

Samuel Landman

Rabbi Jacob Samuel Zuri z"l



A great light shone upon Częstochowa the day a simple Jew came to its gates came, to settle there – a Jew of the sort commonly called in Yiddish “*A Yid fin a gantz yuhr*” [“an all-year-round Jew”; i.e., weekday, commonplace], with no distinctive features or specific expertise in anything, but just to seek his livelihood in our growing and developing city, in which the chances of earning an honourable living were higher than in the small town of Pilica, from whence his family came.

This Jew’s name was Moszek Rzezak.

He would have probably remained in obscurity, in his personal space, and no one would have known anything about him or mentioned his name and his father’s name, except for when he was called to the Torah or received a

hakufe on Simchas Torah.

But a fortune, the likes of which is seen only once in many generations, befell our Reb Moszek - a precious son, a prodigy among the Jews, and known to the nations as one of the greatest experts in all fields of the Jewish Torah and the wisdom of the Gentiles, who had nothing in his world but to learn and to teach.

This son of his - whose name, in the beginning, was Jakób Szmul Rzezak - was born in Pilica in 5644 [1884]. He was later to become the greatest scholar and crowning jewel among the experts on archaic Hebraic law - Rabbi Jacob Samuel Zuri. His exceptional talent was already apparent in his childhood. He astonished all his teachers with his quick comprehension, wonderful memory and immense diligence, which was unparalleled.

While still in his adolescence, he travelled to Sochaczew to learn Torah from the mouth of that prince among the prodigies of Poland, *Rebbe Awrum Borensztajn*¹, author of “*Avnei Nezer*” [“Stones of the Crown”] and “*Iglei Tal*” [“Dewdrops”], and had the honour of being ordained by him as a Rabbi when he was only 18.

Below, we subsequently an article of appreciation which was published about him in the compilation on existential questions, science and literature “*Metsudah*” [“Fortress”], printed by “Ararat” in London in Kislev 5704 [December 1943], under editorship of Dr Simon Rawidowicz. It was written by Samuel Landman, whom the editor Dr S. Rawidowicz denotes as being, “one of a small inner circle that stood by Zuri, who “rejoiced in his lot²” and made do with little and enabled him to sit and study Torah in London.”

From Mr Landsman’s article, we may glean a concept of the illustrious man’s greatness, which did not only apply scholasticism of the Torah, but also drew forth his Torah and poured it out to others.

¹ [TN: Son-in-law of the Kotzker Rebbe.]

² [TN: Reference to Pirkei Avot, Ch. 4, m. 1: “Who is rich? He who rejoices in his lot.”]

Happily, there are those amongst us, now in Israel, who still remember him and the wonderful lectures he gave during his visits to Częstochowa, returning from the Land of Israel or his wanderings in the lands of Europe, to which he migrated, to quench his thirst in their centres of wisdom and knowledge.

A.

Jacob Samuel Zuri was born in Pilica, near Częstochowa.

In his youth, he spent some years in Sochaczew (Warsaw district), where his knowledge of Torah and Talmud deepened and widened. He gained renown as a young prodigy. Rabbis, who were greater than him in years and in wisdom, showed the young scholar great respect.

After leaving Sochaczew, he heard Torah from other greats, among them Rabbi Joel, the rabbi of the Kraków community.

Częstochowa's beautiful natural surroundings instilled a great love for nature and art, such as music and painting, in the young man's soul. He did not limit his studies exclusively to Judaism, but also engaged a little in secular studies – botany and zoology.

Already in his youth, Zuri saw no contradiction between secular and religious studies. In this, too, he followed in the footsteps of some of our great Sages of past generations.

Feeling no inclination to serve as a rabbi, he continued his studies in Western Europe - in Germany, Switzerland and France. The more he saw of the wide world, the more the value and originality of the Jewish Sages in which he delved day and night grew in his eyes, and he came to identify with them. He lived in these lands for about ten years, acquiring knowledge of German and French - in addition to the Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish and Russian that he had absorbed in his homeland, all of which he fully mastered. The main subjects he studied at the time were philosophy, linguistics, sociology, history and law.

The years leading up to the First World War were a period of mass-migration for our people, from Eastern Europe to the West and to America. At the same time, a small group of émigrés did not allow themselves to be swept up by this current and made their way to the Land of Our Forefathers, where "*Hovevei Zion*" and the first Zionists lay the foundations for the New *Yishuv*³ [Settlement]. The young Zuri naturally joined this minority and emigrated to the Land [of Israel] in 1912, where he was engaged as a teacher at "*Ezrah's*" ("*Hilfsverein [der Deutschen Juden]*"; Aid Society of German Jews) "*Teachers' Seminary*", under directorship of Ephraim Cohen [-Reiss].

In Palestine, he was filled with the joy of life and creative exultation. His memories of the Land of Israel [always] lifted up his spirits. In Eliezer Ben Yehuda and the other members of the Committee of the Hebrew Language, he found kindred spirits, and he cooperated energetically and enthusiastically with them in reviving the Hebrew language and culture.

During these years of his settling for the first time in Palestine, he became interested in [ancient] Hebraic Law, with the clear purpose of understanding Hebraic Law methodically and in an orderly fashion, to be used in the future Kingdom of Israel.

In order to accomplish this task, he needed to deepen his knowledge of the laws of other peoples - the ancient and the modern - and, whilst still vacillating on whether he should leave the Land of

³ [TN: Refers to the Jewish settlements built in Palestine from the 1860's to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.]

Israel and wander to Europe to study law, the War broke out and he was forced to leave anyway. He lived in Europe until the end of the War and returned to Palestine in 1920.

During these years in Europe, Zuri began preparing his books on Hebraic Law. Upon his return, he was appointed lecturer at the British Law School in Jerusalem. In the seven or eight years that he worked in Palestine, he contributed to Torah [knowledge] and also published several highly important original works.

His reason for leaving Palestine a second time is unknown to me. Perhaps he could not adapt to the atmosphere that prevailed then in the country, or perhaps there was another reason.

Following his second departure from the Land of Israel, he stayed a few years in Egypt, where he became the governmental advisor on Hebraic Law (in the Near East, Hebraic Law has legal validity in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance etc.).

His health declined in Egypt and he was forced to travel to Europe to recuperate. He came to Paris, where he lived for several years, continuing his scholarly work.

In the summer of 1931, he arrived in London, where he remained until the end of his life (barring the last two years, which he spent in Oxford, due to the bombing of London).

At Oxford, he found the books he had yearned for, in which he found the joy of his life and contentment of his soul, as well as some of his friends who had also left the capital. When these started returning to London, he decided to do so too. Moving from Oxford was doubtlessly a great physical effort and possibly also caused him much agitation, for the very day he moved to London (12th February 1943) he died suddenly.

B.

Zuri's first book in Hebrew was *Toldot Darkei HaLimud* [History of Study Methods], published in Jerusalem before the Second World War. In it, he compares the methods of Torah instruction implemented in the *yeshivas*⁴ in the south of the Land of Israel with those of Galilee and Babylonia (Sura and Nehardea). In this work, we are introduced to the author's novel approach to Talmudic science, which is both historical and sociological. His prodigious expertise and vast memory enabled him to reconstruct - based on the Talmudic material - the daily life in the different academies, to reveal before us the ideologies of the most prominent teachers, each teacher with his distinct views and day-to-day occupation, as well as to inform us on life in society in general. Zuri was able to bring the world of the Mishna and Talmud Sages back to life, based on their teachings, which are scattered throughout the Talmud.

His second book, *Mishpat Ha'Talmud* [Talmudic Law], was printed in Warsaw in 1921-22. This was his first work in the field of the research of Hebraic Law, which was to become his life's work. In it, he succeeded in bringing the foundations of the Hebraic Law in the Talmud to light (Prof A. Golack and the Chief Rabbi in the Land of Israel, Dr Herzog, also studied this important matter).

In his book *Tarbut Ha'Dromi'im* [Culture of the Southerners], also printed in Warsaw in 1924, Zuri returns temporarily to the research of his favourite era - the period of the Second Temple. In it, he differentiates between the cultures of the Jews from the south of the Land of Israel and those of Galilee and the north, here too putting great emphasis on the legal side of things. In the years he served as lecturer at the British Law School in Jerusalem, he wrote four large biographical works on

⁴ [TN: In Roman times.]

Rav, Rabbi Yossi bar Chanina of Caesarea, Rav Ashi and Rabbi Akiva, which were published in Jerusalem in 1924-26. His book on Rav is the most famous. It was praised by great Jewish scholars of our generation (this book is now rare, and should be reprinted). The author's originality in his approach to the subject, his fluency, his great passion for research and the deep knowledge of the Talmud he displays in this book, guarantee it a special place in our libraries.

It seems that he began describing the life of Rav when he was in Europe during the First World War because, in 1918, he published an illustrated booklet on Rav and a short book about Rav Jochanan, written in German. These are his only writings - as far as I know - which were not in Hebrew. He had the deep conviction that only books written in our language are the possessions of the Hebrew People. Despite the many entreaties that he write in the languages of Europe - English, French and German - he always remained loyal to Hebrew.

In 1931, his books on "History of Hebrew Public Laws" began to appear, which were intended to serve as a basis for the legal system of the future Hebrew State. The first three volumes were published in Paris in 1931. The fourth and fifth were printed in London in 1933-34, and the sixth in Jerusalem, in 1939. All these volumes deal with the periods of the Roman occupation and the Dark Ages. The first serves as an introduction; the second is on the times of Rabbi Yehuda *HaNasi* [Judah the Prince, c.135-217 CE]; the third, on the *yeshiva* at Sepphoris; the fourth, on Rabban Gamliel *Ha'Nasi*⁵; the fifth, on Rabbi Chanina bar Chama [died c.250 CE] of Sepphoris, in Galilee, and the sixth, on Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak [d. 356 CE], the chief lecturer and dean of the *yeshiva* [at Pumbedita, Babylonia].

Between 1934-1942, he dedicated himself to compiling the Hebraic Law and published five volumes on civil law: "Claims", "Appeals", "Damages", "Partnerships" and "*Chok Ha'Mitasek Shelo Birshut*"⁶, in Latin and English [?].

Before his death, he completed the sixth volume on the subject, "Liens and Collaterals", which deals in mortgages and such. He intended to codify the Hebraic Law, in a *Codex Hebraicus*.

He managed to interest a few of the friends who stood by him in this important idea. Shortly before the current [i.e., Second] World War, he founded the "Society for the Research and Codification of the Hebraic Law". Zuri hoped to continue his great project with this society's aid, but "never does a man die, having attained even half his desires" [*Midrash Kohelet Rabbah* on Ecclesiastes, Ch. 1:13].

C.

The central idea, which runs like a common thread through all of Zuri's works, is that the characteristic foundation of the skills of the Jews as a nation, is not only the religious sentiments as expressed by the prophets and in Psalms, or in philosophy and ethics, as in Pirkei Avot and Maimonides' "*Mishneh Torah*", but also in Hebraic Law.

Zuri believed, and also proved, that the Hebraic legal concepts are of very special value, and that the humanistic, social and international values contained in Hebraic Law should be revealed to the world. His starting point was the widely accepted idea that the Ten Commandments and the Hebrew Bible constitute the foundation of foundations of education and law, on which are based the pillars of human culture and social life in most parts of the world. Thus far towards the outside, and towards the inside - our Torah and the principles of Hebraic Law served as a defensive wall against all enemies who sought our destruction. Zuri's main article of faith was that our people are eternal

⁵ [TN: Son and successor of Judah the Prince.]

⁶ [TN: Translates roughly as "laws pertaining to accidental damage caused by one engaged in something he is not allowed to do."]

and will never be destroyed, exclusively due to our elemental aspiration to justice and fair trials, set as the basis of social life. He therefore considered it his obligation - as a Jew and a member of human society - to bring these foundations of the law out to the light of the world, and to reveal their glory and might, once the dust of generations upon generations of ignorance and disdain had been shaken off. In the course of his research, he found a copious amount of material written by the Gentiles on Roman and Greek Law, the laws of Islam and of other ancient peoples, but Hebraic Law occupied no position at all in Europe's scientific world.

He believed that a modern redaction of the Hebraic legal system would reveal the brilliance of our laws to Europe, thus his goal in life became to discover the foundations of Hebraic Law from among the sources scattered throughout the Talmud, to clarify them [and] to trace their evolution in modern law, in light of the newest research. He was not drawn to work in this field only due to his analytical inclinations, but also because he was a Hebrew through-and-through, who yearned for a Hebrew-speaking Land of Israel, whose law would be the Hebraic Law - a bastion for Jews and a model for Gentiles, based on the cornerstones laid by our ancient predecessors - a project which could only be accomplished by our people.

Zuri attributed particular importance to the fact that in 70 CE - when the Second Temple was destroyed and our political rule came to an end - the country remained in its public governmental role as the fiscal centre of the Jewish communities. He also collected and revealed ancient sources, which proved that the Sanhedrin and its leaders continued serving as the highest legislative institution for the management of the people in the Land of Israel for many years to come. He would often repeat the Talmudic saying, *"Any judge who judges a true judgment truthfully [the verse ascribes to him as if] he became a partner in the act of Creation"* [Talmud Bavli, *Shabbat*, 10a], and he would also say that the Sages had found no better expression signifying anarchy and social lawlessness than *"there is no law and there is no judge"* [various sources].

Zuri excelled in his vast Hebraic acumen, like the disciples of the Haskala movement and the Russian intelligentsia prior to the First World War. His world view was based on the principle that the Hebrew foundation is an inseparable part of the evolution of human culture. He believed that the course of human evolution, which had been halted by the spread of Christianity, must progress forwards with the force of pure Judaism - until reaching the lofty heights our prophets prophesied: *"For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea"* (Isaiah 11:9).

It was clear to him that the most productive period in Hebraic Law was the Talmudic era. He regarded Talmudic Law as the fruits of the flowers which blossomed in Scripture - which he knew by heart to the finest detail and studied all his life. His prowess was great, whether expounding on a chapter of the Hebrew Bible, or a chapter of the Ethics of the Fathers.

He found it difficult to constrict himself, to control the myriad of forces brewing inside him. This lack of constriction is also apparent in his books, the majority of which will become sources for research and not textbooks.

What was Zuri likened to? A mighty waterfall with a limitless flow. Sadly, no one was found to harness this current and there was no one to draw from within this colossal torrent of wisdom the great bountifulness it contained. It is a pity we were unable to take proper advantage of this treasure-chest of Torah and its great wealth - for the benefit of the nation and the Hebraic legal code.

The man Zuri was never deterred by great difficulties. His troubles and disappointments turned him into a harsh person who lashed out at others. [But] he was always full of hope, brimming with the

joy of life and creativity. He shall not be forgotten among the Jews, and his project in the field of Hebraic Law shall serve as a source of plenty for future generations.

W.H

This mighty tree, whose branches were so abundant, first sprouted up in our city - happy are we that such honour befell us!

(With appreciation and affection, we commemorate his name and memory in the Memorial Book to our destroyed community, from which arose the fighter for the glory and merit of the Hebraic Law! May his memory be blessed!)