

B”H.

Introduction

Prof. Eliezer (Elmer) Offenbacher passed away in Jerusalem on the 30th of Nissan 5779. He was 95. As a longtime physics professor at Temple University in Philadelphia¹ and an Orthodox Jew, Dr. Offenbacher was a pioneer in encouraging the integration of science and Orthodox Judaism. He founded the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists (AOJS) on the 15th of Teves, 5708, by convening a meeting in his Manhattan home of a dozen young religious Jews who were engaged in research in the physical sciences, ten graduate students and two PhDs. Subsequently, he founded many additional branches nationally and internationally, in London, Paris and Yerushalayim. If today it is taken for granted that an Orthodox Jew can also be a successful scientist, it is in no small part a product of some of the achievements of AOJS.²

From its early years, the Rebbe maintained a special relationship with AOJS as an organization and was in direct contact with many of its members. While the full story of this relationship is worthy of a more detailed study, this article will focus on the Rebbe’s interactions with Dr. Offenbacher, a founder and president of the AOJS, and in future articles we hope to examine additional interactions with the AOJS.

Dr. Offenbacher’s Notes

Dr. Offenbacher’s son, Rabbi Dr. Natan Ophir (Offenbacher) recently privately published his father’s autobiographical notes³ and has kindly shared excerpts related to the Rebbe:

On Dec. 24, 1951, I met with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. This was his first year as leader of Chabad. He had seen a publication of the AOJS and invited me to his residence. I took along another member of the board, Dr. Walter Feder, a medical doctor. We met for two hours at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn.

Outstanding as this event was, the real important issue for my life, for my autobiography, is that Esther, my future wife (we were not engaged yet!) came along to the meeting with the Rebbe. She waited patiently in the ante-room. We were invited for 10 pm, but by the time we got in there, it was midnight, and we did not go home until 2 o'clock in the morning! And Esther waited... I decided to marry her.

¹ Dr. Offenbacher also taught in Amherst College and the University of Pennsylvania, and was a visiting Professor at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge and the Hebrew University. His major scientific expertise was in solid state and ice physics.

² This paragraph is adapted from the notes of Rabbi Dr. Natan Ophir (Offenbacher) who published his father’s autobiography. For the full story, see Elmer L. Offenbacher, “The Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists (AOJS) The First Two Decades (1947–1967)” and *Bekhol Derakhekha Daehu: Journal of Torah and Scholarship*, 15, Sept. 2004, pp. 5–36, <http://bit.ly/2ER97Oj>.

³ The book titled *My Life: Reflections at Ninety-Five* was published privately in Israel.

During the two-hour private audience, we described AJOS and the Rebbe outlined his positions on six topics. This included a proposed joint publication directed towards college students. The Rebbe offered us financial assistance for publications and expressed willingness to receive AOJS groups in his office.

Other topics on which we exchanged views included the study of science and Yira'as Shomayim, separation from as opposed to integration with outside culture, the involvement of scientists in questions of science and Halacha, philosophic questions arising from scientific developments (and whether to discuss this with college age students).

At the audience we had discussed, amongst other matters, the question of how long each of the six days of creation were. I attempted to explain that science could be reconciled with the Torah, by assuming that each day of creation stretched a lot longer than 24 hours. However, the Rebbe held firmly to a literal interpretation of 24 hours, stating that this has not been disproved by science.⁴

In a follow up letter on March 25, 1952, he asked that I intervene to help Dr. S. B. Ullman at McGill University in Montreal. Dr. Ullman specialized in cancer research and had been at McGill since 1950. The Rebbe wrote:

“Dr. Ullman believes that he is being persecuted at McGill by an influential member of the department, and that one of the reasons is Dr. Ullman’s record of outspoken defense of Judaism. I am writing to ask you if there is anything that can be done for Dr. Ullman.”

I responded on March 30, 1952 in a letter to the Rebbe and explained that Dr. Albert Schild, who had been teaching in Canada, stated that McGill “is known for its antisemitic policy” although it is “the best medical school in Canada”.

Then on May 20, 1952, the Rebbe wrote to me again to thank me for visiting Lancaster Pennsylvania to help Chabad emissary, Rabbi Yehoshua Nachum Goodman⁵ “in preserving the orthodox traditions of the congregation”. The Rebbe blessed me: “May G-d bless you to use your gifts, qualifications and position to strengthen Orthodox Jewry in an ever-growing measure”.⁶

⁴ Rachel S. A. Pear, in *Agreeing to Disagree: American Orthodox Jewish Scientists’ Confrontation with Evolution in the 1960s*, Cambridge University Press: Volume 28, Issue 2 Summer 2018, page 221 quotes Dr. Offenbacher as having repeated additional anecdotes as to how the Rebbe tried to influence AOJS scientists to adopt an antievolutionary position. Additional details with regards to this matter will Bezh be reported in a future article.

⁵ Rabbi Goodman was at the time the Rabbi at the synagogue Degel Yisrael in Lancaster Pennsylvania. Rabbi Goodman was one of the original *talmidim* of Tomchei Temimim in America and in 5707 he and his wife Rebbetzin Nechamah Tzipah had been sent by the the Friediker Rebbe to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to serve as Rabbi in the Degel Yisrael Synagogue. Rabbi Goodman was was having trouble with his congregation at the time because of the *mechitzah*, and Dr. Offenbacher came and showed support for Rabbi Goodman.

⁶ This letter was recently published by JEM, see here: <https://jemcentral.org/2019/05/09/a-yechidus-67-years-ago/>

I remained in contact with the Rebbe for a few years. Contact with the Rebbe was renewed when Professor Yirmiyahu (Hermann) Branover first visited the USA in 1973.⁷ Branover became acquainted with the AOJS during his visit. He thanked us for a letter we wrote on his behalf, and even credited it as a significant factor in his release from the Soviet Union.

Additional Details

A short few months before his passing Dr. Offenbacher gave an interview to JEM's My Encounter project. JEM has graciously allowed us to publish here some additional details which Dr. Offenbacher related in regards to his yechidus with the Rebbe.

The Rebbe allowed that one "may" study secular subjects in order to make a living or if it helps in *avodas Hashem*.

Dr. Offenbacher was of the opinion that everyone could be involved in the integration and synthesis of Torah and Science. The Rebbe disagreed and maintained that for the majority of the population it is better to keep a distance from the outside world of culture and science and only yechidei segulah—select individuals—can engage with it successfully without being negatively affected, and that certain segments of the Jewish population had assimilated due to their involvement with the sciences

The Rebbe maintained that it's better not to raise questions in the minds of college students, because people under the age of thirty generally don't have ideas of their own and usually they are merely repeating things that they have heard.

Dr. Offenbacher invited the Rebbe to speak at AOJS events. The Rebbe declined the invitation but offered to receive AOJS groups privately in his office, where he would be willing to give them his advice and blessings.

Readers that have any additional light to share on the content of this article are encouraged to do so in the comments, or by emailing, N.Ahavaschesed@gmail.com.

⁷ Dr. Offenbacher adds: Four of our Board members (Walter Feder, Eric Freudenstein, Elmer Offenbacher and Adolph Oppenheim) participated in the founding of Branover's Friends of Shamir (*Shomret Mizvot Yotze'ei Russia*) in the USA, an "organization of religious scientists for Jewish education from Soviet Union in Israel." Excerpts of Branover's credo, "De Profundis," composed in Riga in 1963, were published in AOJS's *Intercom* (May 1973).

Professor Offenbacher.



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מנחם מענדל שניאורסאהן

ליובאוויטש

770 איסטערן פארקוויי

ברוקלין ג. י.

ג"כ

25th of Iyar 5712
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Prof. E. Offenbacher
Temple University
Broad and Montgomery Ave
Philadelphia, 22, Pa.

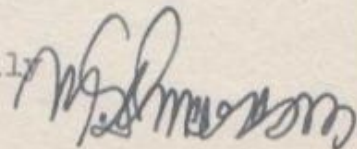
Dear Prof. Offenbacher:

I learned with pleasure of your visit
to Lancaster to strengthen the hands of
Rabbi Goodman in preserving the orthodox
traditions of the congregation. I want
you to know that I appreciate it very much
indeed.

May G-d bless you to use your gifts,
qualifications and position to strengthen
orthodox Jewry in an ever growing measure.

With warm personal regards and prayer-
ful wishes,

Cordially



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מנהג סעודת שניאורסאהן

28th of Adar 5712
Brooklyn, N.Y. ב"ה

Dr. Elser L. Offenbacher, M.D.
Temple University
Department of Physics
Philadelphia 22, Pa.

Dear Dr. Offenbacher:

You will recall that when you visited with me, mention was made of Dr. S. B. Ullman. It is in his behalf that I am writing to you now.

Dr. Ullman has been specializing in Cancer Research, formerly at the Hebrew University, and since 1950 at the Department of Experimental Surgery of the McGill University at Montreal, at the invitation of the Cancer Society. His accomplishments in this field won him a grant from the Damon Runyan Fund in the amount of \$10,000. Unfortunately, he has encountered serious opposition by other professors, and even the grant was returned. Dr. Ullman believes that he is being persecuted at McGill by an influential member of the department, and that one of the reasons is Dr. Ullman's record of outspoken defense of Judaism.

I am writing to ask you if there is anything that can be done for Dr. Ullman, and would appreciate your suggestions.

Hoping this letter finds you in the best of health, and looking forward to hearing from you soon,

Cordially yours,

לכבוד הרב מנחם מ. שניאורסאהן
הרב מנחם מ. שניאורסאהן
בניקוד עם ופירושים
פי"ב אדר

AOJS 50th Jubilee Reunion - AOJS Presidents who came on Aliyah. Left to right, top row: Teddy Fink, Elmer Offenbacher, Seymour Glick. Second row: Cyril Domb, Pini Kahn, Leo Levi, and Willie Low (Zev Lev).

