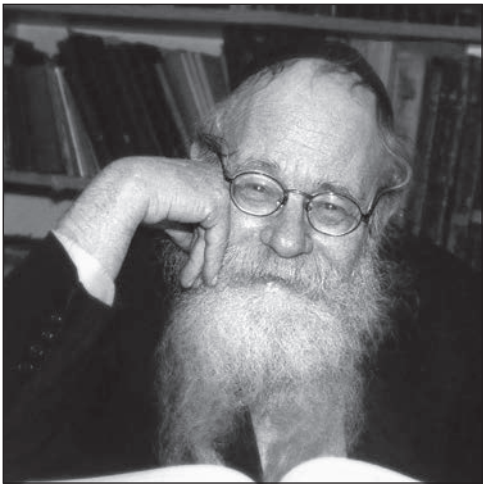
ADIN STEINSALTZ

by ILENE R. PRUSHER



When Adin Steinsaltz was a boy of five, he was playing with a few of his cousins on a kibbutz in the countryside. They had corralled a donkey, linked it up to a makeshift carriage, and told him to climb in for a ride.

He refused, telling them he could not do such a thing on the Sabbath because he was a Jew. One cousin laughed at him and said, "So? We're all Jews here!"

"I was slightly precocious," Steinsaltz recalls somewhat sheepishly. "I said, 'I am more of a Jew than all of you!'"

Today, in his early seventies, Rabbi Adin (Har-Even) Steinsaltz views with bemusement that memory of his young self, a boy growing up in a secular Jerusalem family who was somehow drawn to a pious life from a very early age. Even more striking is that the

distinction – as expressed by the pint-sized Adin – flies in the face of what he ultimately came to believe and what his life's work is about.

"These differences we draw between religious and secular people are not a true picture at all. It's really more like a mosaic; you have all kinds of combinations," the white-bearded, slightly stoop-necked, bespectacled rabbi says in a conversation in his modest but ultra-modern Jerusalem office. Just outside his door, an array of men and women who come to learn in the rabbi's evening *shiurim* (classes), scheduled to begin in an hour, are already assembling, seeking a good seat. Others, his long-distance learners, will join by teleconference.

That Steinsaltz grew up in a non-observant home is a fact that many people find fascinating. Born in 1937, he has become a Torah luminary of his generation and is celebrated for his ongoing work of translating the Talmud into modern Hebrew, making it accessible to a huge portion of the Jewish population for whom the Talmud's esoteric, arcane Aramaic and classical Hebrew make the core texts of Jewish study unapproachable.

When asked about the rarity of having been reared in a secular home and becoming a world-renowned Orthodox rabbi – his father was a Communist and "one of the few Palestinians to volunteer for the civil war in Spain" – Steinsaltz recalls that he nonetheless grew up in a home steeped in Jewish values. "I am far more observant than my father, but my father is far more Jewish than me," he explains.

On some level, this view fits with Steinsaltz's vision of education in general and Jewish learning in particular. A person isn't born a Torah scholar or a scientist, he says. Learning is more of an acquired taste than it is an inherited one.

"Most of our abilities don't come to us naturally. We have to learn them," says Steinsaltz, as he packs a deep-curved pipe, which he loves to smoke in his rare leisure hours, with a pinch of Captain Black Royal tobacco. "You may be born Jewish, which means you have it in your genes, in your brain in some form, but it won't express itself naturally, except in extraordinary places. When I teach

people, it's like teaching them to talk, to walk. I'm teaching them to get to their potential."

. . .

Called a "once-in-a-millennium scholar" by *Time* magazine and a recipient of the Israel Prize, the country's highest honor, Steinsaltz has authored more than sixty books on a staggering range of subjects – theology, of course, but also zoology, social commentary and even a detective novel. The most well-known among them is *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, his classic work on Kabbalah, which was published in 1980 and has been translated into eight languages.

"In a way, I'm a very slow writer," Steinsaltz shrugs, exhibiting his streak of self-deprecating humor. Since graduating from the Hebrew University, where he studied physics and chemistry, he has averaged over a book a year, and that's in addition to all of his other endeavors, which includes an extensive commitment to education – he has established a network of schools and educational institutes in both Israel and the former Soviet Union. His involvement in education began early in his career, when he founded several experimental schools and became Israel's youngest school principal at the age of twenty-four.

But of all his life's work, the books he has written, the many schools he has established, the countless lectures he has delivered, Steinsaltz's crowning achievement is his translation of the Talmud, opening the texts at the very heart of the Jewish tradition to people for whom they were closed books. He began this work in 1965 and so far, he has published thirty-eight of an anticipated forty-six volumes. The work has been translated into several languages including English, French, Russian and Spanish.

The significance of the translation is far-reaching. "It's a translation and a commentary," explains Arthur Kurzweil, author of the book *On the Road with Rabbi Steinsaltz: 25 Years of Pre-Dawn Car Trips, Mind-Blowing Encounters, and Inspiring Conversations with a Man of Wisdom* (2006), and Steinsaltz's chauffeur when the rabbi is in New York. "He takes you by the hand to show you what's happening

on the page. As Rabbi Steinsaltz says, the Talmud was never supposed to be an elitist document, but it became that. Many students are spending most of their time trying to figure out what the darn thing means. Rabbi Steinsaltz says, 'If you're going to spend three-quarters of your life just trying to crack the text without engaging with what it means, what's the point?'"

Steinsaltz's translation has made possible a profound change in the way Talmud can be learned – and by whom. "It means that if you're a Hebrew speaker, he does the job of translation, and that's tremendous," explains Avital Hochstein, a preeminent teacher of Talmud at leading Jewish learning centers such as Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies and the Shalom Hartman Institute, and co-author of the book, *Women Out, Women In: The Place of Women in Midrash* (2008).

One has to turn the clock back nearly a thousand years to find a scholar who undertook something as far-reaching as Steinsaltz's opus. Rashi, who was born in eleventh-century France and is considered the most prolific of all Jewish commentators, writing on both the Torah and Talmud, took on a similar project to Steinsaltz's.

Not only has Steinsaltz opened the door for secular Israelis to learn Talmud, but Hochstein points out that while Steinsaltz did not set out to make a feminist statement, his translations opened the door for many women to study Talmud. Traditionally, throughout the Orthodox world, girls were not taught Gemara. By the 1980s, that began to change, and a few modern-Orthodox schools such as Pelech High School in Jerusalem were teaching girls Talmud.

Steinsaltz's text includes introductions, commentaries and marginal notes that help guide the reader through the text and make it more accessible. Hochstein explains the end result: "It really allows me to stand in front of the text. That's the highest level of generosity a teacher can give, to allow you to learn on your own."

Kurzweil echoes this: "I roll up my sleeves, and with Rabbi Steinsaltz's direction, I can start engaging with the text and ask the big questions. I'm not just spending all that time trying to understand what the darn words are saying."

That in fact, comes pretty close to precisely what Steinsaltz was aiming for when he began the project more than forty years ago. The ultimate goal was to make more space at the table of Jewish thought by enabling people to tune in to the complex, intergenerational conversation taking place on the pages of the Talmud.

"Talmud study is basically an oral teaching," Steinsaltz explains. "It is not a systematic book by any means. You're always in the middle and you never have an entry point. It begins in the middle and goes in all directions. It always assumes that you have a previous knowledge." He knew well what it was like to be coming in from the outside, without as much of the "backstory" as he would have liked.

"Most Jews don't have access to our texts. If you're an outsider, it's like hearing other people have a conversation you can't follow," he says. "What I did was to try to make a portable teacher, because the teacher is not always nearby and not always so available."

Some say this is the equivalent to democratizing Jewish learning, making it a possibility for people to study without being dependent on a rabbi or school of thought. Steinsaltz pokes fun at such claims, saying that such an achievement sounds a bit like "democratizing chess," adding playfully: "If you're not into it, it's not very amusing."

Of course, creating a "portable teacher" is not equivalent to making a teacher irrelevant. As Hochstein points out, "If you don't know Talmud at all, you won't necessarily be able to pick it up and understand. Something that is difficult to understand in the text will remain difficult. But the unmediated connection with the text is amazing. He doesn't give you his opinion. That's its greatness."

But still, the controversy remains. The fact that Steinsaltz has enabled untold numbers of Jews to have direct access to the debates of their forefathers is a particularly interesting position for someone who, having been quite close to the late Lubavitch Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is viewed by many Jews to be part of Chabad, with its accompanying emphasis on the revered place of the Rebbe. Steinsaltz acknowledges that Schneerson was a beloved friend and an inspiration, and that he even worked in the Soviet Union to assist

Chabad's network of *shluchim* (emissaries) there. For many years, Steinsaltz traveled to the region each month. In 1990, he founded the Free Jewish University in Moscow, and in 1994, the Institute for Jewish Leadership Training in the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Clearly, though, Steinsaltz through his actions – the schools he has founded, the students he teaches, the lectures he delivers – does not believe in making the teacher irrelevant. He does, however, believe in questioning, in skepticism.

As Kurzweil puts it, Steinsaltz is both "a man of faith and a huge skeptic." He recalls a talk Steinsaltz gave at a religious high school. "He said, 'Look, I don't know that much about many things, but I know a little bit about Torah study. Make the lives of your Torah teachers as miserable as you can. Try to trip them up and find contradictions in what they say. Ask them the most difficult questions you can think of.' When he was leaving the principal got up and told the students, 'Don't take him too literally.' At which point, Steinsaltz goes and takes the microphone back and says, 'My message to you today is: Make the lives of your teachers as miserable as you possibly can.' And then he walked off the stage."

. . .

Rabbi Menachem Even-Israel, or Meni, is one of Steinsaltz's three children and his father's right-hand man. In his early thirties, he manages the newly designed Steinsaltz Center in the colorful Jerusalem neighborhood of Nahlaot, a diverse and dense district where hip young artists cross paths with some of the city's more pious personages. He constantly checks on his father, managing a round-the-clock schedule of lectures and travels that seems appropriate for a man half his father's age. Steinsaltz usually teaches each night until 10:30 P.M., and will often get home between 1 and 2 A.M. His only break is his afternoon nap, which is "almost holy," Meni says.

"His pace? I think he's remarkable," he says. But this is the way he remembers his father always having been: learning constantly, sleeping sparingly. "I always saw him with a book ranging from

Talmud to science fiction, and not necessarily at different times," Meni recalls. "I'd wake up from a nightmare and he was up, sitting on the couch, reading a book."

At some point, his family tried to rein in his schedule. Steinsaltz, who has the metabolic disorder Gaucher's disease, is not in the best of health. But instead of slowing him down, the opposite seems to have happened. "The thought that his time was limited, that made him work especially hard," Meni explains.

When he was younger, having a father constantly on the go and increasingly in the public eyes sometimes meant he was not around as much as his children wished. "Once you make a decision to give your life to the public," Meni says, "often your family suffers." To make up for it, they often skipped having Shabbat guests, because Fridays and Saturday were for family only.

"The moral of the house was that knowledge comes before all else," recalls Meni, quoting the gist of a maxim his father taught him: "It is better to be a heretic than an ignoramus." At the same time, he says, though Steinsaltz sits firmly in the Orthodox world, he has actively engaged with and accepted leaders of different streams of Judaism. "In our house we've had Reform rabbis, Conservative rabbis," Meni recalls. "We understood that they are a part of the conversation. They are all part of one big thing. I think his mission in life is something we as a family will carry forward."

. . .

While not aligned with any party, Steinsaltz has sometimes taken positions that have propelled him into the political fray. Following the Six Day War in 1967, in which Israel occupied the West Bank, east Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights, Steinsaltz was one of those rabbinic voices suggesting that, were it a means to saving lives (*pikuach nefesh*), a land-for-peace compromise with Israel's Arab neighbors was conceivable. This position ran counter to those of other influential rabbis who said it was forbidden that a Jewish state, once in control of any part of the Land of Israel, would willingly forfeit it to another people.

This theoretical flexibility aside, Steinsaltz has been supportive of controversial West Bank settlements, founding a boys' high school in the settlement of Kfar Etzion and a *hesder yeshiva* – a seminary that combines religious study with military service – in the settlement of Tekoa. "Halachicly speaking, it would have been permissible to make territorial concessions…However, at this point in time the question should not be asked, since in the current situation there is no room to talk about peace," Steinsaltz said in a speech in April 1970. Published in a collection of his speeches and articles, his point sounds like a quote any major figure on the Israeli Right might have given to a newspaper reporter only yesterday.

Abroad, Steinsaltz is better known for his books and for educational outreach through organizations such as the Aleph Society, which he established in 1988. It has centers in New York, London, Melbourne and Israel. The organization is aimed at giving Jews "access to fundamental texts, the skills with which to understand those texts, the motivation to study, and an appreciation for the contributions of fellow Jews of all backgrounds," its mission statement says. The Aleph Society's website features, among other things, a user-friendly commentary on the *daf yomi* (daily page of Talmud), which is studied the world over until each tractate of the Talmud is completed – a cycle that takes about seven-and-a-half years.

Recently, Steinsaltz stirred more than a little controversy when he joined a movement of rabbis to restore the Sanhedrin. The highest court in the Jewish tradition and a body that once commanded universal authority over the entire Jewish people, the Sanhedrin was last functional in the year 358, although some say it was in power until 425, when the rabbinic patriarchate was abolished. The medieval scholar Maimonides (Rambam) was keen on reviving the Sanhedrin and, with his plan in hand, several rabbis met in 2004 in Tiberius to work toward re-establishing the body according to Maimonides' proposal. The group elected Steinsaltz as their president, and they continue to meet every month.

Ask two Jews, the saying goes, get three opinions. The prospect of one body to oversee Jewish affairs raises worried eyebrows

for many, including those within the Orthodox world. Steinsaltz has worked to allay fears, saying he understands why the concept is off-putting.

"It's no wonder that these things frighten people," he said in his acceptance speech in 2004, according to the *Haaretz* newspaper. "There are people who are concerned about what is emerging here. And where is it headed?" He answered his own question by saying that restarting the Sanhedrin was a process that could take generations to complete, and that there was no rush to set up a body that could be seen as a threat to existing institutions, from the Supreme Court to the Israeli Rabbinate.

"We will do things with an eye toward future generations, not with a stopwatch and an annual calendar. The Jewish calendar is a calendar of thousands of years. A lot of patience and a lot of work are needed. I'd be happy if in another few years these chairs are filled by scholars who are greater than us and we can say: 'I kept the chairs warm for you.'"

Steinsaltz also said at the time that a rabbi has a right to engage in public issues, but to do so he has to have all the appropriate material before him, whether he is "dealing with the kosher status of a chicken or the disengagement."

The rabbi can be as enigmatic as he is witty. While he still believes in the idea of re-establishing the Sanhedrin (Meni insists it's just his father's "hobby"), Steinsaltz has also spoken out against what he calls "religious atavism," criticizing the tendency in the *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) world to assume that turning the clock back is a route to redemption.

What's important, he says, is to keep asking questions.

"When I ask God questions, I can only hope for limited answers," he told an audience in Miami in 2005. "I have a right to ask. Every child has a right to cry. But not every cry has a right to be answered with a kiss. And not every question has a right to be answered quickly or soothingly."