YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Manitou**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

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In memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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**Introduction to the Teachings of Manitou**

**Preface: Manitou’s life-story and its significance**

Rav Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi, better known as “Manitou”, was one of the foremost spiritual leaders of French Jewry in the generation following WWII. Although a familiar name amongst French Jews, Manitou remained almost unknown to the Israeli public until, a few years ago, some of his students began disseminating his books in Hebrew translation. Almost all of his books are in fact transcriptions of *shiurim* that he delivered, which were edited for print by his close disciples after his death.

We shall start with a review of Manitou’s life-story. Usually, when we approach the work of a *talmid chakham*, his biography is regarded as secondary to the study material. While in some cases this is indeed the case, when it comes to Manitou this background is significant in its own right. We know this because Manitou himself shares his life-story – which, as we shall see, goes deeper than a purely factual biography. The excerpts below are taken from the biographical overview that was recounted by him and printed in his book, *Sod ha-Ivri*, pp. 21-30.

**Three periods**

Manitou divides his life into three periods. The first consists of his childhood and youth in Algiers, up until the age of twenty. The second – just over twenty years - is the time he spent in France. The third and longest period is his life in Israel, up until his death at the age of 74. The points of transition are clear: the Second World War marks the transition between the first period and the second, and the Six Day War leads him from the second period into the third. Manitou goes beyond the historical facts, discussing the teachers who influenced him in each period. While he learned from a number of different rabbis, at each stage of his life there was a central figure who guided him.

During the first period, the most important teacher in his life was his father, who was the Chief Rabbi of Algiers. During this period Manitou studied Torah in depth, including the dimensions of *peshat, derash, remez* and even *sod* (kabbalah), by virtue of his family lineage, which can be traced back to one of the disciples of the Ari. His father sent him to study with the kabbalists of Morocco. Manitou acquired a solid, broad and multi-faceted grounding in Torah, with all the facets emerging from and reflecting Torah itself, as traditionally interpreted throughout the generations. Torah on its own terms, independent of anything else.

Then Manitou moved to France. Since Algiers was under French occupation, Manitou had become familiar with French culture already during his early years. Many French Jews – those living in France as well as those who have made Aliya – are originally from Algiers, Morocco, and elsewhere in North Africa. By virtue of the ties between these countries, upper-class Jews from North Africa were exposed to the Enlightenment, which occupied a dominant place in French culture. Thus, even while still in Algiers Manitou had encountered aspects of Western culture and the Enlightenment and had engaged in secular studies, so none of this was new to him when he moved to France.

Manitou arrived in France after WWII. He had served in the French Foreign Legion, had fought in the war, and had been injured. Afterwards he went back to France. During the war the French government collaborated with the Nazis, and afterwards French society was left deeply divided. Manitou was active in the Jewish Scouts and it was there that he received his nickname (in [indigenous North American](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_Americans_in_the_United_States) mythology, “Manitou” means ‘Great Spirit'), which remained with him to the end of his life – an indication of the importance of his place in the Scouts, and vice versa.

Manitou’s most important influence during his French period, according to his own testimony, was Jacob Gordin, although their acquaintance lasted only a short time. Gordin was a learned scholar, proficient in Torah, philosophy, and kabbalah. He was head of the School of Young Jewish Leadership, which he had founded after the war in Orsay, near Paris, as part of his quest to rehabilitate the Jewish community of France by nurturing a new generation of Jewish spiritual leadership. Within this framework, Jewish students received a modern, western education while at the same time consolidating a spiritual worldview inspired by the world of Torah and Jewish tradition. Manitou originally meant to spend just a year there, to help get the school going. It was there that he met Gordin and was exposed to a religious perspective that he had not previously encountered. Manitou knew from his home and upbringing that there was a religious world of Torah, and he knew from the high-school he attended in Algiers that there was a Western world. For him, these were two separate entities. Within the space of a single year, Jacob Gordin introduced him to a worldview that encompassed both realms – or, more specifically, the relationship between them: that Western culture is not a yardstick for judging the world of Judaism, but rather the inverse: the Torah, with its worldview and its wealth of concepts and principles, is the yardstick for evaluating events, perspectives, and schools of thought in the world. Manitou had spent just one year at Orsay when Gordin passed away, but that year had left a lasting impression, as is evident in Manitou’s works. He acceded to Gordin’s request before his death that he continue teaching Torah at the school in Orsay. He remained there for twenty years, until his Aliya.

“One of the factors that influenced my decision to join Castor’s group [“Castor” was Robert Gamzon, founder of the French Jewish Scouts and also founder of the school in Orsay] was my desire to become a disciple of Jacob Gordin, who to my mind epitomized someone who had managed to forge a profound synthesis of traditional Judaism and European culture. Mr. Gordin was a great Talmudic scholar, a kabbalist, and a philosopher, who succeeded in showing us the possibility of a unification between secular thought and Jewish tradition, from within the conceptual world of Torah wisdom. This understanding caused us to rediscover the importance and the dimensions of Jewish tradition as part of the mosaic of world culture.”

While still living in France, as part of his duties at the school in Orsay, Manitou occasionally visited Israel with groups of students, and it was on one such trip that he met Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook, who became the central spiritual influence during his third period, in Israel. Manitou describes their first encounter as turning point in his life, like the first encounter with Gordin. It was under R. Tzvi Yehuda’s tutelage that Manitou internalized the idea that Jews are, first and foremost, a nation. During his early years, his understanding – like many other Jews growing up in Diaspora communities – had been that a Jew can be a German, a Russian, or an Algerian; as for himself, Manitou regarded himself as a member of the French nation. It was only when he moved to Israel that he underwent a transformation of awareness and realized that everything that he spoke about and felt identification with, was fundamentally grounded in his belonging to the Jewish nation. A nation whose physical, geographical place is Eretz Yisrael. His teacher and guide with regard to this fundamental awareness was Rav Tzvi Yehuda:

“An Israeli identity offers a dimension that is far more secure, better defined, and more consolidated than the marginal phenomenon that was Jewish identity in the Diaspora: a spineless religious system joined to national identity which, while sometimes prestigious, remains foreign. The borrowed national identity always, of necessity, remained ruptured, translated, and lifeless, and was destined to disappear. At that time I developed a consciousness of the political, national aspect of the Jewish People, while in Algeria I had identified as a Jewish Frenchman.

The Israeli reality included the long-awaited emergence from the underground, and a search for Jewish political identity. This was the moment when I began to understand that **what unites all Jews throughout the world is, first and foremost, their national belonging, rather than a religious belonging**.”

**The influence of world events**

As noted, Manitou’s documentation of his life story is of great significance. Usually, a *talmid chakham* views his role as passing down God’s Torah, as is, to the next generation. Sometimes he not only receives from his own teachers and passes on to his students, but also exposes new insights in Torah, which he reveals by virtue of his devotion to his study. Every *talmid chakham* reveals a different “letter” of the Torah – not an expression of his own views or aspirations, but rather the product of his ongoing quest to explore and clarify the truth of Torah. The academic world has a completely different perspective on Torah scholars and the transmission of Torah. According to the academic view, the approach of a certain *talmid chakham* is molded by the influences of the culture around him and the events of his time. Thus, we might say that the Rambam, for example, was influenced by Arabic-Aristotelian philosophy, as evidenced by his *Moreh Nevukhim*. His codification of the Gemara into the Mishneh Torah might likewise be understood as a reflection of the culture of orderly redaction that was prevalent in his time. From this point of view we could say that Manitou set himself a trap of sorts: he states openly that he was influenced by the events of his life: his childhood in Algeria, the crisis facing the Jewish community of France, Western culture, Zionism, the State of Israel – all of these elements helped to mold his Torah. He does not wait for scholars to arrive at this conclusion, but seemingly declares at the outset that his Torah is not an original, authentic outpouring, but rather the product of external factors. However, in a deeper sense, he is saying the exact opposite: that it is not outside events that mold his Torah, but rather the Torah – Divine truth and the Divine will – that molds events, and thus his world:

*“My life story is not exceptional, but rather an accurate reflection of the vicissitudes and revelation of the reborn identity that has manifested itself amongst the Jewish People in the generation of revival.*

*I was born an Algerian Jew with French citizenship, and throughout the first part of my life, which I spent in Algeria up until WWII, I regarded myself - without devoting any special attention to these definitions – as an Algerian Frenchman of the Jewish faith. The second part of my life, after WWII, I spent in France, where, encountering the Ashkenazi Jewish world, I discovered the tremendous social complexity of the Jewish People and its history. The third part of my life will be spent in Israel, as an Israeli.*

*These changes and transitions in my life make me a private instance of the process of identity renewal that is taking place in our times, transforming the Jewish People into the Hebrew nation – or, to put it differently, a process of turning the Jew into an Israeli.”*

The biographical process that Manitou describes is in fact the process whereby Divine Providence guides the Jewish People. The stations in his life story are junctures in Jewish history. The entire nation is being shifted from exile to redemption, from the Torah of exile, which “has nothing but the four *amot* of halakha” (as per the Gemara in *Massekhet* *Berakhot*), to a new revelation of Torah. Manitou effectively declares: I am a private instance of what is happening to all of Am Yisrael. Indeed, this is his message from the very outset: he introduces his life story with the assertion that his biography is more than just a personal matter. And thus he hints that the story of his life requires a change in the way of studying Torah. The events of our times are not an external influence, but rather an essential, intrinsic orientation. For instance, Manitou maintains that Am Yisrael has lost the ability to read the Torah as a Hebrew nation, and the commentators go to some lengths to preserve the ability to read the Torah in a special, more profound way – for instance, through Midrash and Kabbala. A living Hebrew nation must read the Torah as its authentic, natural language. Now that we are returning as a nation to our land, we can rehabilitate the living nation’s Hebrew reading of the Torah. This just one example of an exegetical principle that Manitou proposes, in light of the developments of our times: there is a process that is happening to the Torah; events demand that it reveal itself in a different way, so as to restore it to its original role and status as the Torah of the nation.

Translated by Kaeren Fish