

# The Value of Secular Education

Class 7

Thought of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein

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## “A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Point of View” (1961)

... three fundamental premises. The first must be a clear and unwavering recognition of the primacy of Torah as a way of life. This we posit as the supreme value – in a sense, as the *only* value. Fulfilling our spiritual destinies, furthering in ourselves and others the development of Torah, strengthening and deepening our consciousness and experience of God, stimulating our love, fear, and knowledge of Him – this is the alpha and the omega, our first, last, ever-present goal. Religion demands an axiological monopoly; *yihud Hashem* means simply that religion alone has absolute and comprehensive value. Everything else, no matter how socially or intellectually desirable, has only relative and secondary importance. Its worth is derived solely from the extent to which it contributes, however remotely, to the fulfillment of the divine will. On this point there can be no compromise and should be no misunderstanding. A man’s religion means everything or it means nothing.

Our second premise is that the achievement of *hayyei Torah*, a Torah life, is dependent on *talmud Torah*, Torah study. *Yahadut* has always held that the highest development of the Jew’s spiritual personality is impossible without the fullest exertion of his intellectual faculties – *lo am ha-aretz hasid*... The significance of Torah study is twofold. First, it gives the Jew an insight, as direct and profound as man is privileged to attain, into the revealed will of his Creator... Second, Torah study, when properly pursued, affects our total spiritual personality...

If our first two premises are an insistence upon the primacy of Torah and an awareness of the overriding importance of Torah study, our third is the recognition of the great, albeit ancillary, value of a broad spectrum of general studies. The practical value of general studies is obvious. They provide both professional or vocational training and a general orientation toward the innumerable pragmatic exigencies of human life. These are, in themselves, matters of no little moment; but I am at present concerned with the directly spiritual significance of general studies.

To begin on a negative note, secular knowledge is invaluable for an understanding of the environment in which we all, willy-nilly, find ourselves. No matter where we live, we are in the midst of a society that is generally indifferent, if not hostile, to religious values, one in which advancing the development of Torah entails an almost perpetual struggle... We cannot combat worldliness until we know what it stands for; we cannot refute the secularist unless we have mastered his arguments... to this end, secular study is virtually indispensable.

We may go even further. In our circumstances certainly, general knowledge is necessary not only for influencing others; it also helps us to preserve our faith. The Mishnah tells us that we should be able to answer the apikoros. The person it has in mind need not be a freethinker or an idolater. There is an apikoros within, a serpent potentially lurking in the finest of Edens, and we must be ready to reply to his proffer of the bittersweet apple. But we must first read a treatise on serpentine psychology.

Secular knowledge is not merely a tactical weapon, however. It possesses considerable intrinsic merit. First, secular studies are often invaluable as a direct accessory to *talmud Torah* proper. Consider simply the aid we derive, by elucidation or comparison, from linguistics in Amos, history in Melakhim, agronomy in Zera’im, physiology in Niddah, chemistry in Hometz u-Matzah, philosophy in Yesodei Ha-Torah, psychology in Avodah Zarah, political theory in Sanhedrin, torts in Bava Batra – one could continue almost indefinitely. As the Gaon insisted, there is hardly a province of Halakhah for whose mastery scientific, historical, and linguistic knowledge is not only helpful but indispensable. If pursuing such knowledge is not *talmud Torah*, it is, at the very least, *hekhsher talmud Torah*. And contrary to the general assumption, it is precisely the weaker student

who stands most in need of auxiliary aid of this kind. While learning Sanhedrin, R. Hayyim Brisker evolved his own political theory. Most of *us* merely fumble...

It is perhaps even more significant in a third capacity. Secular studies possess immense intrinsic value insofar as they generally help to develop our spiritual personality. Time and again, they intensify our insight into basic problems of moral and religious thought. History and the sciences show us the divine revelation manifested in human affairs and the cosmic order. The humanities deepen our understanding of man: his nature, functions, and duties. In one area after another, a whole range of general studies sustains religion, supplementing and complementing it... Of course, we cannot always see how a specific isolated detail can have such an effect... we should remember, however, that knowledge is attained only by degrees...

Nor should we be deterred by the illusion that we can find everything we need within our own tradition. As Arnold insisted, one must seek "the best that has been thought and said in the world," and if, in the many areas, much of that best is of foreign origin, we should expand our horizons rather than exclude it. "Accept the truth," the Rambam urged, "from whomever states it"... The explicitly systematic discussions of Gentile thinkers often reveal to us the hidden wealth implicit in our writings. The Gentiles, furthermore, have their own wisdom, even of a moral and philosophic nature. Who can fail to be inspired by the ethical idealism of Plato, the passionate fervor of Augustine, or the visionary grandeur of Milton? Who can remain unenlightened by the lucidity of Aristotle, the profundity of Shakespeare, or the incisiveness of Newman? There is *hokhmah ba-goyim*, and we ignore it at our loss. Many of the issues that concern us have concerned Gentile writers as well... To deny that many fields have been better cultivated by non-Jews than by Jewish writers is to be stubbornly, and unnecessarily, chauvinistic. There is nothing in our medieval poetry to rival Dante, and nothing in our modern literature to compare with Kant, and we would do well to admit it. We have our own genius, and we have bent it to the noblest of pursuits, the development of Torah. But we cannot be expected to do everything.

I have so far been dealing with our question on a more or less ideal, abstract plane, on which the respective positions of Torah and *madda* can be neatly charted, and can be seen as existing in easy, perfect harmony. We are all well aware, however, that no such easy concord exists... whether, in the life of a *ben Torah*, there is any room at all for serious general education... *Hakhmei Yisrael* have clearly been divided. As the Rama put it, *zu makhloket yeshanah bein ha-hakhamim*. In Hazal proper, references to the problem are relatively few and, taken as a whole, rather inconclusive... If the Sephardic Rishonim were mostly in favor, the Ashkenazic were generally opposed. If the Maharal extolled philosophy, the Maharshal condemned it... A questions *gedolei Yisrael* could discuss with such fervent interest cannot be lightly dismissed...

What are the problems?... To begin with, it has been asserted that secular culture, especially of a freethinking nature, may exert a dangerously powerful influence over students, luring them from the fold of Jewish tradition. Hence, the discussion has tended to center around the question of studying philosophy.

It has also been argued that the study of even innocuous subjects constitutes a waste of precious time, time which might – nay, must – be spent more profitably in depending and expanding one's knowledge and understanding of the Torah. Vocational training, so runs the argument, might be necessary, but every moment available for spiritual or intellectual concerns must be devoted solely to Torah study. Finally, many have objected that, quite apart from the time which they consume, secular studies weaken the individual's religious position simply by diverting his interest, thus sapping his personal resources...

A consideration of influence leads us back to our initial premise. We have been concerned so far with the primacy of Torah on the axiological plane, in the realm of values... We recognize [Torah] as the basis upon which all human culture, all arts and sciences, must stand...

Second, Torah must be the subjective basis from which, as students, we judge all else... For us, Torah is at once the criterion of truth and the touchstone of value. Whatever the *ben Torah* reads, he will read through its eyes;

whatever he studies, he must judge by its standards... Failure to do so can only lead, at best, to intellectual schizophrenia... in a larger sense, the need for a religious approach to secular culture is universal. At one point of another, everyone is in contact with secularism...

If secular culture is to be judged from a religious perspective, religious knowledge is an obvious prerequisite to its study. Ideally, the primacy of Torah should therefore also be chronological... how is one to know when he is ready? There is no simple answer. Every student's situation is different, and each case must be decided on its individual merits. With regard to the study of idolatry, Hazal established the principle of *lo tilmad la'asot, aval attah lomed lehavin u-le-horot* – “You shall not study (if it may lead) to practice, but you may study in order to understand and pass judgment.” When may one venture, confident of his purpose? The question must be decided on the basis of individual circumstances...

Some may find my position illiberal. Perhaps it is. But are we to sacrifice eternal salvation on the altar of untrammelled objective inquiry? The danger of having our faith undermined by our studies is one which we dare not underestimate... if nothing else, the success of modern propaganda has taught us how naïve was Mill's notion that the free clash of ideas must result in the triumph of truth. Falsehood does not always stick to the rules. We must be on our guard, and we must not venture out of our depth. Objectivity is fine, but one should beware of indifference.

Our second major problem, no less pressing than the first, is of a more practical nature: simply a matter of budget. Working within the bounds of limited time and energy, we are constantly confronted by the need to balance the conflicting demands imposed by various studies... we must make the study of Torah our principal intellectual endeavor. Especially during our formative educational period, the high school and college years, it is imperative that we devote the major portion of our time and effort to *talmud Torah*... we are dealing with a quantitative rather than a qualitative problem – not a question of whether to study but how much. If the principle of *bittul Torah* were to be carried out consistently to its logical conclusion, then in applying it to, say, mathematics, we should stop teaching children how to count...

It would be ridiculous to insist upon a uniform standard of so much or so little secular education for all students at all times. Conditions vary, and vary widely... for some, no doubt, a double program at the college level is too much... the principle to be kept in mind, however, is that the students' development as a *talmid* must come first...

I have hitherto been concerned with the liberal phase of education, that which merely concerns our development of human beings. As Hazal recognized, however, education also has a professional aspect – *le-lammedo ummanut*... particularly in a period so dominated by specialization, placing the primacy emphasis upon the study of Torah would seem to block the path to professional success... the graduate student, like the practitioner, may have to shift his emphasis, but the critical college years should focus upon personal development, and this means upon growth as a *ben Torah*...

The final problem, that of diversion, can be met by a single word: commitment. Realizing the danger of possible distraction, we can avert it by sincere dedication... Commitment is the permanent recognition, both emotional and intellectual, that Torah is our principal concern... Hence, even in later life, when many will find it necessary to devote the bulk of their energies to earning a livelihood, *talmud Torah* can never cease... Lifelong study, quite apart from its intrinsic importance, is what gives this commitment a focus...

Ultimately, one's view of the relation of secular and religious studies depends upon a corresponding attitude towards the relation of religious and secular life... we have a unified conception that stems from a deep-seated belief that life is basically one, that the secular and religious aspects of human experience are in fundamental harmony, the latter perfecting rather than destroying the former; and finally, that while *kodesh* and *hol* are neither identical nor coextensive, they are contiguous and continuous. I think the attitude of Torah is clearly

aligned with... what a Canadian scholar has called “the principle of integration”... The Torah is neither world-accepting nor world-rejecting. It is world-redeeming... at bottom, however, the comprehension of Torah’s outlook established a rich education as the basis of a rich life. The final word is with integration and harmony.

### **“The End of Learning” (1988)**

p. 105-6

A word about my slightly anomalous position with respect to the ongoing discussion of the issue of *Torah u-madda*. Something funny happened to me on the way to this forum. During the decade that I spent on the faculty of the Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Theological Seminary, I poured much energy into *talmud Torah* and pressed, vigorously and continually, for enhancing its quality and stature at Yeshiva University. Apart from my regular *shi’ur*, I was privileged to be instrumental in rejuvenating the *kollel* and, *inter alia*, had a hand, albeit a secondary one, in the molding of many who went on to become YU Roshei Yeshiva. Seventeen years after our Aliyah, having gone on to engage in the study and dissemination of Torah in Eretz Yisrael, I find myself cast in the eyes of some, including former *talmidim*, as an apostle of culture... I do not believe that my principled position concerning the value of culture has changed drastically over the last twenty years... I held then, and hold ever more firmly now, that Torah is the heart of our personal and collective spiritual existence...

p. 109-111

The end, then, of learning, is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue...knowledge of the *Ribbono shel Olam*’s work is indeed both illuminating and ennobling.... Is it conceivable, then, that anyone could consider contemplation of God’s handiwork as adequate, while omitting study of its fullest manifestation... of human nature?... The study of man as spirit is... what the humanities are all about.

p. 116 (quote from John Milton and explication)

We simply need to reject Philistinism and transcend pragmatism; to open ourselves to recognize and assert the value of humanistic learning as a means toward a fuller manifestation of the spirituality of man.

### **הקדמה לתרגום ספר אוקלדס לר' ברוך משקלוב**

והנה בהיותי בק"ק ווילנא המעטירה אצל הרב המאור הגאון הגדול מ"ו מאור עיני הגולה החסיד המפורסם כמוה"ר אליהו נר"ו בחודש טבת תקל"ח שמעתי מפי קדוש כי כפי מה שיחסר לאדם ידיעות משארי החכמות לעומת זה יחסר לו מאה ידות בחכמת התורה כי התורה והחכמה נצמדים יחד ... וציוה לי להעתיק מה שאפשר ללשונינו הקדוש מחכמות כדי להוציא בולעם מפיהם וישוטטו רבים ותרבה הדעת בין עמינו ישראל ותוסר גאון עוזם וגאות עריצים המון עמים ולשון לאומים אשר כשאון מים רבים ישאון לעומתינו איפה חכמתכם ונמצא שם שמים מתחלל

### **Introduction to the Hebrew translation of Euclid’s *Elements* by R’ Baruch of Shklov (1780)**

And when I was in the beautiful city of Vilna with the great genius, light of the exile, the pious and famous, our teacher Eliyahu [the Vilna Gaon], may he live, in Tevet of 5538 [1778], I heard from his holy mouth that according to what a man lacks in knowledge of other disciplines, he in turn lacks one hundred-fold in knowledge of the Torah, for Torah and knowledge are aligned together ... and he instructed me to copy whatever possible into Hebrew from the [other] disciplines, so knowledge will increase among our people Israel, to undermine the pride of the scorners of the other nations who challenge us with the might of great waters ‘where is your wisdom?’ thereby desecrating the name of Heaven.