

Introduction

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n February 22, 1934, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Bloch, head of a Jewish educational institution of higher learning in Telshe, Lithuania, wrote a letter in which he presented his opinion about the place of secular studies in Jewish tradition. His opening programmatic statement is significant and serves as an appropriate point of departure for this volume:

Regarding your request to clarify the ruling concerning the study of "the wisdom of the nations"... it is extremely difficult to render a clear precise decision (*ki-halakhah*). For matters like these are based very largely on ideologies and opinions that are associated with the aggadic [or nonlegal] portions [of the Torah].... Even though there are several positive and negative commandments associated with them, it is impossible to establish firm rulings with regard to them as [one can do] in the halakhic portions, that is, to issue a ruling applicable to all. They depend very much upon the temperament of the individual person and upon his

unique mode [of life], and also depend upon the conditions of time, place, circumstance, and environment.¹

Indeed, the attitude of Jews throughout history to gentile learning and culture is not monolithic and unidimensional and cannot be reduced to any simplistic, facile generalization. On the contrary, it is complex, changing, and nuanced, very much reflecting "conditions of time, place, circumstance, and environment." Affirmation and acceptance in one part of the world or during a specific century was countered by rejection and denial or simple benign disinterest in other times and places. Often differences existed even within the same cultural milieu and identical chronological time frame. All sorts of factors directly influenced how Jews in any given place or time throughout their history reacted to non-Jewish culture. It is this interesting and fascinating story, with a specific emphasis on those factors which militated in favor of an openness of traditional Judaism to non-Jewish sources, which serves as the focus of this volume.

This issue of Judaism's relationship to non-Jewish *wisdom* (*Lamentations Rabbah* 2:13) is one of, if not the most basic concern of Jewish intellectual history from antiquity to modern times. Indeed, it is difficult to identify an issue of greater centrality and duration in the history of Jewish thought throughout the ages. It is fundamental to an understanding of the way a minority Jewish culture confronted the majority cultures within which it functioned, struggling to retain its own identity, integrity, and authenticity under the pressure of other and often hostile environments. On occasion, Jews responded positively, even going so far as to appropriate ideas, concepts, and values from the outside and creatively integrate them into its own cultural—and even religious—matrix. There

1. Rabbi Bloch's letter was first published by L. Levi, "An Unpublished Responsum on Secular Studies," *Proceedings of the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists* 1 (1966): 107-12 and was reprinted by Levi in his "Shetei Teshuvot 'al Limud Hokhmot Hizoniyot," *Ha-Ma'ayan* 16:3 (1976): 11-16, and his *Sha'arei Talmud Torah* (Jerusalem, 1981), 296-301. It was most recently reprinted in *Ha-Pardes* 64:8 (May 1990): 9-12.

For a discussion of the context in which this letter was written, see my "Torah u-Madda Revisited: The Editor's Introduction," *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 1 (1989): 1-2, and nn. 1-3.

were also many cases of principled objections to such an enterprise, often generating heated controversies that emerged and reemerged throughout the course of Jewish history and did much to define the intellectual and religious profile of Judaism itself.

The authors presented here provide fresh insight into this long-standing discussion and debate. In stimulating and compelling presentations, they discuss both sides of the issue but, particularly, provide a rich sampling of source material and offer an eloquent and convincing case for the perpetuation of Judaism's dialogue and cultural interaction with the world outside of it.

In the first essay, Dr. Gerald Blidstein treats the attitude of the talmudic Sages to the ideas, legal systems, and realia of the gentile culture of their times.² After briefly dealing with the slippery question of how influence is to be determined or proven in such cases, Dr. Blidstein engages in a close textual analysis of various rabbinic sources which directly address the issue: the talmudic prohibition against involvement in *Greek wisdom* or *the wisdom of the other nations*, the banning of *the reading of outside books*, and the dictum outlawing a father from teaching his son *higgayon*. Besides precisely defining the meaning of these phrases and the parameters they were meant to encompass,³ Dr. Blidstein discusses whether they are to be avoided because they are intrinsically worthless, deficient, or dangerous (potentially undermining the absolute superiority or centrality of Torah study) or because they are simply superfluous and irrelevant for someone whose religious obligation requires him to study Torah all day long. One thing is clear: In classical rabbinic Judaism there was no higher value than the study of Torah.

But beyond these programmatic statements about gentile culture, which are generally negative in tone, Dr. Blidstein notes that the talmudic rabbis did not live in a hermetically sealed world, and they achieved—and sometimes even sought—familiarity with significant elements of

2. See also Louis H. Feldman, "Torah and Secular Culture: Challenge and Response in the Hellenistic Period," *Tradition* 23:2 (Winter 1988): 26–40.

3. See also Joshua Bloch, "Outside Books," *Mordecai M. Kaplan Jubilee Volume* (New York, 1953), 87–108; Dov Rappel, "Hokhmat Yevanit-Retorika," *Melikherei Yerushalayim bi-Mahshevet Yisrael* 2:3 (1983): 317–22.

Roman and Hellenistic culture. Gentiles were expected to abide by the Seven Noahide Commandments, which share a common morality with the more developed *halakhah*; some identified gentile civil law with the *dinnim* (i.e., "law") of those commandments. Dr. Blidstein also points out how the talmudic Sages were aware of various Greek words and terms, even incorporating them into their normative legal framework, and he shows how they were open to and accepting of gentile descriptions of the physical world and its workings, acknowledging an overall "sphere of culture" shared by Jews and gentiles alike. As Dr. Blidstein documents, the rabbis knew and used universal folk motifs and were very much aware of contemporary assumptions regarding medicine, science, astronomy, and physiology.

Dr. Blidstein concludes that the rabbis during the talmudic period were not necessarily hostile to gentile culture, nor were they ignorant of it. It was just that they did not consider it necessary for themselves. The views of their gentile contemporaries were essentially irrelevant to the rabbis who operated within a self-contained Jewish system governed exclusively by the Torah. They saw no need to recommend gentile sources for insights into ritual, ethical behavior, or legal norms. In sum, their attitude was not a negative one; they simply considered gentile culture as peripheral and superfluous.

The issue of Judaism's attitude toward and use of aspects of gentile or secular culture from tenth-century Baghdad through the transition to modernity in the middle of the eighteenth century is treated next by Dr. David Berger. While explicit concern with the legitimacy of Greco-Roman culture remained sporadic and marginal in the vast talmudic corpus, this was not the case at all in medieval times. In fact, in the Middle Ages, this issue moves from the periphery to the center of Jewish concern. In a wide-ranging article, Dr. Berger describes the rich tapestry of Jewish and non-Jewish cultures on three continents. He points out how the medievals, especially in the Islamic orbit, provided a new and crucially significant answer to the ancient quest for justifying involvement in general culture from the perspective of a tradition where Torah study was still considered to be an all-encompassing religious imperative. They developed the notion that extratalmudic disciplines, particularly philosophy, were not only important per se, but

were actually an integral part of Torah itself. It is thus wrong, writes Dr. Berger, to speak of secular studies in a general sense since, for a substantial number of medieval thinkers, the study of philosophy in and of itself was elevated to the level of religious obligation. In fact, he shows how the study of philosophy was so highly considered during this period that even those who took the conservative position in the debates over philosophy in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, which he discusses in great detail, were often devotees of that discipline, albeit in a more moderate fashion.

The central figure in this positive attitude toward philosophy was, of course, Maimonides. Already by the thirteenth century, shortly after his death, Maimonides' reputation as a preeminent halakhist and philosopher had reached heroic proportions, and all who succeeded him were forced to reckon with the power and force of his stature and authority. Dr. Berger points out how it was extremely difficult to be opposed to the legitimacy of philosophical inquiry in Judaism when the great, towering, and influential Maimonides clearly considered rational investigation of Judaism to be a crucial religious imperative and an indispensable component of genuine religious experience.

Dr. Berger also contrasts the unusually fruitful and positive cultural symbiosis between Judaism and Islamic civilization with the much more limited and circumscribed contacts between Judaism and Christian culture. While pointing out that a characterization of Ashkenazic Jewry as culturally insular and narrow is a simplistic and misleading oversimplification, Dr. Berger nevertheless charts those factors which accounted for a much more extensive involvement of Jews in Islamic culture. Spanish Jewry, in particular, was "unambiguously hospitable to the pursuit of philosophy, the sciences, and the literary arts." Finally, in the course of his widely focused analysis, Dr. Berger also treats the relationship between Jews and the dominant cultures in which they lived in Southern France (where a massive controversy about the works of Maimonides erupted in the thirteenth century and left its mark on Christian Spain and on all of subsequent Jewish history); in the Ottoman Empire and Poland (where the successors of medieval Sephardim and Ashkenazim struggled toward a new cultural equilibrium); in Renaissance Italy (where a unique Jewish community simultaneously absorbed and resisted a dazzling Christian

environment); and in eighteenth-century Europe (where the threat and promise of a new, transformed "modern" culture confronted Judaism with one of the most difficult challenges it ever faced).

At the threshold of modernity, the great battles between the members of the traditional society and those in the forefront of the Jewish Enlightenment were fought over this precise issue. By the nineteenth century, when the movement toward religious Reform and secularization in general was well established, the legitimacy of secular learning became a settled question for large segments of world Jewry. For them the case was closed. For traditionalist groups, however, the issue was not merely alive but it took on an unprecedented force and urgency.

Dr. Shnayer Z. Leiman begins his essay with the formidable figure of the Gaon of Vilna who was seen as a model—justly or otherwise—by all sides in the dispute over secular learning at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. The bulk of his essay concentrates on several key nineteenth-century rabbis—David Friesenhausen, Isaac Bernays, Jacob Ettlinger, Samson Raphael Hirsch, and Azriel Hildesheimer—who combined unimpeachable traditionalist credentials with the pursuit of a sophisticated understanding of modern Western culture.⁴ But there was something very significant that distinguished them from their like-minded predecessors in the medieval world. Not only did every one of them affirm the conceptual importance and legitimacy of secular culture, each one, with the exception of Friesenhausen, attended a university, something unheard of in medieval times. And not only did they all personally demonstrate their commitment to secular knowledge, they went further than that. Without exception, each attempted to formalize this integration in the curriculum of an educational institution which they founded. In medieval times, interest in secular culture was essentially a personal and individual enterprise, and the single example of an institution in sixteenth-century Mantua, Italy, devoted to Judaism

4. In addition to the sources cited by Leiman, see Mordecai Eliav, "Gishot Shonot le-Torah 'im Derekh Erez," *Sefer Aviad*, ed. Yizhak Raphael (Jerusalem, 1986), 77-84; Mordecai Breuer, "Hokhmat Yisrael-Shalosh Gishot Ortodoksiyot," *Sefer Yovel li-Khvod Morenu ha-Gaon Rabi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik Shlita* (Jerusalem, 1984), 856-65; Julius Carlebach, "The Foundations of German-Jewish Orthodoxy: An Interpretation," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 33 (1988): 78-88.

and secular studies⁵ is simply the exception that proves the rule. Now, however, with the beginning of the modern period and all the changes in Jewish life it represented, described by Dr. Leiman at the beginning of his essay, the quest became institutionalized. These great scholars clearly did not believe that it was necessary to wait until a person "filled his belly with the meat and wine" of pure Torah learning before turning to secular wisdom. Little children in the youngest grades should already be exposed to it, they felt.⁶ This new trend began with the founding of an integrated-curriculum elementary school by Zevi Hirsch Koeslin, a Halberstadt merchant, in 1795 and only gained momentum in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The figure which merits the most of Dr. Leiman's attention is Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the German communal leader and educator who devoted his life to the principle of *Torah 'im derekh erez*, the integration of Torah and aspects of non-Jewish culture. Dr. Leiman goes to great lengths to prove that this notion was not meant by Hirsch as a grudging concession to the unique exigencies and needs of his immediate community, intended solely for mid-nineteenth-century Germany, but was a fundamental and irrevocable component of his understanding of Judaism, "intended for all Jewish communities, for all times, and for all places." Dr. Leiman goes out of his way to demonstrate that revisionist efforts, especially in the case of Rabbi Hirsch, to truncate and minimize the breadth of that commitment cannot be squared with the historical record.⁷

5. See David Berger, n. 121; Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World* (Cincinnati, 1938), 381–88.

6. For the important distinction between a personal interest in secular knowledge and introducing it into an elementary school curriculum, which first took root in the nineteenth century, see R. Simon Schwab, *These and Those* (New York, 1966), 15–16.

7. In addition to the sources cited in Leiman's essay, see also I. Grunfeld, *Three Generations* (London, 1958), 114–19; Zvi E. Kurzweil, "Samson Raphael Hirsch: Educationist and Thinker," *Tradition* 2:2 (Spring 1960): 295; R. Yaakov Yehiel Weinberg, "Mishnato shel R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch," *Talpiyot* 8:1–2 (1961): 189; idem., "Torat ha-Hayyim," *Ha-Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch: Mishnato ve-Shitato* (Jerusalem, 1962), 190–91; Cyril Domb, "Torah and the Revolutionary Spirit," *Encounter*, ed. H. Chaim Schimmel and Aryeh Carmell (Jerusalem/New York, 1989), 175–76; Immanuel Jakobovits, "Torah im Derekh Eretz Today," *L'Eylah* 20 (Fall 5746): 37–39; idem., "Torah

The existence of such revisionism brings us to the twentieth century and to the current state of the controversy. Dr. Leiman makes reference in his afterword to several major rabbis who continued the traditions of the chief protagonists of his study. Some of these, such as Rabbi David Zevi Hoffmann, were outstanding academic scholars, while others, such as Rabbis Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook and Joseph B. Soloveitchik, were original thinkers of the highest rank. Nonetheless, historical and sociological forces have today created a situation in which most leading Talmudists in the contemporary world advocate a curriculum restricted to "Torah only" even as the overwhelming majority of world Jewry has long ago abandoned any inhibitions with respect to their involvement in secular culture.

The final essay in the volume is a general conceptual overview of the place secular studies should have in the religious consciousness and daily schedule of a Jew whose value system is shaped by traditional Jewish texts and teachings.⁸ Unconfined to any particular chronological

im Derekh Eretz," in *The Jewish Legacy and the German Conscience*, ed. Moses Rischin and Raphael Asher (Berkeley, 1991), 159–66; Noah H. Rosenbloom, "Religious and Secular Co-Equality in S. R. Hirsch's Educational Theory," *Jewish Social Studies* 24:4 (October 1962): 231; Shelomo Danziger, "Rav S. R. Hirsch—His 'Torah im Derekh Eretz' Ideology," in *Moreshet Zevi: The Living Hirschean Legacy* (New York/Jerusalem, 1988), 93; idem., "Is Torah im Derekh Eretz Relevant in our Time?," *Jewish Action* 49:3 (Summer 5749): 15; Ernst L. Bodenheimer and Nossou Scherman, "Rabbi Joseph Breuer," *The Jewish Observer* 15:6 (May 1981): 6; Moshe Zuriel, "'Al Shitat 'Torah im Derekh Eretz,'" *Ha-Ma'ayan* 29:1 (1988): 61–63; Joseph Munk, "Samson Raphael Hirsch on Judaism and Secular Culture," *L'Eylah* 28 (Fall 5749): 31; Nachman Bulman, "A Healthy Sun," *The Jewish Observer* 26:1 (February 1993): 24; Shelomoh E. Danziger, "Rediscovering the Hirschian Legacy," *Jewish Action* 56:4 (Summer 5756/1996): 23–24; Judith Bleich, "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch: Ish al Ha'edah," *Jewish Action* 56:4 (Summer 5756/1996): 27–29.

For the opinion that Hirsch's ideology "may have been a *hora'as sha'ah*" [i.e., a temporary act], see Yehuda Levi, "Torah 'im Derekh Eretz," *Ha-Ma'ayan* 22:4 (1982): 5; idem., "Torah 'im Derech Eretz: Torah Proper or Hora'as Sha'ah?," *The Jewish Observer* 21:9 (December 1988): 12; idem., "'Torah 'im Derekh Eretz: Amitah shel Torah o Hora'at Sha'ah?," *Manlekhet Kohanim ve-Goy Kadosh*, ed. Yehuda Shaviv (Jerusalem, 1989), 98.

8. For previous analyses of the issue, citing a number of relevant sources, see the works by Yehuda (Leo) Levi: *Vistas From Mount Moria* (New York, 1959), 60–98; "Hokhmat ha-Torah ve-Sha'ar he-Hokhmat," *Yad Re'em* (Jerusalem, 1975), 189–216;

period, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein paints a broad picture, ranging widely over a variety of sources from the Bible to the twentieth century, and passionately argues for the legitimacy—nay, even the necessity—of secular studies for the committed Jew.

Rabbi Lichtenstein first seeks to demonstrate the value of secular knowledge as helping a person to fulfill his or her responsibility to the world in which he or she lives, to reach personal self-fulfillment, and to work toward the perfection of a redeemed world. Included in this scheme are not only the sciences but the humanities as well, both important in achieving the highest realms of human and Jewish self-realization. Furthermore, Rabbi Lichtenstein shows how secular knowledge is also indispensable for Jewish religious study, practice, and even spirituality or religious sensibility. Once again, history, the social sciences, and the humanities are all considered to be as central to this effort as are the sciences.

After showing how valuable and important secular knowledge is on a variety of levels, Rabbi Lichtenstein turns to the question of justifying recourse to it in a tradition which considers Torah “the truest and richest

“Torah ve-Derekh Erez,” *Ha-Ma’ayan* 17:1 (1976): 12–32; “Torah and Secular Studies: The Humanities,” *Proceedings of the Association for Orthodox Jewish Scientists* 5 (1979): 153–67; *Sha’arei Talmud Torah* (Jerusalem, 1981 and reprinted several times); *Torah and Science* (Jerusalem/New York, 1983); *Torah and Science: Their Interplay in the World Scheme* (Jerusalem/New York, 1987); *Yahadut u-Madda* (Jerusalem, 1988); “The Torah and Sciences,” *Mosheshet Zevi: The Living Hirschian Legacy*, 125–71; *Torah Study* (Jerusalem/New York, 1990); “Torah ‘im Derekh Erez bi-Dorenu,” *Ha-Ma’ayan* 31:1 (1991): 1–21.

Additionally useful are: Moshe Munk, “Torah ‘im Derekh Erez bi-Yamenu,” in *Ha-Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch: Mishnato ve-Shitato*, 200–233; David S. Shapiro, “Secular Studies and Judaism,” *Tradition* 8:2 (Summer 1966): 15–39; reprinted with some brief changes in idem., *Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (New York, 1975), 400–424; Moshe Swift, “Sefarim Hizonim bi-Halakhah,” in *Sefer ha-Yovel Tiferet Yisrael* (London, 1967), 205–18; Moshe Arend, “Limud I’hokhmat ha-Goyim bi-‘Enei Hakhmei Yisrael,” *Iyyunim bi-Hirukh* 28 (1980): 51–62; Yeshayahu Director, *Sefer Likkutei Tal* (New York, 1976); Moshe Weinberger, “On Studying Secular Subjects,” *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* 11 (1986): 88–128; Aaron Rakefet-Rothkoff, “Torah Study and Secular Endeavor,” *Niv ha-Midrashia* 20–21 (1987–1988): 39–47; and the articles by Dov Rappel, Mordecai Breuer, Eliyahu Zeeny, Hai Mish’an Montefiore and Rabbi Lichtenstein himself in *Mamlekhet Kohanim ve-Goy Kadosh*, pp. 13–85, 136–44.

of [all] spiritual treasures.” If all of knowledge is included within Torah, why seek elsewhere for perfection? In response, Rabbi Lichtenstein points out that, indeed, some areas of human creativity, especially poetry and literature, reached higher degrees of expression outside Jewish tradition. In an early article on this subject written in 1963, he wrote:

Nor should we be deterred by the illusion that we can find all 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 many areas, much of that best is of foreign origin, we shall expand our horizons rather than exclude it. “Accept the truth,” the Rambam urged, “from whomever states it.” Following both the precept and practice of Rabbenu Bachye, he adhered to that course himself; and we would be wise to emulate him. The explicit systematic discussions of Gentile thinkers often reveal for us the hidden wealth implicit in our own writings. They have, furthermore, 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 *chochma bagoyim*, and we ignore it at our loss. Many of the issues which concern us have faced Gentile writers as well. The very problem we are considering has a long Christian history, going back to Tertullian and beyond. To deny that many fields have been better cultivated by non-Jewish rather than 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.⁹

9. A. Lichtenstein, “A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Point of View,” *Gesher* I (1963): 10–11; repr. in idem., *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning*, vol. 1 (Jersey City, 2003), 94.

But even this does not conclude the discussion. In the last part of his essay, Rabbi Lichtenstein turns his attention to one final crucial question. For even if it can be shown that secular knowledge and culture have a distinct value for the Jewish religious personality, one must still determine if it should be pursued given: (a) the limitations of time and resources which perhaps should better be spent on "pure" Torah and (b) "the danger that religious commitment may be diluted by exposure to secular culture." After a careful halakhic analysis of the parameters of the *mizvah* [biblical commandment] of Torah study and the concomitant prohibition against *bittul Torah* [neglecting Torah study], Rabbi Lichtenstein concludes that secular studies very definitely have a significant place in the life of a fully committed Jew. Openness to secular culture is, therefore, not a modern phenomenon reflecting an unjustified concession and even capitulation to the current forces of secularism. It is very much a legitimate part of Jewish tradition from its very beginnings.

What is most striking about Rabbi Lichtenstein's essay is not just the arguments he presents but the sources he adduces in support of his position. Tennyson, Byron, Wordsworth, Whitehead, Arnold, Shaftesbury, Spenser, Newman, Hawthorne, Yeats, Milton, Keats, Sidney, De Quincey, and C. S. Lewis are liberally cited alongside Maimonides, Halevi, R. Moses Isserles, R. Joseph Karo, Nahmanides, R. Asher b. Yeḥiel, R. Menahem Meiri, R. Baḥya b. Asher, R. Aharon Halevi, R. David ibn Zimra, R. Ḥayyim of Volozhin, R. Shnayer Zalman of Lyady, R. Isser Zalman Meltzer, and R. Barukh Ber Leibowitz. This, alone, is Rabbi Lichtenstein's strongest argument.

The first three parts of this volume, then, present a comprehensive and authoritative overview of a central theme in the millennial history of Jewish thought; the final part will become an instant primary source in a discussion which continues to resonate deeply among many committed Jews with all the force and power that it generated in premodern and early modern times.

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JUDAISM'S ENCOUNTER WITH OTHER CULTURES

REJECTION OR INTEGRATION?

The Goldberg Edition

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