

# The Proper Business of Mankind

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1. by *Shalom Carmy* November 2018



Elijah, the great scholar (Gaon) of Vilna in the eighteenth century, is synonymous with total devotion to Torah study above all other pursuits. Paradoxically, because he held that deficiency in mundane wisdom leads to deficient understanding of God’s word, he has also become an emblem for supplementing sacred learning with secular knowledge. Thus, though his own mathematical and scientific capacity was rudimentary even for his age, he became an icon of Haskala, the modern movement in religiously observant Judaism that championed secular studies. Where I was educated, general studies embraced the full range of liberal arts, far beyond the Gaon’s desire for a Hebrew translation of Euclid. Yet his name still comes up when educated Jews speak of human wisdom as a means to a more ambitious knowledge of God’s word and his service.

The religious hierarchy of knowledge partly inspired by the Gaon gives humanistic education real but not primary importance. The study of mankind—history, philosophy, literature, science—though noble, is, in the final analysis, ancillary to the highest calling of man confronted by the word of God. The priority of our response to the divine, which implicates mind, heart, and soul, has always been central to my lifelong advocacy of university education for religiously committed Jews. Christians undoubtedly have parallel arguments for secular studies justified in light of the imperatives of religious faith. One finds them developed by Cardinal Newman in his day, and in the postwar era presented in H. R. Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*.

My advocacy of liberal arts study has brought me into contact with its opponents. Some object on principle because they consider worldly knowledge heretical, corrupting, or an utter waste of time. More commonly, however, I have encountered a “soft” opposition

among people who do not quarrel with general education on normative grounds. In theory, they accept the possibility that wide-ranging study enables some individuals, maybe individuals they esteem, to think and formulate ideas more clearly, to understand themselves and other people, and to envision alternatives to the pervasive secular culture they deplore. On the bottom line, though, they are not interested in such education for themselves, or for their children. They are not so much opposed to general education as uninterested, and they regard this lack of interest as justified.

One reason for their turn away from the ideals of Haskala is that most preachers and teachers of the liberal arts do not display the perspicuity, self-examination, human sensitivity, and independence of character that are claimed as the outcomes of academic training. There is no assurance that submitting to a recommended regimen of reading, classroom hours, and term paper writing is correlated with these virtues. At times the evidence seems to suggest an inverse correlation.

Second, with all due respect to the Vilna Gaon and to contemporary masters, most people are not interested in attaining intellectual or religious excellence. They feel obligated to meet the prevalent standards of their social group, and are satisfied when they do so. If they don't have a taste for literature or history or philosophy, they will not make substantial efforts to develop such a taste on the chance that it will benefit them spiritually or give them an edge in Talmudic analysis. The prospect of enrichment coming from reading Henry James or John Milton seems remote and probably not worth the effort.

These days one hears a new version of this debate about the role of liberal arts in the service of a higher good. Those who teach in liberal arts programs and other divisions of the university maintain that the humanities have much to offer for those who pursue economic success. Philosophy, history, literature will not, in themselves, make you rich. But if you aspire to genuine excellence in the making of money, basic business school know-how is not enough. Those lacking in the ability to think clearly and write convincingly won't advance as far as those with broad liberal arts educations, we are told. Without self-awareness and the social skills needed to function at the office, mere technical competence is not much of an asset. And those unable to think outside the box, to imagine new frontiers and business opportunities, will never rise to the top. Just as the Gaon of Vilna commends general education as a high-level refinement of the mind that promotes the service of God, some now sponsor liberal arts training for the greater glory of practical success.

Interestingly, the resistance to this new instrumentalist justification for liberal arts education as a means to worldly success faces the same indifference that blocks widespread adherence to the God-centered model.

First, there is the plain reality that intellectual breadth and clarity do not supply a road map to financial success. Just as academic experts often fail to attain the humane virtues prized by those who join sacred and secular studies, the boosters and professors of liberal arts

who plug its practical payoffs are not distinguished by intelligent thinking outside of their narrow area of presumed expertise. As a group, they do not manifest notable talent, honed by humanistic study, for the cultivation of commercially useful self-insight, nor do they develop kind, shrewd, thoughtful connections to human beings that smooth the way to career success. (The self-defeating garrulousness of professors is notorious.) The teachers of the liberal arts are not known for their ability to create significant ideas that are arresting, unhackneyed, and lucrative.

Second—and we should be thankful for this—most people I know are not passionate for great wealth the way the Vilna Gaon strove for enhanced understanding of Torah and total devotion to God. Parents and young people, more often than not, want a reliable path to a secure income, not a monument in the moneymaking hall of fame. No doubt philosophical and literary critiques of the utilitarian mentality that reduces human flourishing to the calculus of *homo economicus* provide some good reasons for this mediocrity of ambition when it comes to making money, and in this way it contributes to the defense of human dignity. But in truth, insights about “alienation” and the perils of the “technological mentality” or other cogitations of modern critics are not matters that trouble the sleep of practical men and women engaged in procuring diplomas and planning their everyday lives. That pre-reflective, practical orientation will not change even if they come to believe, or already believe, that deep humanistic understanding is worthwhile. At best, liberal education sits atop their lives as an ornament rather than exercising deep interior influences.

Let me explain the point by analogy. A person discovers his blood pressure, like that of tens of millions of Americans, is on the high side of normal. Of course a lower reading is desirable, but he faces no immediate peril. Out of a longer-term concern for his health, he may now pay moderate or even drastic attention to his diet and increase his physical activity. Or he might reasonably do nothing at all to change his daily habits. The risk is not great; the danger is not imminent. In any event, he has the option of lobbying his doctor for medication.

The patient who chooses diet or exercise is almost certainly a person who already has a proclivity to proper diet and physical activity. One who needs salt to make life tolerable, or is addicted to eating out, or is profoundly accustomed to a sedentary existence is unlikely to alter his pattern of life. Those who do nothing will say that these measures don't make a dramatic difference for better or for worse. And even if there is some advantage, his blood pressure is only on the high side of normal. Surely the standard of health that's good enough for others—normal—is good enough for him. The direct results provided by drugs offer a technical solution. And so we see in matters of the body what is often the case in the life of the mind. Like the disinclined student presented with arguments showing the benefits of liberal arts education for life's greater goals, the at-risk patient is unlikely to choose diet

and exercise because he is swayed by promises about their marginal benefits unless he already regards proper eating and vigorous activity as desirable, even enjoyable things to do for their own sakes.

There are very few born philosophers. Most of us live in accord with ideals for life that are either of divine origin, and thus higher than those offered by the liberal arts, or of commercial origins and thus lower. In either case, general education needs defending in terms of its usefulness in attaining these ends. I of course prefer the old justifications for liberal arts education, the ones inspired by the Gaon of Vilna. They retain their value whatever their effectiveness in the marketplace. Moreover, the new instrumental arguments oriented toward financial success depend upon the validity of the more traditional ones, for those arguments do little more than recast the humane virtues as professionally useful. Thus for the old or new arguments on behalf of the liberal arts to be plausible for those who aren't already seduced by their charms, it must be the case that general education promotes, at least most of the time, the moral and intellectual virtues ascribed to them by their professors, and that these virtues, against a world of gray mediocrity, show themselves worth attaining.

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