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COVERING ISRAEL, THE MIDDLE EAST & THE JEWISH WORLD

STEINSALTZ
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The Steinsaltz family dynasty

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel hands
the spiritual baton to his son, Meni



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A black and white portrait of Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. He is an elderly man with a long, white beard and mustache, wearing round glasses. He is resting his chin on his right hand, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. He is wearing a dark jacket over a light-colored shirt. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

Cover Story

STEINSALTZ CENTER

From father to son

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel hands the Steinsaltz spiritual baton to Rabbi Meni **By Alan Rosenbaum**

BY THE time Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, 80, arrives at the Steinsaltz Center in Jerusalem, his son Rabbi Menachem (Meni) Even-Israel, 43, has already begun his work day, supervising the various book projects that are under development. By 6 p.m., when Meni has gone home, the senior Rabbi Steinsaltz is still hard at work, proofreading and annotating texts. Sadly, he is unable to speak due to the aftereffects of a stroke suffered a year and half ago. However, he remains deeply involved in his life's work.

For Meni, the eldest of Steinsaltz and his wife Sarah's three children, managing the Steinsaltz Center is no less a labor of love. "As a child, I saw my father's work as mystical and mysterious. I wanted to work with him so I could find out what it was all about. As an adult, I see why it has always been his calling, and I have happily adopted it as my own."

The contrasts between the father and son are striking. The father sports a white beard, and his wizened, diminutive appearance reflects his life-long efforts in making the classic texts of Judaism accessible to all. The son, Rabbi Meni, his face framed with a full, dark beard, is tall, youthful, and energetic. The father is world-renowned for his erudition and brilliance. The son plainly acknowledges that he is not his father – he is his own man, but he has his own skills and talents that he utilizes to promote his father's ideals. Together, they play key roles in the continued creation and dissemination of Hebrew and English editions of the classic works of Judaism, as well as numerous other educational projects designed to educate both the Jewish, and non-Jewish public.

On a warm spring afternoon, Meni sits in the spacious lecture room at the Steinsaltz Center, tucked away in a corner of Jerusalem's hip Nahlaot neighborhood, outlining the origins of the Steinsaltz Talmud, the Center's current projects, and his vision for its future.

The roots of the Steinsaltz saga precede both Rabbis Adin and Meni, and can be traced back to Avram Steinsaltz, Adin's father, who immigrated to Israel from Poland in 1929. Adin was born in 1937, and grew up in Jerusalem's Old Katamon neighborhood. His parents were not particularly observant, yet according to family lore, his father insisted on hiring a tutor to teach him Talmud when he turned fifteen years old. He is reputed to have told his son, "Better to be an apikores – a heretic – than an am haaretz – an ignoramus. Go learn!" He did.

Steinsaltz, who was studying chemistry and physics at the Hebrew University, started to devote most of his time to Jewish studies. He began writing, teaching, and lecturing, and at the age of 24, became the youngest high school principal in Israel. In 1965, he founded the Israel Institute for Talmudic Publications in Jerusalem, and over the next 45 years, created a modern Hebrew translation of the Talmud, complete with detailed notes, indices, pictures, and biographies of the Sages. Says Meni, "He believed that the Talmud, our most important tool for the acquisition of Jewish knowledge, was slipping away, and he wanted to bring it back to its rightful owners – every single Jew."

Meni explains that the genius of his father's approach combines both esthetics and simplicity. "It's his ability to synchronize multiple commentators and make them make sense together. When you read his explanation, you have one line, which simplifies all the explanations together. In addition, his layout of the Talmud page, he says, "is a masterpiece of design. It's the first time someone said 'look, let's make it easier for the learner.'"

The Hebrew version of the Talmud was completed in 2010, and the English translation is expected to be completed by mid-2019. Volumes are also available in French, Russian, Spanish, and soon, in Italian. Steinsaltz has authored more than 80 books on a



Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz and his eldest son, Rabbi Meni Even-Israel, Executive Director of the Steinsaltz Center, inspect a newly printed volume of the Koren Noe Talmud series, an elegant English-language edition of the Babylonian Talmud that is shaped by Steinsaltz's acclaimed translation and commentary

wide variety of subjects, ranging from Jewish mysticism to Hasidism. Overall, more than 5 million Steinsaltz books have been sold. Rabbi Steinsaltz has won numerous prizes and awards, including the Israel Prize. Says Meni, dryly, of his grandfather's decision to hire a Talmud tutor for his father, "It was a good investment with a good return."

Meni runs the day-to-day activities of the Steinsaltz Center." When asked about his personal background in Jewish education and Jewish life, he quips, "Pain and suffering. I had a Jewish mother." After the laughter dies down, he turns serious. He admits that it wasn't always easy growing up as



ISRAEL BARDUGO

Avraham Fried sings for Rabbi Steinsaltz at the gala dinner in his honor on June 10

the son of a renowned scholar. “It was very fulfilling, but it is hard. Everywhere you go, people have expectations, that you will be as smart and knowledgeable as he is. Sometimes you fall in the trap and you think you are. I’m not.

Being in his shadow, is enjoyable in a lot of ways, but it was not easy.” Meni jokes, “My favorite line is that my psychologist built a third house on the Tel Aviv beach, that says ‘dedicated by Meni.’” On a more serious note, he comments about the ban on his father’s works that was declared by some of Israel’s most prominent Haredi rabbis during the 1980’s, when he was still a child. Says Meni, “It was devastating. People would call the house, cursing us.” Eventually, the controversy died down, and today, he says, “As a whole, my father won. The fact that everyone now provides modern commentary to the Talmud is no longer considered repugnant.”

Meni studied at Chabad institutions, and received rabbinic ordination at the age of twenty. He served as a Chabad rabbi in Geneva for a year, and then spent eight years in the United States, working for Chabad, Hillel and Birthright, in Virginia, Maryland, and New York State. “The time that I spent in the United States made it clear to me that the Jewish people is very diverse, and much more needs to be done to reaffirm our Jewish pride and connection,” he says.

In 2005, he returned to Israel, became program director for the Steinsaltz Center, and was appointed Executive Director in 2008. Under his leadership, the organization’s

annual budget has increased fourfold, from one million dollars to over four million dollars, and 10 to 12 new titles are released each year, a vast increase from previous years. The Steinsaltz Center’s staff numbers over a hundred, including editors, translators, and writers.

Meni realizes that his famous surname can sometimes be a liability. “People expect things from you that you cannot do. As long as people understand that I am what I am, and he is what he is, it’s ok.”

“My father has always set very lofty goals,” he explains. “My greatest contribution is my ability to turn those dreams into reality through strong management and clear vision.”

Even-Israel says that the focus and thrust of the organization reflects the same message that his grandfather conveyed to his father – to educate and provide knowledge. He clarifies the message with a clever marketing catchphrase, explaining that the purpose of the Steinsaltz Center is to “bring to fruition the ancient goal of ‘let my people know.’” Eventually, he escapes from the marketing jargon, and explains. “We give you tools. We don’t judge you one way or another. Our job is to provide you with the full spectrum of text and information, accessible, in your language.”

In his view, other publishers are more interested in influencing their readers’ behavior and religious practice than providing knowledge. The Steinsaltz Center, he says, wants the reader to make his own decision.

Any discussion of the Steinsaltz Talmud necessitates a comparison to Artscroll’s Schottenstein Talmud, which dominates the market today. “The reason that Artscroll, and others exist, is because my father ‘opened the gates.’” To prove his point, he pulls out a promotional picture of the very first Artscroll Talmud. In the picture, to the immediate right, is the Random House English edition of the Talmud. As to the criticism, expressed by some, that Steinsaltz’s explanations are too sparse and not as thorough as others, he says, “Our material is clear and simple, and gives you the key to move forward.” He continues, animatedly. “People say that when you use Steinsaltz, you don’t need to read Rashi. No! It’s the other way around.



STEINSALTZ CENTER

Shimon Peres presents Rabbi Steinsaltz with the first President’s Prize in 2012



Rabbi Meni Even-Israel addresses the gala dinner in honor of Rabbi Steinsaltz on June 10

We give you simplicity. We are opening the gates to other commentary.”

Steinsaltz Center projects are all based on the works of the senior Rabbi Steinsaltz. The stroke he suffered and its aftereffects are a matter of concern to the organization, both commercially, as well as personally. Says Meni, “We are not printing anything new, as long as he is not writing. For the moment, because I’m still recovering from my father’s stroke – he’s recovering too – I’m not comfortable with a new commentary.” Nor does he feel comfortable speaking for his father. Meni mentions a call from an Italian journalist, who asked him for his father’s comment on the seventieth year of Israel’s statehood. “I can’t answer on behalf of my father”, he says sadly. I can’t get any information from him now. I just don’t know.”

Despite his frailties, Meni says that his father makes most of the major decisions as to the direction of the Center. “As far as we know, his comprehension is intact.” While he is unable to speak, he communicates by head movements.

Paradoxically, over the past year and a half, the Steinsaltz Center has issued a tor-

rent of new books, all based on Rabbi Steinsaltz’s earlier writings, including the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah, and additional volumes in the English Talmud Series. The first volumes of the Steinsaltz edition of the Mishnah have been released, and it is expected to be completed by the end of 2018. English versions of these books are in the planning stages, and a Hebrew-English Chumash designed for synagogues is expected to be available within the next several months.

Recently, the Steinsaltz Center has taken a different direction with the release of a new, four-volume set, entitled “Yahadut B’Jeans” – Judaism in Jeans – intended for the casual Israeli reader, who may not be intimately connected to Jewish practice, but who still retains an interest in Jewish tradition. It consists of the Chumash (Five Books of Moses), with a basic Hebrew commentary, a second volume filled with Talmudic and Midrashic selections linked to the weekly Torah reading and the holidays, a third covering Hasidic and Kabbalistic thought, and a fourth volume on Jewish law and customs. Meni emphasizes that the volume on Jewish law, “does not tell you that you must do this and that. It says, ‘this is what we do’, and it is designed for both Sephardim and Ashkenazim.” An English version is planned for release sometime in 2019.

“This set was the last major project that my father did, before his stroke”, says Meni. “It is intended for the secular Israeli market, and is intended to be a comfortable, easy read.”

Even-Israel says that the Steinsaltz Center’s next major project will be the creation of a digital platform for its books. “My dream is that everyone will have accessibility to all of the texts openly. I want everyone to have the same accessibility to the materials as the greatest teachers have – in every major language – English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Chinese.”

Our interview concludes with a visit to a basement storeroom in the Steinsaltz Center. Stacks of books fill the shelves and line the floors, suffusing the room with the wonderful smell of fresh books, ink, paper, and knowledge.

Meni has the last word, again quoting Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. “A long time ago, my father said that the Bible is the record of when God talks to Man. The Talmud, though, is Man talking to God. That we feel that we can have this conversation with him is important.” ■

The Steinsaltz family, including both the aging Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, and his youthful son Meni – still have a lot to say – and much to contribute to the Jewish people and Israel.