

# Yechiel Zwi Herschensohn /Lichtenstein – “der Alte” and the stranger

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## Jewish believers from the past

Tonight we are going to focus on “der Alte”, the “old man” Lichtenstein, Yechiel Zwi, who from birth had the last name Herschensohn and who is not to be confused with Rabbi Isaac Lichtenstein from Hungary, whom we are going to meet tomorrow. At his death in 1912, Yechiel Lichtenstein was “old” – over 80. But already at the beginning of his teaching career at the recently established Institutum Judaicum in Leipzig in 1886, the students thought of him as “der Alte”, even though he was “just” in his mid-50s.

At Lichtenstein’s death on February 12, 1912, they only have one photo of him at Institutum Judaicum; it is taken in the street but we do not know when; he is standing with a book in his hand reading. The learned Lichtenstein, always reading! As caption they might have used some words by a former student, the Dane Irenius Fauerholdt: “He was a stranger among the German Christians and would have been at home in Apostle times and in the Apostle church. He lived in the writings of the Law and the prophets, and literally pondered the words of the Lord day and night and had little sense of the present.” Otto von Harling, also a one-time student and from 1903 Lichtenstein’s superior at Institutum Judaicum, says in his funeral oration that it is difficult to imagine anyone who has lived less in the present than Lichtenstein.

Herschensohn/Lichtenstein was born in Bessarabia, today’s Moldavia, “around” 1830; on his gravestone it says 1831, but other sources have different information. He was famous for his learning already as a child. He comes to faith in Jesus in the 1850s after having served as “wonder rabbi” in Jassy for a short period of time. Therefore his later “talmidim” did not only call him “Rabbi” but sometimes also “Rebbe”. Having come to faith he baptizes himself and some who have come to the same conviction. It is Lichtenstein who hands his friend Joseph Rabinowitz a Hebrew New Testament with the words: “Who knows? Perhaps it is really he whom the prophets have foretold.” In the 1850s this has no effect on Rabinowitz, but it was to have so later on. Herschensohn marries Rabinowitz’ sister, who dies shortly after, and afterwards – also after Rabinowitz has come to faith in the 1880s – there is enmity between the two brothers-in-law. Perhaps because of a dispute in the probate court, as suggested by one source.

And now that we are talking about disagreement, and about the photo of Lichtenstein not only with a book but also with sideburns – then let us turn to the relationship between him and Christian Theophilus Lucky. I will return to Lucky another evening.

### Lichtenstein and Lucky

To begin with Lucky and Lichtenstein had a good friendly relationship. After having come to faith Lucky travels to Leipzig and goes to see Franz Delitzsch, who introduces him to Yechiel Lichtenstein. They understood each other. What Lichtenstein told Lucky is answered with the words: “Das ist Meschichuth [This is Meschichuth] . . . This is something a son of Israel can accept and use!” But their friendship did not last for the rest of their lives. On the contrary, it developed pretty strong tensions. According to G.M. Löwen, who was on friendly terms with Lucky, the latter wanted to model Lichtenstein and required of him a conduct of life in accordance with the Talmud and Shulchan Aruch. In Löwen’s words:

“Lichtenstein objected to such an unreasonable demand, more amused than angry, but as he was constantly being pushed, he eventually lost patience and cried out: ‘Will you now leave me in peace for this darned Talmud!’ Lucky could never forget what he had said. In several letters to me, Lucky bitterly rebuked this and other sins of Lichtenstein’s, the worst being Lichtenstein’s (third) marriage to a non-Jewish woman; the second biggest that Lichtenstein in his old age had razed his chin and not let his beard grow out again.”

If Löwen’s words can be trusted, the surviving photo of “der Alte” with sideburns cannot be a picture of Lichtenstein in his last years. What the controversy says about Lichtenstein and Lucky respectively I will refrain

from commenting on.

### **Lichtenstein 1868-1885**

Lichtenstein took many secrets with him to the grave. He did not like speaking about himself. In 1868 he meets Franz Delitzsch in Germany and shows him his newly printed Hebrew book entitled *Limudei Haneviim* (The Teaching of the Prophets). Delitzsch says this about his encounter with Lichtenstein: "An unusual man, a man with a thorough knowledge of the Talmud and the Kabbalah but, what is more important, a soul with a deep love of the Lord Jesus, God's incarnate son."

In 1872 Lichtenstein is baptized in London by Henry A. Stein, London Jews Society. After this he works, for a short period, at a proselyte home in Neuendettelsau and after that, and till 1878/1879, he is in the service of the Berlin Society.

Next comes a period that is very obscure. A rumour was circulating in the Jewish press that Lichtenstein, after his stay with the missionaries in Berlin, had returned to Russia – and to Judaism – and now wished to live as a *Yehudi tov*, as a good Jew. Did he for a time live a kind of double life? I dare not rule out the possibility but, on the other hand, I cannot say I am convinced that he did so.

### **Teacher at Institutum Judaicum in Leipzig**

From 1886 to the winter semester 1910/11 he shared his learning with the students at Institutum Judaicum. The objective was to educate theological candidates for a ministry in Jewish evangelism. Lichtenstein principally teaches three disciplines: The New Testament in Hebrew, the apologetical Jewish work Chissuk Emunah by Isaac Troki and the Toldoth Yeshu literature. It must be said to Lichtenstein's credit that he was the first Jewish believer to have a commentary in Hebrew to the *whole* of the New Testament published. It was, and is, difficult to understand. It mainly consists of notes on difficult passages in the New Testament incorporating an attack on Chissuk Emunah and German liberal theology. In the words of the Dane Axel Bülow, who had been a student there 1886-1887: "Lichtenstein had himself worked out a sort of interpretation of the New Testament which was not quite easy to grasp. A peculiar old gentleman he was, very eager in his often rather strange arguments. "*Ich will Ihnen sagen*" ["let me tell you this"], he shouted. And then he was off in a strange mixed language."

Lichtenstein enjoyed pointing out places in Delitzsch's translation of the New Testament into Hebrew, where he had been able to put his fingerprint. In his Hebrew commentary, however, he sometimes uses his own translation, namely in places where he thinks Delitzsch's translation is wrong. Lichtenstein will be Lichtenstein. He for one is sure that he is right; he had an answer for every question.

And when von Harling, Lichtenstein's superior, preached in public meetings for friends of Israel, Lichtenstein would sometimes interrupt with a "*Ganz falsch!*" [all wrong] – upon which von Harling would give him an opportunity to unravel the threads.

There is no doubt that Yechiel Lichtenstein was a learned man. There is no doubt that many students were grateful that he had introduced them to a world that was foreign for them, the world of the Talmud and the Kabbalah. In Lichtenstein's person and teaching they felt contemporary with Jesus and the apostles.

But others were critical of him, like the above-mentioned Fauerholdt who writes: "I am sure that this old man had the best intentions not only to impart knowledge to us but also to educate us as missionaries. But if I am to sum up briefly what was lacking in him, then it is that he wanted us to deliver proofs instead of testimonies." And somewhere else: "He was convinced that it must be possible to prove Christianity logically for the Jews, just as he himself had been convinced by logical means."

### **At Lichtenstein's grave 1912**

Lichtenstein was laid to rest in 1912 on the Christian churchyard where also Delitzsch had been buried in 1890. The inscription at the top of the gravestone is in German, in English it reads:

*Yechiel Zbi Lichtenstein  
A witness of Israel about Jesus  
[Born] 14 June 1831, [died] 12 February 1912.*

The Hebrew text underneath reads:

*Here rests Jesus Messiah's disciple  
In spirit a member of the Jerusalem church  
R[av/abb]i Yechiel Zwi Lichtenstein  
May his memory be a blessing.*

The Hebrew text was composed by himself several years before his death. So this is what Lichtenstein wanted to be remembered for: he was linked with the first Jesus-believing Jews, in the past, in the early history of the Christian church. Through his Jewish eyes Jesus looked different from the Jesus that the *goyim*, the Gentile Christians, saw. In his eyes Jesus was a Jew and had Jewish features. To his mind a Jesus-believing Jew was a "Ben Israel", a son of Israel's people, which is what he himself had remained after coming to faith in Jesus.

With this conviction Lichtenstein became "a stranger" in a double sense. He did not want to alienate himself from his fellow Jews, but this is exactly what happened – much to his distress. His views also caused many *goyim* to regard him as "a stranger" among them. It is a Lichtenstein full of resignation who shortly before his death says that the Jews can read his commentary on the New Testament but they do not want to. The *goyim* would like to but cannot.

There is something sad or unfulfilled about Lichtenstein's life and work. He felt homeless on this earth, says von Harling. For him salvation was something that belonged to the future when Israel as a people would be saved; it was not so much a question of the individual's *personal* salvation. And that was, according to von Harling, Lichtenstein's weakness. And it was exactly because he had no understanding for the present that he isolated himself – and became isolated. "That was also a reason why he could not get any leading position in the struggle and the work to win his people for Jesus," says von Harling.

So in a way Lichtenstein was, in his own lifetime, a living anachronism. In another way he lived so much in the hope of the people of Israel's future salvation that it had a negative impact on himself and his work for Israel's salvation in the present.

It is something like this von Harling wants his audience in the churchyard in Leipzig in February 1912 to reflect on. And I want to pass on that question for further reflection for the participants in the LCJE conference at Lake Balaton 95 years later.

### **Selected bibliography**

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### *Texts on the internet*

See Jorge Quiñónez' Messianic Archive Page at <http://www.afii.org/jorge.htm>