The Dilemmas of a Fallible Rabbi
A Biographer Reads History in the Life of a Scholar

Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg 1884-1966
By Marc Shapiro
Littman, 288 pages, $49.95.

By ALLAN NADLER

Many biographies of the 20th century's leading rabbis, chasidic rebbes and yeshiva deans have been published in recent years by Orthodox presses such as Artscroll and Feldheim. The titles of these works — "Revered by All," "Pillar of Fire," "The Man of Truth and Peace," "A Blaze in the Darkening Gloom," "A Tsadik in Our Time," to name but a few — suggest much about their content. Although written about a variety of rabbinical figures, these biographies recount many lives that are virtually one and the same. They tell with awe of saintly men with profound learning and pristine characters who devoted themselves immaculately to the Torah and the Jewish people. As young children, their genius and saintliness were already manifest, and until the hour of their deaths they never erred or strayed. These books are, in other words, hagiographies, uncritical tributes to allegedly infallible saints, and not true biographies. Their value is purely inspirational, not historical.

What a refreshing pleasure it is, therefore, to read Marc Shapiro's "Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg 1884-1966." Mr. Shapiro's scholarly account of Weinberg's remarkable life and turbulent times happily avoids the panegyric tone that has too long dominated the field of rabbinic "biography," offering instead a detailed look at a rabbi of great learning and character who nonetheless strayed and erred about grave matters and who was, by the end of his life, a tragic and lonely figure.

Weinberg is today best remembered as the head of the famed Berlin Rabbinical Seminary (commonly known as Hildesheimer's after its founder, Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer) during the 1930s and as a major halachic authority whose collection of responsa, "Seridei Aish," is to this day widely consulted, particularly among Modern Orthodox rabbis. Despite his powerful intellect, great Torah scholarship and fine character, Weinberg (like his many rabbinic colleagues who have yet to be studied critically) was anything but flawless. For example, as Mr. Shapiro recounts in this unflinching biography, Weinberg's initial response to the rise of Hitler was one of cautious, but significant, optimism: "Weinberg...[said] that it was the Jews, in particular the Orthodox, who understood and sympathized with the new national movement that had swept Germany. It was the religious Jews who understood how thankful they had to be to Hitler for his fight against communism and atheism, which had brought such spiritual destruction on the Jews of Russia."

Weinberg was also, in turns outs, quite a fan of Mussolini and believed that the Duce's ascent to power could actually give Judaism a boost by fostering the development of a "Hebrew spiritual fascism." Lest the reader suspect that Weinberg was singularly deluded on this issue, Mr. Shapiro includes, in an appendix, the full text of a deeply disturbing "Letter to Hitler" sent to the Führer by Berlin's Free Association for the Interests of Orthodox Jews, an astonishing document that alone makes this book worth owning. He also cites words of praise for Nazism by a famous Orthodox rabbi, Elie Munk of Ansbach: The Nazis "have taken up the war against the loosening of morals and respect for law, as well as against the emancipation of the female sex. They have replaced the democratic principle of majority rule with the principle of 'Führerturn,' and have put a stop to the progress of the collectivist economic system. All these steps are fully in accord with the direction of our religious will." Of course, such sentiments were uttered long before Kristallnacht, and I single out these passages cut out of this lengthy biography not to condemn Weinberg with the wisdom of hindsight, but rather to emphasize the obvious fallibility of even the greatest of rabbis.

As the book's title suggests, Weinberg was one of those rabbis of the last century who have been dubbed "transition figures" by historians. They were, that is, men who began their Jewish paths in the insular yeshiva world of Lithuania but later moved to Germany and came under the influence of the enlightened forms of Judaism that in those years dominated even Orthodox German Jewry. Born in a Polish shtetl, Weinberg studied at the famed Yeshiva of Slobodka, just...
across the river from the Lithuanian city of Kovno. Long before his departure for Germany, where he was to pursue doctoral studies in Semiotics at the University of Würzburg, Weinberg was a close disciple of the master of the musar movement, Rabbi Nosson Zvi Finkel (1849-1927), ordained by some of the greatest rabbis of Lithuania and served as the "Crown Rabbi" of the Lithuanian town of Pilsak from 1906 to 1913.

As Mr. Shapiro meticulously demonstrates, Weinberg, even in these early years in Lithuania, was a man torn between the piety of the East and the cultural sophistication of the West; between the strict Orthodoxy, rigorous moralism and deep talmudic scholarship of the yeshiva world and the liberal tendencies of both Jewish and gentile enlightenment in Germany. Although he published numerous anti-haskala polemics during his rabbinical days in Pilsak, at the same time he began to exhibit an atypical interest in modern Hebrew literature, Zionist ideology and critical biblical scholarship.

A major part of this book is devoted to the inner struggles that Weinberg experienced after his move to Germany in 1914. Mr. Shapiro richly describes Weinberg's personal battles to reconcile his yeshiva origins with the attractions of enlightened German Judaism, particularly the Vienna brand of Orthodoxy founded by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, known as "Torah im Derosh Eretz," or Torah fused with worldliness. Weinberg's lifelong inner religious conflicts serve as a window onto the larger religious and cultural trends that characterized German Jewry during the Weimar years. With Weinberg's career as his prism, Mr. Shapiro explores the different hues of pre-war European Judaism, particularly the subtle, but significant, varieties among the various factions of traditional German Jewry. Chief among the contentious issues separating the various Orthodox camps was the legitimacy of secular studies. While the Lithuanian yeshiva world rejected completely all non-rabbinic studies or gentle cultural pursuits, the Berlin Seminary, headed by Weinberg, believed in the importance of fusing modern scholarship with traditional Jewish learning. This approach was in turn opposed by the Frankfurt school of Orthodoxy, which, while believing in the value of cultural enlightenment, viewed critical, academic Judaic studies as a threat to faith.

What is of particular interest about Weinberg is the fact that he strenuously advocated each of these positions at different periods of his life, making his biography a fine vehicle for Jewish intellectual history.

His considerable intellectual strengths notwithstanding, Weinberg emerges, in this biography, as an indecisive man of weak character whose nerve failed him on many occasions, particularly when challenged by the fervently Orthodox about his "liberal" or "modern" halachic views. In the last decade of his life, his life presaged those of many later "modern" Orthodox rabbis, particularly in recent years, who have been increasingly intimidated by the religious right, often to the point of theological and halachic paralysis.

The Nazis closed the Berlin Seminary in 1938 and, despite several efforts to relocate it to Palestine, Weinberg decided to stay in Germany and "ride out" the Nazi terror. He spent most of the war years in a remote detention camp in the Bavarian fortress at Würzburg, unaware of the extent of the horrors of the Holocaust and the death camps in the East. After the war, devastated by the complete destruction of German Jewry, he ended up in the Swiss village of Montreux, where he spent most of his time writing halachic responsa. Despite numerous offers of respectable positions in England, Israel and America, Weinberg chose to remain in Munich, living in a town with barely 100 Jews and with no facilities to which he could carry on his pre-war scholarship. In 1949, he abandoned plans to go to Oxford, where he was to collaborate with his former teacher from Ghent University, Paul Kahle. The reason he gave was that it would be difficult to find kosher food there.

In a 1955 letter to his friend Rabbi Samuel Atlas of Cincinnati, Weinberg explained his rejection of several attractive offers in Israel: "I am afraid to go to the Land of Israel. There are different worlds there which reject and hate one another. I am part of two worlds, and which one should I choose when I go there? In the end, I will have to remain in solitude. For it is better for me to be alone in an empty desert than in a noisy and raucous atmosphere." Mr. Shapiro tends to accept at face value these and other of Weinberg's "reasons" for his self-imposed isolation. And therein lies the major weakness of this otherwise fine study. One completes the book knowing that Weinberg's "life and works," but with little sense of the person. Mr. Shapiro limits his study to purely intellectual history, avoiding any speculation about the role of Weinberg's personality or psychological makeup in shaping his life. Early in the book, for example, Mr. Shapiro discusses Weinberg's short-lived marriage in Pilsak, explaining its failure in purely intellectual terms: i.e. that unlike Weinberg, who "read newspapers and books in both Hebrew and Russian," his young bride knew "little more than how to read the prayer book." But that was the case in literally thousands of enduring marriages in the Eastern European Jewish society of the day. Similarly, Weinberg's failure ever to remarry and have a family—features of his life that are quite obviously connected to his theological paralysis and social isolation—are documented by Mr. Shapiro with no attempt at personal or psychological interpretation. Despite this serious limitation, Mr. Shapiro's book is arguably the best biography of a rabbi ever written.