Marc B. Shapiro – Forgery and the Halakhic Process, part 2

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Prof. Shapiro is a frequent contributor to the Seforim blog and his recent posts include: “Uncensored Books”; a response to Rabbi Zev Leff (with a subsequent exchange with Rabbi Chaim Rapoport); “What Do Adon Olam and ס”ט Mean?,” and obituaries for Rabbi Yosef Buxbaum and Prof. Mordechai Breuer.

This post is a follow-up to his recent “Forgery and the Halakhic Process.”

Forgery and the Halakhic Process, part 2

by Marc B. Shapiro

In this post I would like to finish up with Rabbi Zvi Benjamin Auerbach’s Eshkol. But first, I must clear up another matter about which I was asked, as I discussed it right at the beginning of my first post dealing with the Eshkol. I mentioned that the late fourteenth-early fifteenth-century kabbalist, R. Menahem Zioni, quotes R. Yehudah he-Hasid’s comment that a section of the original Torah was removed by David and placed in the book of Psalms. After being shown this passage, as part of the effort to defend the authenticity of R. Yehudah he-Hasid’s commentary, R. Moshe Feinstein replied that Zioni’s commentary was also forbidden to be used.[1]
R. Moshe also writes that he doesn’t know who R. Menahem Zioni is. Presumably, this is designed to show Zioni’s insignificance, and make it easier for R. Moshe to ban his book. The problem is that Zioni is hardly an unknown figure; his commentary on the Torah is actually quite famous. He was also “one of the few kabbalists in 14th-century Germany.”[2] For R. Moshe to state that he is unfamiliar with Zioni is an acknowledgment that he is not particularly learned in Kabbalah. I don’t think anyone should find this surprising, much like they shouldn’t find it surprising that R. Moshe was not a savant of Jewish philosophy. He was an ish halakhah, and his time was spent focused on Shas and Poskim. Just as the Rav reports that R. Moshe Soloveitchik never held the Rambam’s Guide, we can also say about R. Moshe Feinstein that his interests were in line with the typical Lithuanian gadol, and that meant that Talmud and halakhah were what he devoted himself to.

While I don’t find R. Moshe’s lack of knowledge about a medieval kabbalist surprising, not all share this sentiment. After my last post someone wrote to me asking if it is true that R. Menasheh Klein rejected R. Moshe’s disqualification of Zioni. This is indeed true, and Klein’s responsum appears in his Mishneh Halakhot, new series, vol. 2, no. 214. Klein also points out that Zioni is quoted in halakhic sources, including the Magen Avraham, and he adds:

‘I too am quite familiar with Zioni’s work, and it appears that R. Soloveitchik could not have written these words, for his papers among his students contained nothing of the sort.

As to how R. Moshe could have banned such a work, Klein has his own solution: “I don’t believe that these words came from the Gaon R. Moshe, but in my humble opinion a mistaken student wrote them and placed them among his papers after his death.” He also states that it is impossible for him to believe that R. Moshe never heard of Zioni since he is quoted in the commentaries on the Shulhan Arukh, and R. Moshe knew the Shulhan Arukh backwards and forwards. He concludes that God should forgive the one who is responsible for what appear in
Iggerot Moshe, that which is now falsely attributed to R. Moshe.[3]

This is, of course, comical. R. Moshe insists that Zioni’s commentary should be banned, and Klein insists that R. Moshe never wrote this. The fact that the relevant volume of Iggerot Moshe was published in R. Moshe’s lifetime and the letter in which he writes against Zioni was sent to Rabbi Daniel Levy of Zurich and is dated 1976 does not deter Klein is what is surely one of the strangest things to appear in his volumes of responsa (which contain a good many strange things[4]).

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R. Moshe’s rejection of the commentary of R. Yehudah he-Hasid is not entirely unexpected. In fact, there are about ten different places where R. Moshe denies the authenticity of an earlier text because it does not agree with his preconceptions. In a future post I hope to list all of these examples, which show that R. Moshe could be quite daring (and this led to sharp responses to him by other poskim). Yet, as with R. Yehudah he-Hasid, every one of the texts that R. Moshe rejects is unquestionably authentic. In at least one of the cases we even have the author’s own manuscript.

A number of years ago I was studying R. Mordechai Spielman’s Tiferet Zvi. This is a multi-volume commentary on the Zohar which shows incredible bekiut. In fact, the Zohar is often just a springboard for the learned author to discuss all sorts of Torah matters. His first book, Tziyun le-Nefesh Tzvi, shows the same characteristics, and it is devoted to the issue of whether kohanim can go to the graves of tzadikim. While most poskim rule that they cannot, there is also a tradition, popular among the kabbalistically inclined, that tzadikim are exempted as they do not cause impurity. In one of his final articles, the late Prof. Israel M. Ta-Shma dealt with this
I noticed that Spielman cited Zioni and was curious to hear his reaction to R. Moshe’s teshuvah. In a lengthy letter, dated July 14, 1994, in which he discussed a variety of matters, he wrote:

[Quite by coincidence, a couple of years later my havruta at the Scranton yeshiva was the great-nephew of Rabbi Spielman. He told me that his uncle, who was a follower of the Munkatcher rebbe, R. Hayyim Elazar Shapira (and also a native of Munkatch), used to celebrate Thanksgiving each year. Such was his feeling of gratitude to be living in the United States.]

Returning to Auerbach’s Eshkol, the controversy really started when R. Shalom Albeck, in an open letter, later followed by his Kofer ha-Eshkol, accused Auerbach of forging the work. (Albeck himself, and his son Hanokh, later published the authentic Eshkol.) Yet it must be noted that Albeck was not the first to accuse Auerbach of this, as right after the work was published there appeared an anonymous article in He-Halutz[6] saying the same thing. There is a widespread assumption that this article was written by the outstanding scholar Raphael Kirchheim. Yet I don’t know how this assumption arose, as I can find no evidence to justify it. I believe that the author was Joshua Heschel Schorr, the publisher of the journal.

I must thank Rabbi Baruch Oberlander of Budapest[7] who called my attention to the fact that in another article in He-Halutz, eleven years later,[8] Schorr once again attacks Auerbach and his edition of the Eshkol. Among his choice words are the following:
Oberlander also called my attention to the following, which is quite interesting. In my previous post I quoted R. Shlomo Yosef Zevin’s assessment that Albeck was correct in judging Auerbach’s Eshkol a forgery. Yet in the Talmudic Encyclopedia, edited by Zevin, Auerbach’s Eshkol is cited! I wouldn’t be surprised if most of the people working on the various entries, who are all great talmidei hakhamim, have never even heard of the dispute over the volume. Unlike the case of Besamim Rosh, the reliability of Auerbach’s Eshkol is almost never mentioned in traditional rabbinic literature, and the great poskim continue to cite it as a rishon. Yet Auerbach’s Eshkol is also cited numerous times in the volumes that appeared while Zevin was still alive. How can one explain this?

Auerbach’s Eshkol was shown to be a forgery in that it contained formulations taken from post-medieval works. In my last post I quoted R. Ratsaby’s comment in his letter to me that the work contains material from the Beit Yosef. Oberlander points out that R. Menahem M. Kasher, Torah Shelemah, 9:140, also raises this possibility.

It is in this area, of post-medieval material in the Eshkol, that Prof. S. Z. Havlin has made a fascinating discovery. I refer to his article in Yeshurun 13 (2003), which should satisfy even the final doubters that the work is indeed a forgery.

Havlin quotes a passage from R. Abraham ben ha-Rambam that is found in the Orhot Hayyim of R. Aharon of Lunel and also appears in Auerbach’s Eshkol. The question is obvious: How could the Eshkol, whose author, R. Abraham ben Isaac, died in 1159, quote anything from R. Abraham ben ha-Rambam. Of course, one could say that this is a later addition to the manuscript from someone who used the Orhot Hayyim. But as Havlin notes, this is no help either because where would this person have come across this text, as it is lacking from the standard
The answer is that the Beit Yosef cites this passage in the name of Orhot Hayyim (without noting that the Orhot Hayyim is quoting R. Abraham ben ha-Rambam). R. Joseph Karo had access to a manuscript of Orhot Hayyim which had this text, which, as mentioned, does not appear in the standard version of Orhot Hayyim. Auerbach saw this text in the Beit Yosef and simply incorporated it into his Eshkol, perhaps even assuming that this was another example of Orhot Hayyim quoting the authentic Eshkol, as he often does. Only now, when we have access to the Jerusalem manuscript of this work, do we see that Orhot Hayyim is actually quoting a teaching of R. Abraham ben ha-Rambam. This was information that Auerbach did not have, and explains how he could include it in his edition. R. Abraham ben Isaac was a great scholar (and father-in-law of the Ra’avad). Yet even he was not able to quote from works that would not appear until after his death.

Havlin concludes:

I was asked to explain a bit about the Eshkol, vol. 4, that Bernard Bergman published. First some background: In the introduction to volume 3 of his edition of the Eshkol, Auerbach wrote that the halakhot of the Eshkol found in his manuscript that remained to be published were Hilkhot Yom Tov, Rosh ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur, Orlah, Kilayim, Hallah, Hekdesh, Vows and Oaths, Tzedakah, and Rabbinic laws. In his Kofer ha-Eshkol, Albeck, who insisted that Auerbach had no Eshkol manuscript but created his edition using various other sources (including the authentic Eshkol), challenged Auerbach’s supporters to at least produce Auerbach’s transcribed copy of his manuscript. It was asserted by Auerbach’s defenders that the original manuscript had been lost, presumably put into geniza by Auerbach’s family after the latter’s death, since they didn’t realize its value. But, Albeck claimed, certainly
Auerbach must made a copy of the manuscript (if it really existed). Albeck’s request was never fulfilled, and it is obvious that all of Auerbach’s defenders, who were in close touch with his family, assumed that there was no such copy. Had anyone known of it, its existence would have been a central feature of the defense of Auerbach’s honesty.

In 1986 Bergman published volume 4 of Auerbach’s Eshkol, which contains some of the missing sections. This would appear to show that Albeck was not correct in his assumption, and accusation, that no such text existed. But its existence says nothing about the authenticity of Auerbach’s Eshkol. All it means is that Auerbach had written down certain sections, and added his commentary Nahal Eshkol which he had to do before publication. Even forgers have to present a written text to the printer!

With regard to Bergman’s volume, it is very curious that the reader is given no insight in the introduction as to where this manuscript came from (or even a picture of it). I can’t think of any other publication of a rishon where this information is not provided. I would not be surprised if some think that the new edition is itself a later forgery designed to protect Auerbach’s legacy. After all, how is it that Bergman came to this work when Auerbach’s family and defenders knew nothing about it? Despite these questions, I think that barring new evidence we should give Bergman the benefit of the doubt and assume that the manuscript did originate with Auerbach.

I realize that it was, and remains, hard for people to accept that a gadol be-Yisrael was capable of such an outrage, namely, forging the work of a rishon. I think we should simply assume that he had some sort of schizophrenic personality, and leave it at that. Even great Torah scholars sometimes do weird things.
It is of course understandable that people who knew Auerbach as a pious sage were not able to accept this. Professor Jacob Barth, who taught at both the Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin and the University of Berlin, and was one of the world’s leading Semitic scholars, is a perfect example of this phenomenon. Although he was R. Esriel Hildesheimer’s son-in-law and a leading figure in German Orthodoxy, he also had a critical mind and was not one to be led by convention. It was thus possible for him to argue that Isaiah 40-66 was a later addition, and to reject the talmudic dating of various post-biblical books. He even claimed that the Song of Songs was not originally intended as an allegory, a position that today would probably get him put into herem. Yet even this giant of critical scholarship could not approach the Eshkol problem objectively. Instead, he reflected on how forty years prior he had studied Talmud under Auerbach, and how much he was impressed by him, from both an intellectual and personal standpoint. As he put it, whoever had any contact with Auerbach knows that it is “absolutely impossible that he could have committed the smallest literary dishonesty.”[9] He concludes his essay by stating that the learning and character of Auerbach stand tall, despite the shameful attack of Albeck.

In my first post I noted that R. Hayyim Heller pointed out to the Rav that Auerbach’s Eshkol is a forgery. In this regard, it is interesting to mention something that appears in Shimon Yosef Meller, Uvdot ve-Hanhagot le-Veit Brisk. In recent years there has been great interest in “Brisk.” I am not referring to the Brisker method of Torah study which has been popular for a long time, but rather a great interest in the personal lives of the outstanding figures of Brisk.

As every bit of information is precious, and every book wants to offer new stories, it is important for the authors to look anywhere they can. Unfortunately, at least one such book has plagiarized from R. Herschel Schachter.[10] Another unfortunate element in these books is the lack of respect
shown to figures who did not share the Brisker anti-Zionism. This is more understandable, as at times R. Chaim and R. Velvel themselves had negative views of the religious Zionist gedolim.[11] It would be censorship if their attitudes were not recorded properly, but most people reading this will still regard it as unfortunate that these great rabbis were not more tolerant. (The irony, of course, is that they are expected to be tolerant of those who supported what in their mind was bringing great devastation upon the Torah world.)

Speaking personally, I must say that some of the stories recorded in these books are so strange that I wonder if most people in this generation would be led to admire these figures more after hearing the stories, or if the result would be the opposite. For example, what is one to make of the following story, told in order to inspire awe of the Brisker Rav? Once he was served something which, while kosher, did not measure up to his standards. Upon learning of this, he immediately stuck his finger down his throat, causing himself to throw up on the host’s expensive rug. Rather than this upsetting the host, we are told that this further increased his admiration for the Brisker Rav.[12]

Can people today grasp what it means to be a pure ish halakhah of the sort the Rav describes in Halakhic Man, whose behavior can come across as very cold and unfeeling (e.g., R. Moshe Soloveichik’s rebuke of the Baal Tokea, and the story of R. Elya Pruzhener and his dying daughter)?[13] Another such example of this is the report that when one of R. Velvel’s sons died shortly after birth, and the family was crying, he was insistent that they stop their tears, since there is no avelut before thirty days.[14] Whether this type of pan-halakhism is inherently positive or negative I will leave to the judgment of others, but I think that in modern times it is clear that the average person who hears stories like this, even if he is a haredi, will not be spiritually inspired. I think that many times he will even be spiritually turned off,
for obvious reasons.

I know that Rabbi Pinchas Teitz, who headed my high school, the Jewish Educational Center, didn’t like the similar sort of stories told about the Rogochover. He felt that people today would hear these stories and the only thing that would stay with them is that the Rogochover was eccentric. Since the point of stories of gedolim is to inspire respect and awe, telling stories that stress his eccentricity would therefore be counterproductive. For example, hearing about how the Rogochover threw a chair at R. Hayyim Ozer, or how he proclaimed that R. Yitzhak Elchanan didn’t know how to learn or that Tosafot is full of errors, are hardly the sort of tales that will inspire awe.

In fact there are many gedolim about whom R. Teitz’ point is applicable. I remember when a high school rebbe of mine got all excited telling the class about his trip to the Steipler, and how while he was there the Steipler chased another fellow out of the house. (Subsequently I learnt that this was not so uncommon). After the rebbe finished his story, no doubt thinking we would be impressed, one of the students blurted out something along the lines of “Do you think that was a nice thing to do?” Now I certainly am not going to judge the Steipler, and it is likely that the man was deserving of being thrown out, but the rebbe didn’t know the details and thought that it would be exciting to tell us high schoolers how the great Steipler lived up to his reputation as one who didn’t suffer fools. Yet the acculturated Modern Orthodox response was to wonder why he wasn’t a nicer person. In other words, Rabbi Teitz was correct about the need to be careful when it comes to telling the masses stories of gedolim.

To give another example, I recently read a hesped where R. Yitzhak Yosef recorded how the deceased talmid hakham, R. Moshe Levi, didn’t miss a moment of Torah study. He described how when R. Levi was at a communal meal he kept a book under the tablecloth, and every free second he could be seen be
looking at it. The eulogizer saw that as something positive, whereas in my town, everyone would regard it as very rude. This point illustrates why I find haredi hagiography so fascinating, as it clearly reveals the culture gap between the haredi world and the Modern Orthodox world. Some of the stories that are told, and are part of haredi myth making, would be regarded with horror by the Modern Orthodox world.[15] How better to determine the ethos of a community than by seeing how it chooses to remember and praise its leaders? If anyone thinks that the Rav shared the Modern Orthodox ethos, just look at the stories he tells in Halakhic Man.

Sometimes truly horrible stuff is found in haredi “gedolim books” as well. Let me offer just one example. There is a very helpful book by Dov Ber Schwartz entitled Artzot ha-Hayyim (Brooklyn, 1992). This book contains short biographies of numerous American rabbis, a list of rabbinic books published in the United States, and an essay on Orthodoxy in America. Yet in the midst of the book, on page 52a in the note, one finds the shocking passage which you can see here, and which I am too embarrassed to translate. One can only hope that sentiments such as these are not very common among Schwartz’ fellow Satmar hasidim.

Another real problem with all of the haredi hagiography is that one never knows if the stories are trustworthy. That doesn’t mean that the stories have no value, for even if gadol x never did what is recorded, the fact that this story is told
about him reveals the mindset of the generation telling the story. In other words, we can adapt the point Neusner has made about talmudic tales of tannaim really telling us about the amoraim; late twentieth and early twenty-first-century tales of gedolim really reveal what the current haredi ethos is (especially since anything that doesn’t agree with this ethos will be censored.)

While in many cases the stories told are strange and one wonders whether they are accurate, in some cases it can be determined with virtual, or even complete, certainty that they are false. Yehoshua Mondshine has authored a number of articles showing the falsehoods in (mostly) hasidic stories. Among the non-hasidic works he takes aim at is R. Barukh Epstein’s Mekor Barukh.[16] Mondshine’s prime concern is with the famous story recorded by Epstein about his father’s meeting with the Tzemah Tzedek, and Mondshine attempts to show that there is no reason to believe the report.

To this I would only add that, knowing Epstein’s reputation as a plagiarizer and how he manufactured stories, one should not take seriously any of his “recollections.” I know the feminists will be upset with this, but we must assume that the entire dialogue between him and Rayna Batya,[17] which shows her as a proto-feminist, is contrived and has no historical significance other than revealing that Epstein himself wanted to call attention to the sad fate of talented women who are not permitted to study Torah. In the unlikely event that he does accurately portray Rayna Batya, all I can say is that the punishment of one who tells tall tales is that even when he tells a true story he is not believed. We must, however, remember that even when it comes to stories that are certainly false (and there are loads of them being invented all the time, and then repeated by the gullible), one should not be discouraged when reading them. Rather, one should keep in mind Saul Lieberman’s famous comment: “Nonsense is nonsense, but the history of nonsense is scholarship.”

What does all this have to do with Auerbach’s Eshkol? In Uvdot
ve-Hanhagot le-Veit Brisk, 3:291, we are told in the name of someone who heard it directly from R. Velvel that when Auerbach’s Eshkol was published, “I [R. Velvel] immediately said that this is not the Eshkol.” R. Velvel is also quoted as saying that it was actually written by another rishon. Here is a perfect example of why these sorts of books are so unreliable. I am not saying that the person who reported this story is lying, only that he didn’t understand what R. Velvel said, or perhaps after forty years no longer remembered properly. I say this because R. Velvel never could have said what he is alleged to have said, as he wasn’t even alive when Auerbach’s Eshkol appeared in 1868. The only kernel of truth that can be gleaned from this text is that R. Velvel knew that Auerbach’s Eshkol was not the authentic Eshkol. Seeing how badly the informant messed up, I am not even willing to trust him that R. Velvel said that Auerbach’s Eshkol is the work of another rishon. Perhaps he only said that it contains information from rishonim, without committing himself to it being an authentic medieval work.

The great problem is what to do with pesakim that rely on Auerbach’s Eshkol. For example, the authentic Eshkol does not have hilkhrot niddah, but Auerbach’s does. Unlike Saul Berlin, Auerbach was not simply making up pesakim and attributing them to rishonim. He was taking information in the Beit Yosef and other works and putting this in the mouth of the Eshkol. This is, of course, terrible, and in a halakhic sense it gives the authority of an aharon to a rishon. Yet when you have a pesak in one of the aharonim that relies on Auerbach’s Eshkol, I would think that it does not need to be thrown out because there is at least some important authority (e.g., Beit Yosef, Peri Hadash, etc.) who holds this position, even if it wasn’t the Eshkol.

That said, I can only sympathize with those who have written articles or halakhic works and treated Auerbach’s Eshkol as authentic. The forger has all sorts of motivations, but at the
very least he is guilty of genevat zeman, i.e., the time that people take in examining that which they think is a rishon, and wouldn’t have done had they known the truth. Time is precious, and the forger causes it to be wasted on falsehoods. Just think how much time was spent on the forged Yerushalmi Kodashim and Besamim Rosh that could have been spent in authentic Torah study. From an issue currently in the scholarly news, imagine how many thousands of hours have been spent on Morton Smith’s Secret Gospel of Mark, by scholars arguing both sides of the issue. If it turns out that Smith is a forger, even after his death he is playing havoc with people and their scholarly direction.

One very unfortunate example of this is Chaim Bloch’s collection of forged anti-Zionist letters, Dovev Siftei Yeshenim (3 vols., 1959-1965). Hermann Greive wrote an entire article based on these letters,[18] and shortly after his article appeared Shmuel Weingarten published his Mikhtavim Mezuyafim Neged ha-Tziyonut (Jerusalem, 1981), showing beyond any doubt that the letters are forgeries.[19] All the time spent by Greive in writing his article was of course never to be recovered, stolen from him by the worst type of scoundrel the scholarly world can produce. Years ago I had wanted to discuss this matter with Greive, but was shocked to learn that he had met an untimely death, killed by a deranged student.[20]

Notes:


[3] In a later responsum, vol. 16, Yoreh Deah no. 102, he offers a far-fetched explanation of Zioni and R. Yehudah he-Hasid, according to which David never removed anything from the Torah, only from Moses’ chumash, which contained material
not found in the Torah.

[4] For example, what other posek has concluded that ethnic foods, e.g., Chinese, Italian, sushi, etc. are forbidden, and that Jews must only eat “Jewish food.” See Mishneh Halakhot, vol. 10, no. 111. It was pesakim like this that gave rise to the yeshiva quip that the title of his book should be pronounced Meshaneh Halakhot. In addition, Klein’s negative views towards baalei teshuvah and women are also very troubling (although with regard to women, a knowledge of some of his difficult personal history adds some necessary context in this regard.) His attitude towards non-Jews is also shocking, so much so that one wonders whether Elie Wiesel, great humanitarian that he is, would be such a supporter of his institutions if he knew what was being taught there (Wiesel and Klein were in Auschwitz and Buchenwald together). In a lecture at an Edah conference some years ago, a well known talmid hakham discussed if it proper for one to make use of poskim like R. Menasheh Klein for certain areas (e.g., hilkhhot Shabbat), if one feels that their general worldview, in particular in areas of Jewish-Gentile relations, is diametrically opposed to one’s own values.


[7] Rabbi Oberlander is the world’s leading expert on the forged Yerushalmi Kodashim. He published numerous articles on the topic in Or Yisrael, which will be part of his forthcoming book. I should also note that he has played an important role in the rebuilding of Jewish life in Hungary. See e.g., here.


[9] “Notwendige Abfertigung,” Jüdische Presse (February 17,
1911): 65.

[10] Halikhot ha-Grah (Jerusalem, [1996]) takes a good deal of material, often word for word, from R. Hershel Schachter, Nefesh ha-Rav (Jerusalem: Reishit Press, 1994) without acknowledgment.

[11] I don’t know if it is a reliable report, but see R. Ephraim Greenblatt, Rivevot Efraim, 6:41, third introduction, that R. Velvel also expressed himself negatively with regard to the Rav. (R. Greenblatt himself always shows great respect for the Rav and all gedolei Yisrael, whatever their hashkafot; the passage I refer to was written by someone else. Years ago I expressed my surprise to R. Greenblatt that he included this in his work. Since it is part of an article about one of his teachers, he no doubt felt that it was inappropriate to make any changes.)

[12] Shimon Yosef Meller, Ha-Rav mi-Brisk (Jerusalem, 2004), 2:546-547. See also ibid., 1:484, for a story where R. Hayyim Ozer gave R. Velvel some sugar for his tea, and the latter thought it might contain kitniyot. Out of respect for R. Hayyim Ozer, which is a biblical commandment (kavod ha-Torah), R. Velvel used the sugar, but

[13] David Singer and Moshe Sokol advance the radical view that the Rav’s descriptions of his family members is actually designed to show his opposition to their hyper-intellectualism and pan-halakhism. They write

[T]here is something strange about Soloveitchik’s tales of the Litvaks. The behavior he describes is so radical, so extreme, as to make his presumed heroes seem grotesque. Who, for example, wishing to portray Litvak intellectualism in a positive light, would boast that his father and grandfather set aside all human sentiment and refused ever to enter a cemetery, because a stark encounter with death would have distracted them from the contemplation of the law. Or again,
who would tell with pride the following macabre story about his maternal grandfather [referring to the story of R. Elya and his dying daughter] . . . Stories like this, while ostensibly presented in order to glorify the Litvak, cannot help but evoke strong disapproval in the reader. And this disapproval, it seems safe to assume, is shared in part by Soloveitchik himself, specifically by that part of him which rebels against the Litvak tradition’s spurning of the emotions. The vein of anger that runs through the anecdotal material in “Halakhic Man” is not to be missed.


[14] Shimon Yosef Meller, Uvdot ve-Hanhagot le-Veit Brisk, 4:22-23. The eyewitness to this story was R. Simcha Sheps, late Rosh Yeshiva at Torah Vodaas.

[15] The same high school rebbe, mentioned above, also told us how at the Steipler’s wedding he had a sefer with him and was learning throughout the affair. Again, the reaction of the Modern Orthodox youths who heard this story was that the Steipler was definitely not someone to look to as a role model. What might inspire awe in Boro Park and Bnei Brak can often have the opposite effect when told to acculturated, fun-loving, American youngsters. This is the sort of story that will convince them that gedolim don’t value the normal pleasures of life, and why would any young person, brought up in America, want to be part of a religion that holds this up as an ideal?

[16] See here.


[18] Hermann Greive, “Zionism and Jewish Orthodoxy,” Leo Baeck
[19] Even before Weingarten’s book, and earlier articles, there was strong reason to suspect Bloch of forgery. From the beginning of the twentieth century he published books and articles containing letters of great rabbis and Hasidic leaders. None of them can be assumed to be authentic. During his great dispute with R. Yosef Elijah Henkin in the 1940’s, the latter repeatedly accused Bloch of dishonesty and pointed out that he would often attribute quotes to rabbis who were no longer alive so that he couldn’t be contradicted.

[20] After learning of the forgeries, Greive also published “Zionism and Jewish Orthodoxy (II),” Leo Baeck Institute Year Book 28 (1983): 241-246, which is a disgraceful and feeble attempt at defending his original article. In truth, it is no more than a justification of the time and effort he put into the original article. The best course would have been to simply acknowledge how he had been hoodwinked. Why do I say that his article is “disgraceful”? Because it is a twisted example of post-modern mumbo-jumbo that would make the editors of Social Text proud (see here). Here are some choice quotations from Greive, which if they ever became the standard of the historian’s craft, would mean the end of knowledge as we know it. He is trying to show that even forgery of texts is not very different than what historians do all the time!

It is precisely because of this awareness that historians tend to be exceedingly sensitive to any departure from the accepted standards, to any instance of “interference” that does not stop at interpreting a text, but – in the case of written sources – presumes to interfere with the very words in order to demonstrate a newly proclaimed truth. It must be borne in mind, however, that what the offender does in such a case is no different in principle from what everybody is doing except that he goes a little too far. It is this proximity of the permissible to the impermissible that accounts for the intensity of the hostile reaction among
scholars, which is as it ought to be for the sake of upholding the standards of serious scholarship, for it is that final step across the dividing line that is the decisive one.

The indignation among scholars will be the more vehement, the rejection the more absolute, the more clearly the newly demonstrated “truth” diverges from the established tenets, flies in the face of securely held scientific convictions. Yet, as will be explained later on, such reactions may be over-hasty. For one thing, interference with a text is not in principle different from inadmissible interpretation which does not alter the words but stretches their meaning; for another, the editing of a text touches on the problem of the extent to which a word uttered during a particular period truly reflects a (hypothetical) extra-verbal reality. Of course, such doubly problematical sources must be approached with caution: their usefulness depends on just what wants to demonstrate by their use.

Later on in the article Greive assumes that Bloch did not create the anti-Zionist letters from scratch, but rather altered authentic letters, and he argues that one can “extract” authentic information from them. He concludes: “Admittedly, there is a danger of drawing erroneous conclusions from a distorted text, but this only reinforces the need for a careful and balanced critical approach and is certainly no reason for altogether ignoring the material until some more reliable evidence pointing in the same direction becomes available.”

It is unfortunate that such a fine publication as the Leo Baeck Institute Year Book published this nonsense. Dovev Siftei Yeshenim is completely useless as a historical source.