

Torah and Study

One of the biggest challenges Judaism faces today is the Haredi schism. On the one hand, it is the most dynamic, fastest growing, most passionately committed and scholarly section of the Jewish world. On the other, it is the most fundamentalist, anti-intellectual, narrow-minded, excessively restrictive sector that refuses to countenance any change, moderation, or amelioration in Jewish law—and in almost all cases does not approve of any serious secular education that might help those who want to find a means of making a living in the world outside.

In my youth the dominant strain, numerically, of Anglo-Jewry was the United Synagogue. All the big communal synagogues belonged to it. Officers wore top hats. Rabbis or reverends wore canonicals. Services were formal and boring. Most members were hybrids, attesting to Orthodoxy in public but disregarding it in private.

To its left was the Reform movement. To its right, groups of smaller synagogues, located mainly in Stamford Hill; the Federation of Synagogues, which my father once headed; the Adath, founded by Rabbi Dr. Victor Schonfeld, a German import; and a few Hasidic *shtiebelah*.

Then there was the Golders Green Beth HaMedrash, which combined its Orthodoxy with a Germanic intellectual tradition, a respect for academic study, and Wissenschaft, the academic analysis of Judaism. It was affectionately known as Munk's, after its rabbi, who was a member of another illustrious German Orthodox family.

The community was proud of its motto *Torah im Dereh Eretz*—Torah combined with secular knowledge. It was the slogan of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), who had led the Orthodox Jews of Frankfort in a breakaway (called an Austritts Gemeinde) from the main community, which he saw drifting towards Reform and assimilation.

He campaigned hard for an intellectually rigorous interpretation of traditional Orthodoxy, to offer what he saw as the best of both worlds. He was a powerful essayist and spokesman. He wrote a German commentary on the Torah and composed *Nineteen Letters* as a polemic against Reform. His essays on Judaism were published in a volume called *Horeb*. Most significantly, he insisted on secular education in his religious school.

The community was already in decline between the two world wars. Many of the refugees from Frankfort who came to London were loyal to his memory in theory rather than practice. Cynics liked to say they had a lot of *Dereh Eretz* but much less *Torah*. Even so, it was a remarkable community, until Eastern European Orthodoxy and Hasidic fundamentalism slowly recovered from the impact of the war, flourished, and began the process of becoming more Haredi and less and less and less interested in rational discourse and academic approaches to traditional texts and sources. Munk's has, sadly, veered strongly towards the Haredi right.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch is sadly missed. His motto *Torah im Dereh Eretz* is nowadays mocked and rejected in Haredi circles. It may be that this swing was a necessary condition of rebuilding Orthodoxy after the Holocaust, and it has succeeded brilliantly. But at a cost.

The Talmudic term *Dereh Eretz* has two meanings. The one most people associate with it is the Yiddish expression which means civil behavior towards others and good manners. But the Talmud also uses it to mean earning a livelihood in a totally secular sense (Avot 2:2 and 3:5). This second meaning is what Rav Hirsch meant. "It is good to combine studying Torah with a livelihood, for the effort needed for both will keep a person away from doing the wrong things." (Pirkei Avot 2:2) This was why Rav Hirsch introduced secular education in his schools.

The Talmud made the study of Torah the preeminent expression of Jewish identity and activity. Yet it discusses the relative merits of Torah and *Dereh Eretz*. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was forced to hide from the Romans in a cave for twelve years, which he spent studying Torah with his son. When he came out of the cave, he could not understand how ordinary people were going about their business, plowing and sowing. He wanted to get rid of them. A heavenly voice told him that he had no right to destroy God's world. And sent him back to the cave to cool off. Rabbi Shimon argued that the in the Book of Joshua it says that "the words of the Torah should never leave your mouth, and if one studied, others would take care of earning a livelihood. Rabbi Yishmael disagreed with Rabbi Shimon. He insisted that as the Torah says, "You should gather in your corn, wine, and oil," one should try a combination. The Talmud comments that many tried Rabbi Shimon's way and did not succeed; many tried Rabbi Yishmael's and did succeed (Shabbat 33b & Brahot 35b).

The implication is clear. A scholar's life is admirable. We should all aspire to as much Torah study as we can. But most, even of the outwardly pious, are not suited to permanent study. It is for such that other ways of earning a living are a necessary alternative. To give someone the linguistic and scientific tools to get on in life is very different than immersing oneself in an alien culture and a morality that differs from that of the Torah. The secular world today has adopted both aspects of Greece: its intellectual exploration of the world around us and its morality of relativism and self-indulgence that offends everything the Torah stands for. We should stand in contrast to it, morally. But scientifically, medically, and technologically, we all benefit from it. Yet Haredi leadership in principle resists any secular education altogether. This cannot make sense.

Having studied Greek philosophy at Cambridge and Talmud in yeshivah, I believe that nothing is as mentally challenging or demanding as Talmud studies "*Lishma*" (purely for its own sake). A strict Talmudic education can equip many to succeed in life when they choose to use their brain power to pursue jobs. The problem is with the majority, who are neither gifted nor inclined to. This is why we can also see how hordes of so-called Talmudic scholars swarm onto the streets of religious enclaves to protest against what they see as assaults on their communities, when in fact requirements that governments try to impose are usually no more than attempts to protect them

from their own unrealistic expectation that the rest of the world owes them a livelihood and protection. Genuine scholars of the Talmud are not the ones out demonstrating, throwing stones, spitting, or bullying. They do indeed study day and night. Ironically, that is why in their ivory towers they often appear oblivious to the realities of the world around them.

When I studied at Be'er Yaakov Yeshivah in Israel in the 1950s, like in many Yeshivot, there were two heads. The academic head was the Rosh Yeshivah, the brilliant mercurial Rav Moshe Shapiro. The Spiritual Head, the Mashgiah (often called the Dean) was Rav Shlomo Wolbe. Both had been students at Mir in Lithuania and contemporaries of my father, who actually shared a room with Rav Shapiro. Rav Wolbe was serious, pensive, intense. The yeshivah split into two camps, with students identifying with whichever one of the two they felt more in common with. Rav Wolbe had studied secular subjects in Berlin before arriving at Mir. But he had thrown his lot in absolutely and completely with the Lithuanian world of Torah. I admired and loved both of them.

Rav Wolbe went on to become the greatest voice of Mussar, spiritual self-analysis, in the Jewish world and published several volumes of his intense religious outlook. Amongst his letters collected posthumously is this extract:

“I was delving into the topic of *Torah Im Dereh Eretz* which is, ultimately, the foundation upon which live most *Shomer Mitzvos* in the world. We do not sufficiently relate to this approach, and the result of this is that many Bnei Yeshivah who eventually leave to engage in business and suchlike see this as a contradiction to the life of Torah, which is a great mistake. I head in the name of the Steipler that today's effort to make people stay permanently in kollel is a *horaas shaah* (temporary decree), and Rav Chaim Kanievsky said that it is reasonable that his father said this. The basic path of the Torah is that a person works for a living and also establishes regular times for Torah study...” (Letters and Writings)

Is it possible to have one without the other? That is the challenge we face today. Rav Wolbe thought we could. But then, he was a very special man, and there are no leaders of his stature in the Haredi world today as it lurches ever more towards obscurantism.

How will this all play out? The Haredi world has already split into extreme factions. It has rejected so-called Modern Orthodoxy. It refuses to accept any other expression of Judaism as legitimate. It looks as though we might be heading towards a split similar to that which disrupted Judaism 2,000 years ago and contributed to its near destruction. Dead Sea Sects, Pharisees and Sadducees. Déjà vu?