he approached his special area of study.

I was Ehrlich's steady and constant companion during the years in which he was writing and publishing his masterwork, the eight-volume *Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel*. Throughout this brief sketch I shall refrain from a detailed appraisal of his scholarly contributions, since there are others far better qualified than I am for that task. I believe it wise to touch the human side of the towering personalities of the past, so that their times may have a living influence upon those who read and study their works. Most of what is known about Ehrlich comes from his rather limited though very intensive literary output.

It was my privilege several years ago to acquire from his daughter, Olga Auerbach, a few of his unpublished notebooks for the New York library of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Reli-

Dr. Stern is an advisor on finance and economics to several banking and investment institutions in the New York City area. Before entering the financial field he served as spiritual leader of Temple Israel in New Rochelle, N. Y. and The Temple in Nashville, Tenn.

gion. These notebooks appear to be addenda to the *Randglossen*, and I hope that in the hands of present-day scholars they may shed further light upon the Hebrew Bible to which Ehrlich devoted his life. I am also convinced that there are other such notebooks which have not yet come to light, and perhaps his family may still find some fragments which will also prove valuable.

My stepfather Samuel Greenfield, a graduate of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati (1891), persuaded me to pursue Jewish studies under Ehrlich. He had been a pupil of Ehrlich when the latter was an instructor in the Emanu-El Theological School of New York City. My stepfather was profoundly disturbed by the events which led to the withdrawal of Professors Max L. Margolis and Henry Malter from the faculty of the Hebrew Union College. He felt that I could obtain sound instruction in New York under Ehrlich's guidance. I offer this brief explanation of the reasons which moved me to seek the larger part of a rabbinical education from this one great scholar and teacher.

ALL OTHERS FADE INTO INSIGNIFICANCE

In the early Spring of 1911, after I had been graduated from college, I called on Mr. Ehrlich at his home in New York City (he insisted upon the "mister" because no university had ever granted him a higher academic degree). I explained the reason for my visit and asked him to accept me as a private student. I was not a little surprised that he made no inquiry as to my preparation in Hebrew. What interested him most was my acquaintance with Latin and Greek, German and French. He assumed that I had had some preliminary preparation in Hebrew, but he told me that he did not care to accept any pupil who was not acquainted with the classic tongues and with the more widely spoken languages of Western Europe. I managed to satisfy him, and our instructional sessions began the following day, continuing without interruption for eight years.

It was his plan to cover with me all the basic material outlined in the curricula of the Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Theological Seminary. Our sessions lasted approximately five hours each day, often six or seven days a week, with no intermissions for sum-



Arnold B. Ehrlich
His wife and daughter

Courtesy, Arnold M. Auerbach, New York

mer vacations or holidays. After three years, we met only four days a week, but oftentimes for longer hours each day. Ehrlich was no easy taskmaster. This kind of concentrated schedule would have been exhausting had Ehrlich not been an inspiring and electrifying instructor whose work was a constant challenge to all my limited resources. There were days when I was completely spent by the burden, but more often I left him with a sense of still unsatisfied curiosity as to the depths of his knowledge and with a desire to rush back for another day of enlightenment. I have spent many years since in graduate university courses, and I knew of no more uplifting teacher than Ehrlich. All others fade into insignificance compared with the fascination which this dour man had for me. That last sentence may appear to be a contradiction, but I shall explain it in the course of this sketch. I hasten to add that he was the soul of kindness in our teacher-pupil relationship.

As a teacher, Ehrlich was incomparable. In all the years it never occurred to me that I would dare come unprepared to any session, for every hour was predicated upon advance study. And he was thoroughly prepared, too, for he felt that the dignity of his pupil demanded this. First, he satisfied himself that I had read the assignments, and then he proceeded to a lecture based upon references to related texts, to comprehensive explanations, and of course to his own inimitable interpretations. His views of history filled the hours, and the material came with such speed that my hand could not keep pace in taking adequate notes. All of Hebrew literature was part of the fibre of this man. He could, in response to a question, cite explanatory texts and passages with "total recall," not alone from Jewish sources, but also from the literature of the many languages with which he had a sound acquaintance.

When I first met him, Ehrlich was a pleasant-faced, dark-complexioned man in his early sixties with thinning, closely cropped gray hair and a silver ring around the edges of his head. He was about five feet nine or ten inches tall and weighed possibly 190 pounds. (I mention this only because Eli Ginzberg in a memoir about his father Louis Ginzberg describes Ehrlich as an enormous man of about 300 pounds.) In ordinary conversation, Ehrlich gave the impression of remoteness or of utter preoccupation. And remote

he was. Through all the years, our chats rarely concerned themselves with anything personal in his life or in mine. He appeared to be totally removed from people and came alive only when he discussed his philological interests.

It is surprising how little I know about him as a personality, though I was with him continuously. He was obsessed with his studies and cared to talk only about them, to analyze what others in his field had contributed, and to comment critically though not always in friendly fashion on their publications. He made every effort to restrict our relationship to discussions of Jewish and cognate literatures. A complete introvert, he could not reveal himself. What I learned about him, his life, his aspirations, came indirectly and only in dribbles. He wanted no social life outside of his study, which served also as a bed-living room. True, he was acquainted with everyone in his field, but he met colleagues only for scholarly discussion. I tried to understand what prompted this strange withdrawal from the life of people to the world of books. There were evidently episodes in his life that had soured him and that he wanted to forget. He was aware that others of his own generation might not judge him charitably, and he was insecure socially.

His second wife, as Eli Ginzberg says in his memoir, was a hard-working woman who seemed content to support the great scholar. They had one daughter, Olga, who married Dr. Julius Auerbach and whose only son is the distinguished playwright, essayist, humorist, and critic Arnold Auerbach, who bears his grandfather's first name. Ehrlich had some small income from the pupils he tutored and from a small business enterprise in which he was engaged for a short time. His books were far from profitable; they cost him money. Ehrlich had a married son by his earlier marriage, and a granddaughter.

When Ehrlich died in 1919, his widow had strange ideas as to the monetary value of the manuscripts as yet unpublished. I can well sympathize with what must have been Louis Ginzberg's frustration. As Ehrlich's literary executor, he could not persuade Mrs. Ehrlich to release the manuscripts for publication without paying inordinate amounts for them. I had a similar experience when George Alexander Kohut and I offered to provide financing for the publication of a

memorial volume if she would submit the manuscripts to Dr. Ginzberg. And now these notebooks, which were numerous and which contained material on languages other than Hebrew, appear to have disappeared, with the exception of those already referred to, now in the library of the College-Institute in New York.

HE PAID A FRIGHTFUL PRICE

Ehrlich was sorely resentful of the fact that, despite general recognition of his status as a scholar, he had not been chosen Professor of Bible at the Hebrew Union College. There were good reasons, of course, for passing him by. He had had an early association with Professor Franz Delitzsch in Germany; at Delitzsch's insistence Ehrlich had revised the Hebrew translation of the New Testament (10th ed.), which was to be utilized for proselytization among Jews. At the early age when he undertook this work, he could not have realized how much this activity was to cost him, and how he was to pay for it throughout his life. He was never invited to teach in either of the major rabbinical seminaries. Certainly Isaac M. Wise, who had troubles enough among the Orthodox because of his Reform point of view, did not care to appoint a professor who would invite criticism from all conservative quarters. I am sure that Solomon Schechter must have entertained similar feelings. As for the translation itself, there are many who regard it as a beautiful piece of modern Hebrew composition. The damage it caused him was to haunt him to the end of his life.

In addition, there were earlier rumors that Ehrlich had been baptized in Germany, but I have not been able to find proof or confirmation of this. Had it been true, I am confident that the officers of Temple Emanu-El, who were closer in time to all these events, would never even have considered him for a place as teacher in the Emanu-El Theological School. Throughout all his years in the United States, Jewish scholars and students sought him out, and he was faithful to their confidence in him as a Jewish scholar and a Jewish teacher. But Ehrlich surely paid a frightful price for that New Testament translation.

As I pieced together the information from throughout our years, I

ascertained that at an early age he had studied German in his native Polish village and had read the Bible in the Mendelssohn translation, thereby affronting the religious attitudes of relatives, friends, and teachers. Like other students at the local school, he was married at fourteen. Later, at seventeen, Ehrlich came to the conclusion that he could no longer abide the stringencies of his environment, and he sought association with the wider fields of knowledge he hoped to find in Germany. He wanted his young wife and son to go with him, but as I understand the story, she too opposed his liberal views and chose to remain where she was. And so at seventeen he left for Germany and entered school to learn arithmetic, geography, and other elementary school subjects alongside boys of ten. Such subjects were simple for a lad who had learned to read German at five. With his ability to concentrate, he finished the Gymnasium in two years.

I am very hazy about dates and times, but I believe that it was during this period that Ehrlich somehow came to the attention of Delitzsch, who engaged him as his amanuensis. It may have given him a small livelihood, but the association was an evil spectre later in life. It was at that time, as I understand it, that Ehrlich encountered the work of Wellhausen, Kuehnen, and the whole school of biblical criticism which fascinated him. He was quite ready then (and throughout his career) to accept in general the theory that the Bible was constructed of a patchwork quilt of documents, but his later work was a revolt against the destructiveness of the "higher criticism." The Hebrew language was bred into his bones, and it became his conviction that the Bible could be understood only as one devoted oneself to its language and to an understanding of the Hebrew idiom through its cognates. Whether or not one agrees with this point of view, Ehrlich's intensive cultivation of the knowledge of languages was the basis of his unique contribution.

Thus Ehrlich became a close student of many languages, and he should be regarded as a philologist, not only as a student of the Hebrew Bible. Recently I was somewhat perturbed in reading a thumbnail sketch of Ehrlich's contributions because the author offered the comment that Ehrlich was evidently unacquainted with the various versions of Scripture. This is a complete mistake. If he chose to ignore some things in the versions, it must not be assumed that he did

not know them. No one pursued comparative linguistic studies with greater diligence. Ehrlich had a scholarly mastery of thirty-nine tongues, which of course included all the Semitic languages, all the languages of Western Europe except Finnish, all the Slavic dialects, as well as Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek. Some of the recent entrancing theories which archaeologists have advanced as to the relationship Israelite and Canaanite civilizations bear to that of the Greeks were also propounded by Ehrlich upon the basis of language similarities and idiomatic likenesses, though he did not commit much of this to writing. In his "leisure" he had written what was practically a *Randglossen* to both the Iliad and the Odyssey, and I was often treated to his observations concerning the Greek classics. I still hope that these notes of his will somewhere turn up, for they would demonstrate the range of his knowledge and his comprehension of the classic civilizations.

Now as to his regard for the Bible "versions," I had to read the Bible with the Septuagint before me, and I was required to retranslate the Greek text into Hebrew in order to reconstruct a Hebrew text that may have differed from the traditional massoretic reading. I had to endure an exposure to Syriac, of which I remember little or nothing now, so as to have at least a handshaking acquaintance with the versions. I am quite certain that, despite questions raised as to Ehrlich's knowledge of the versions, that knowledge was quite thorough.

The results of his studies appeared in a running Hebrew commentary upon the Bible text entitled *Mik'ra Kiph'shutah*. It embodies his main point of view that the Bible itself is the best source for the knowledge of Hebrew as a language and for ancient Hebraic ideas, even though the cross references of comparative passages or words might be separated in widely disparate ages. (I am pleased to note that Ktav has announced a new edition of this valuable work.) He felt that somehow original meanings persisted and that the cross references or parallel passages often shed light upon obscure sentences as well as upon mistakes in the original Bible text. Modern archaeology has opened new vistas, and Ehrlich had no knowledge of what the future would bring in this realm. It is amazing nevertheless that, depending solely upon language and upon his own intuitions, he ar-

rived at explanations and interpretations which still have validity. He was cognizant of the archaeology of his own generation, but it was of little or no use to him in his time.

AMONG THE MODERNS

Ehrlich had a special love for Arabic. He enjoyed it as a language, he enjoyed its literature and its poetry. His missing notebooks include critical comments upon the large Arabic dictionary and upon Arabic grammar. I have seen these notes, too, and I know that they were voluminous. Many of those who taught Arabic in the Semitics departments of universities came to Ehrlich for instruction, and among them was Professor Richard J. H. Gottheil of Columbia University.

Ehrlich's one diversion, strangely enough, was to attend the primitive "movies" of the early twentieth century. He adored Westerns and historic presentations. The great scholar could watch that trash and find complete "escape." He preferred this to spending time with people, whom he avoided.

While Ehrlich was a recluse by nature, he was nonetheless well known to everyone in the field of Semitics in his generation. His strongest affection was for Louis Ginzberg of the Jewish Theological Seminary. He admired Dr. Ginzberg's thoroughness, his vast and comprehensive knowledge, and the originality of his mind. I cannot remember that he spoke of any other scholar of his generation with the same enthusiasm, though he had a high regard for Professors Malter and Margolis of the Dropsie College. But Ehrlich had no doubts as to his own status, for he was convinced of his own superiority in his chosen area of research, and his egotism was often very disturbing. His contemporaries admired his work and regarded him as something of an eccentric, but paid him the compliment of stating that, even when they disagreed with his conclusions, they stood in awe of his learning and of his remarkable ingenuity in exegesis.

Perhaps his bitterest disappointment came when he discovered that he had not been included in the committee appointed by the Jewish Publication Society and the Central Conference of American Rabbis to prepare a new translation of the Hebrew Bible. He felt

that his stature warranted the appointment. And his wrath was rekindled when the final work was published in 1917 with a preface which acknowledged that the committee had consulted the work of "the moderns S. D. Luzzatto, Malbim, and Ehrlich." My own feeling is that the committee saved itself many a heartache by not having him as a colleague, for he would have overwhelmed them with his insistences, and would probably have antagonized many in his desire to have only his point of view incorporated into the final work. I am pleased to learn that many of the members of the present committee on the revision of the Bible translation have found that his work still has value and has brought light to many an obscure passage.

Ehrlich had a hand in areas other than that of the Bible. He had prepared textbooks to introduce students to rabbinic literature, and I believe that some of these texts were used when he taught at the Emanu-El Theological School. He had also prepared an anthology of aggadic passages representative of material that students might later have to study. His poetic German translation of the Psalms had wide acclaim in its day, but this volume is now out of print and may be found only in the large university libraries. That he had no well established academic position always irked him, and he never became reconciled to that fact.

Ehrlich was an occasional attendant at religious services, and selected synagogues where he hoped to find preachers who could use the biblical texts with the related midrashic or other rabbinic commentaries. He thoroughly disliked the *Union Prayer Book*, primarily because he felt that its reform of the liturgy had not gone far enough. He disliked what he chose to call "the worm in the dust" theory of prayer. He felt that all the passages which belittled human dignity should be revised or eliminated. He believed that a modern Jewish prayer book should, of course, be rooted in traditional forms, but that prayers which involved a servile humility were unbecoming to modern man and should be rewritten.

Many of the older generation of rabbis studied under Ehrlich at one time or another, either at Emanu-El or as private pupils. Among them were Samuel Schulman, Leon Harrison, Bernard Drachman, Stephen S. Wise, and George Alexander Kohut—to

mention but a few whose names would be recognized in our time. Another of his mature students was Isaac S. Moses, rabbi of the Central Synagogue, who continued his studies with Ehrlich until late in life.

A KIND OF INTROVERSION

Ehrlich wrote English magnificently and spoke it fluently and flawlessly, though with a slight foreign color. His scholarly work was written in German because, prior to World War I, German was regarded as the language of Jewish scholarship.

He was not without his admirers among the laity. The publication of the *Randglossen*, which took six years to complete, was financed by two Jewish laymen who were patrons of all worthy causes: the beloved Jacob H. Schiff and Dr. Isaac Adler. Dr. Adler, chief of the Medical Staff of the German Hospital (Lenox Hill), was the son of Rabbi Samuel Adler of Temple Emanu-El and the brother of Felix Adler of the New York Ethical Culture Society.

Despite his effort to remain aloof, Ehrlich was sought after by many non-Jews who wanted to study under him. Two of his well known Christian pupils were Dr. Charles Fagnani and Dr. Julius Beyer, both members of the Union Theological Seminary faculty. Ehrlich was especially interested in Beyer because the latter exhibited an unusual aptitude in reading and understanding rabbinic literature—the language as well as the tenor of its argument. Ehrlich was unhappy that Christian scholarship had not cultivated this area with greater assiduity. He was not satisfied with the achievement of Paul Haupt (Johns Hopkins), Crawford H. Toy (Harvard), Robert F. Harper (Chicago), Charles C. Torrey (Yale), or George Foot Moore (Harvard). He hoped longingly that in Beyer he had found the Christian disciple who would devote himself to rabbinics. Once again Ehrlich was disappointed, for Beyer chose the field of biblical criticism exclusively and especially the tradition set in motion by Wellhausen and his coterie. Ehrlich had no love for that group and, with Schechter, thoroughly disliked the “Higher Anti-Semitism.” It was through Ehrlich that I met Professor Beyer and enjoyed a pleasant friendship with this liberal Christian scholar.

Ehrlich was antisocial in that he felt uncomfortable and uneasy in ordinary human relationships. But he was completely social in his outlook, in his passion for justice, in his desire for the self-realization of all people regardless of race or color. Unfortunately, his own life experience, of which he tried not to speak, forced him into a kind of introversion. He was an avid reader in all fields, particularly in philosophy, and maintained a steady correspondence with Hermann Cohen. As a matter of self-discipline, he required himself to read through Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* every year.

It is exceedingly strange that, despite his personal discomfort in the presence of living and breathing people, he was entranced by the new sociology, and particularly by the new Freudian psychology, emerging upon the scene in his latter years. Not long before he died, he told me that had he the opportunity to relive his years, he would like to give greater attention to psychology so as to try to understand why some human beings are driven perforce into defined areas of activity and why others are willing to remain "contented cows." Pitiably, indeed, that this titanic scholar wanted to understand human motivations when throughout his life he avoided every human contact except his brief conversations with those whose studies paralleled his own! A strange eccentric, but a genius! There is scarcely a day when I am not reminded of his great wisdom, of his penetrating insights, of his incisive comments upon the actions of human beings, whom he seemed to understand from afar, but with whom he could have no converse.

A FRANK ANSWER

Mrs. Craigie, owner of Longfellow's home, disliked Jews. When told by Miss Lowell: "Why Mrs. Craigie, our Saviour was a Jew," she answered: "I can't help it, ma'am."

Jewish Comment, April 27, 1900