

# The Rabbi as Judaica Scholar

Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter

Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter makes a powerful case for the rabbinic benefits to be drawn from a familiarity with modern Judaica scholarship, as well as contemporary literature. While the study of Torah, traditionally defined, is pivotal, there is a growing body of academic research and publication that can serve to deepen one's appreciation and understanding of traditional texts. Such studies can maximize the rabbi's impact as a speaker and teacher, at the same time adding an important dimension to one's own learning.

My heart was always inclined to know [and] to examine worldly matters as well; the [various] nations and faiths, their characteristics and dispositions, their histories and wisdoms, all of whose matters cannot be known from our sacred books. This was also [necessary] in order to know how to respond [to a heretic], to mingle comfortably with people, to know the proper etiquette of each country. . . . All this I yearned to learn from their own books in the original. . . .<sup>1</sup>

The study of Torah is undoubtedly the most important component of Jewish religious life. It is the most central religious imperative binding on all Jews and certainly is an obligation for rabbis who are directly responsible for the accurate transmission of its values and teachings. Nevertheless, this emphasis on the primacy of Torah study notwithstanding, great rabbinic scholars throughout the generations were also

involved in a wide variety of extra-talmudic disciplines and acknowledged their value even when they were not directly applied to elucidate specific Torah laws or customs. From ancient through modern times, a large number of universally acknowledged rabbinic authorities recognized the importance of such knowledge and integrated it into their way of thinking and writing. As the quote from Rabbi Emden indicates, primacy of Torah study does not necessarily imply exclusivity.<sup>2</sup>

While secular studies were always valued throughout our history, their importance is even greater today. The moral relativism and intellectual skepticism characteristic of contemporary society have provided an unprecedented challenge to traditional Jewish life. All segments of the Orthodox community have been forced to devise strategies to cope with these new realities. Some advocate complete withdrawal from what is becoming an ever more alien and hostile world. For others, modern or centrist Orthodox Jews, this is no solution. By opting to function wholly within Western society while continuing to maintain a strict allegiance to Torah study and observance of mizvot, we have chosen to confront the challenges of contemporary culture head-on by seeking ways of resolving the apparent conflicts that arise out of living in both worlds. The knowledgeable rabbi, learned in both Torah and secular culture, is in the best position to achieve this goal and thus provide sorely needed guidance in these confusing times.

In addition, growing numbers of modern Orthodox Jews are becoming increasingly more intellectually sophisticated. Many of these have had the benefit of advanced yeshiva education and high level postgraduate professional training. Their level of knowledge is impressive in the areas of secular disciplines as well as in Torah. As a result, rabbis who serve such *balebatim* must also have such broad intellectual interests if they are to be effective. A more literate and educated laity expects its rabbi to have wide-ranging secular and Torah knowledge and to bring these different disciplines together in intelligent and meaningful ways. If Rabbi Emden could write in the second half of the eighteenth century that secular knowledge was important to enable someone "to mingle comfortably with people," how much more true is it for a rabbi today when such knowledge is so widespread among the members of his own congregation. He must speak the language of his community and can only do so if he shares

their level of intellectual sophistication. In most modern Orthodox congregations, the more knowledgeable and worldly the rabbi; the more he will be respected and by extension, the greater will be his impact and success.

An openness to and appreciation of the world beyond the Gemara is indispensable for a number of practical reasons. First, it enables the rabbi to express himself in a clear and articulate manner. In the homiletics seminar I took as a semikhah student in Mesivta Torah Vodaath in the early 1970s, our teacher, Rabbi Moshe Sherer, encouraged us to read the editorial page of *The New York Times* every day. It was very important, he said, not so much for its content as for its rich vocabulary and felicitous style. Read it long enough, he counseled, and you will slowly be able to raise the level of sophistication of your own speaking. In a long conversation with Dr. Norman Lamm shortly after I became Rabbi of The Jewish Center, he told me that he regularly read *Saturday Review* for the same reason and also recommended the works of Loren Eiseley, the noted anthropologist. My own favorite is *The New Republic*, which I find most useful for its clever turns of phrase and elegant literary style. Clarity of expression and eloquence of presentation are the first critical components for a successful rabbinate, "all of whose matters cannot be known from our sacred books."

Second, the content of any contemporary rabbinic presentation is greatly enriched by allusions to modern secular literature. The following, taken from my own sermons during the last year or two, are only some examples of how such works can be very useful in illustrating matters of concern and interest to us and our listeners: Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* for an example of the fleeting nature of life, Anthony Storr's *Solitude: A Return to the Self* for a discussion of the introspection necessary during the *Yamim Nora'im*, John Updike's presentation of the conflict between science and religion in *Roger's Version*, Erich Fromm's *The Forgotten Language* on the nature of symbolism, and Harvey Cox's *Religion in the Secular City* on the *ba'al teshuvah* phenomenon. Older and more well-known examples I have also used are Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* on the *akeidah*,<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Otto's notion of *mysterium tremendum* in his *The Idea of the Holy* for a characterization of the transcendent quality of God, and the series of books by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross on aspects of *hilkhot aveilus*. Not only are these works intrinsically worthwhile for the different

dimensions and perspectives they provide, but they also enhance the rabbi's level of respect in the community. The ability of the rabbi to incorporate this type of material regularly into his sermons, lectures, and even personal conversations raises his stature in the eyes of his congregants and is thus essential to his success.

A third and more directly useful component for the well-rounded modern Orthodox rabbi is familiarity with the growing world of Jewish scholarship. A historically oriented approach to Jewish texts will clearly enhance one's understanding of many areas of halakhah and hashkafah and enable the rabbi to present this material to others in a more complete and interesting way. For example, a knowledge of Jewish history is indispensable for a full appreciation of the *teshuvah* of the Rosh about the different practices relevant to the recital of *ve-ten tal u-matar* (*She'elot u-Teshuvot ha-Rosh* 4:10); the cross-cultural influences referred to by the Taz regarding the varying customs in lighting Hānukkah candles (*Orah Hayyim* 671:1); the opinion of Tošafot (*Avodah Zarah* 2a, s.v. Asur) that medieval Christians should not be considered in the category of idolaters;<sup>4</sup> the institution of the "Shabbat goy";<sup>5</sup> the earliest time in the day one is permitted to daven Ma'ariv;<sup>6</sup> or even the perennial struggle against talking in the synagogue during services.<sup>7</sup>

There is a great deal of material in books and periodicals discussing various halakhot and minhagim from such a more scholarly, historical perspective, and the literature is growing rapidly. The bibliography (pp. 172–174) contains just a few examples taken from the literature relating specifically to the *chagim* that I have found to be effective in the shiurim and lectures I have delivered in my own shul during the last few years. The works listed are intended to illustrate the kind of material already available on relatively familiar subjects. I do not agree with all their conclusions, but they all provide interesting perspectives which will undoubtedly serve to enrich any presentation on the issues they address. All the periodicals listed in the bibliography contain any number of articles on halakhic themes from a more scholarly perspective. I suggest that the reader skim through them all on a regular basis and occasionally choose those subjects or areas that are of greatest interest. They will certainly prove to be of great value in the preparation of shiurim and lectures.

Also listed in the bibliography are several books and periodicals

that I can recommend as containing many similarly useful presentations.

Furthermore, in any shiur or class I give, I invariably digress for a moment to touch briefly upon some aspect of the life of the particular figure whose opinion I am quoting. For example, I have discussed the Rambam's encounter with the Almohades in twelfth-century Spain, the death of the Mordecai in the Rindfleisch massacres in Germany at the end of the thirteenth century, the maggid of R. Yosef Karo in sixteenth-century Turkey,<sup>8</sup> the Sabbatian controversies of Chakham Zevi in the seventeenth century, and the banking career of R. Barukh ha-Levi Epstein, author of the *Torah Temimah*, at the turn of the twentieth century. Not only do these little excursi present the listener with a more well-rounded perspective on these great rabbinic scholars, they also serve to make the shiur or lecture more interesting and enjoyable for teacher and student alike.

There is one final benefit to developing an interest in secular studies and Jewish scholarship, one that applies equally as much to maintaining a regular program of ongoing Torah study as well. Quite apart from their role in helping the rabbi enhance his effectiveness as a professional, they are also rich sources for personal growth and development. In spite of our best intentions at the beginning of our careers, we very often find ourselves caught up in the daily pressing demands that take up the bulk of our time and tend to neglect our obligation to continue to develop ourselves as talmidei chakhamim and as intellectuals. Even those of us who participate in active adult education programs often find ourselves preparing just to "get by" the class and not learning or studying for ourselves. We are so busy running around nurturing others that we have precious little time left to nurture ourselves. My father, Rabbi Herschel Schacter, often told me that his father used to illustrate this point by reference to the principle in *Chullin* (113a; Rashi, s.v. Ela), "*di-khol zeman she-terudim liflot einan bol'im.*" We are so busy being *polet* to everyone else that we don't have time to be *bole'a* for ourselves. This is a potentially tragic situation and could lead to an unhappy, resentful, and ultimately unsuccessful rabbinate. Torah study and scholarship are critically important because they give us an outlet for our interest and creativity, help us develop ourselves as Jews and human beings, and provide a balance between our synagogue lives and our private lives. Such

involvement could take many forms—personal study, working toward a graduate degree, teaching at a local university and/or publishing books and articles. However we choose to pursue them, Jewish and secular scholarship enhance our personal fulfillment as well as our professional effectiveness.

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*Barkai*

*Ha-Ma'ayon*

*L'Eylah*

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Rabbi Jacob Emden, *Megillat Sefer*, ed. D. Kahana. (Warsaw: Shulberg Bros. and Partners, 1896), pp. 96–97.



<sup>2</sup>I am the editor of a forthcoming book to be published under the auspices of the Torah U-Madda Project of Yeshiva University that will document this phenomenon in detail. It will include essays by Dr. Gerald Blidstein on *tekufat Chazal*, Dr. David Berger on the medieval period, Dr. Shnayer Leiman on the modern period, and Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, who will discuss the issue from a more general, philosophical perspective.

<sup>3</sup>See M. Fox, "Kierkegaard and Rabbinic Judaism," *Judaism* 11 (1953), pp. 160-169.

<sup>4</sup>See J. Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). See also I: Ta-Shema, Yemei Edehem: Perek bi-Hitpat'chut ha-Halakhah bi-Yemei ha-Benayim. *Tarbiz* 47 (1978), pp. 197-215.

<sup>5</sup>See J. Katz, *The "Shabbes Goy": A Study in Halachic Flexibility* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989).

<sup>6</sup>See J. Katz, Ma'ariv bi-Zemano u-Shelo bi-Zemano: Dugma le-Zikah ben Minhag, Halakhah ve-Chevrah. *Zion* 35 (1970), pp. 35-60.

<sup>7</sup>See M. Hallamish, Sichot Chullin bi-Bet ha-Knesset-Metzi'ut u-Ma'avak. *Milet* 2 (1985), pp. 225-251.

<sup>8</sup>See R. J. Z. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karp: Lawyer and Mystic* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1977).

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