

THE ACADEMIC AND/OR A MAN OF FAITH

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By Rabbi Mayer Schiller

All Jews are called upon by their Creator to have faith in Him and His revealed word, the Torah. This faith once it has been achieved is no longer subject to any scrutiny which might call it into question. However harsh or close-minded the above may seem, it is, in fact, axiomatic, for a *perfect faith* which is forever weighed, is no longer a perfect faith. Our most fundamental task as Jews is to possess and maintain this *emunah*, God's most precious gift.

How is the Torah Jew who is engaged in any academic discipline to balance the claims of his *emunah* on the one hand and the demands of objective scholarship on the other? If the truths of the Torah are to function as unchallengeable axioms, how objective can the academic endeavor of a believing Jew really be? There are, obviously, a huge amount of areas where the scholar's objectivity might lead him into conflict with Torah, be he a historian, scientist, archaeologist, psychologist or philosopher. The physical sciences (and we include in this category "tangible history" found in archaeology and document discovery) offer most painful

challenges, but so too do the liberal arts, although more so perhaps via mood than via concrete evidence. Should the researcher in whatever field suppress the fruit of his work either to the public or in his own mind, or does he owe some debt to the picture of reality that he perceives?

Many would respond at this point that for a Torah Jew to pursue academic endeavors of any sort (except to earn a living) is frivolous at best and dangerous at worst. Who needs any other knowledge if we have the Torah? Others of a less forceful sort would say that "objective knowledge is in a constant state of flux. The conclusions of archaeology or science today will be rejected next week, so why take the threat of 'the factual' seriously? All fact, thought and reflection outside of Torah is, at best, only partially objective, limited as it is by time and place. We need not fear so ephemeral an opponent."

A MULTIPLICITY OF TRUTHS

To the first response we offer no reply. The position labeled "Torah only" by some is a very serious business. Its arguments are powerful and (who knows?) conceivably correct. Certainly its roster of proponents includes a far larger team than of its opposite number. Who could not argue quite convincingly, that it protects and encourages faith, fear of Heaven and Torah greatness far better

than its more "open" rivals? This is a question which will conceivably go unanswered this side of the Messiah. Each man must look towards God, the Torah, his Torah leaders, while realistically assessing his own communal, historical, cultural state and most of all his personal spiritual situation and decide. Hopefully a merciful *Ribbono Shel Olam* cannot judge anyone's conclusions harshly if they have been drawn sincerely.

Ideally, it would be easier if our conclusion would be just for us, but, alas, we are also staking the futures of our families, descendants and, if we be leaders, or teachers at any level, communities and students on the correctness of our intuitions. Heavens, it's enough to drive a man to *Meah Shearim* or Williamsburg at least!

Despite the annoying tendency of the previous paragraph's misgivings to stick to one's soul prompting doubt over the possible squandering of life's most precious gift, time, we will push on. Yes, we push on for those who are stuck either by profession, some other set of circumstances or their soul's deepest inclinations to pursue knowledge, reality or beauty in some form. (Although one could seriously doubt how many of us really pursue knowledge due to the urgings of our innermost core and how many have acquired an interest imposed

by their culture? Ah, but then again it could be conversely argued that "closed" *frum* societies serve to stifle intrinsic interest. Yes, but who's to say that these intrinsic yearnings for specific forms of knowledge or certain forms of reflection are not the Tempter's promptings to lure us away from Torah and *avodah*? Oh well, there we go getting stuck again in our last paragraph's problems!)

Will the Messiah really decide these questions? Or are we conceivably dealing with some form of seemingly contradictory, but in some way reconcilable multiple truths? And, indeed, if the core metaphysic of the cosmos can, perhaps, endure such pluralism cannot our minds embrace similar diversity? But, then upon what criteria is personal action to be based? Are our opinions in the end [provided they be Torah true] merely our intuitions in fancy dress? Maybe so, yet, if argumentation be only the mind justifying the heart then how can we avoid losing the forceful certitude of most men? This, though, is a difficult topic for another time.]

TORAH AND LOW CULTURE

A serious skeptic might object at this point that the real conflict between Torah faith and "The World" as we enter the last decade of this confusing century is not with knowledge or reflection or "high" culture, but with security, "fun" and "low" culture. This objection is, as far as we can determine, a most potent one. Thinkers, academics, writers, idealists, all those who are primarily concerned with affairs of the spirit (in the larger sense of that term) are becoming increasingly anachronistic in the contemporary West (and perhaps as Eastern Europe opens its doors to allow capitalist, egalitarian "Americanism" to flow in, there as well). *Have academics become academic?* Universities are no longer hot beds of ideas, art and intellectual ferment, but job fac-

ories where certain studies are demanded for reasons long since forgotten and are certainly now irrelevant. This is an elementary fact as yet little comprehended by the teachers and bureaucrats of the educational establishment, but certain to have ever greater effect upon the public and private discourse, apprehension and way of life of contemporary man. For our purposes, though, we will leave this civilization altering datum for the moment and return to it after discussing the problems effecting that sad breed of academics and theoreticians who fascinatingly continue to hold forth to an ever dwindling crowd as if the auditorium was still packed. Our conclusions may in the end have some relevancy to the dichotomies created by Torah and low culture interaction as well.

PROBLEMS CONFRONTING THE SCHOLAR

The problems which a scholar loyal to the objective calling of his profession must face as a Torah Jew are many. We have alluded to several of them before. Among some of the others we may find 1. The question of spiritual factors i.e., to what extent should the viewpoint of a sociologist, psychologist, historian, etc. be altered once the fundamental assumptions of Judaism concerning God, the Torah, the soul and the metaphysical essence of the physical world are granted? 2. What is one to do about a seeming conflict between Torah and sensory data? 3. Can a scholar pursue a field be it Chinese history, medieval poetry, or physics without constantly having to answer the question of 'What availeth this for Eternity?' And after having given an answer how much must that answer become a conscious part of his long hours of academic endeavor? 4. Granted that a given scholar has satisfactory answers to the above three questions how does he (or should he) transmit his heightened consciousness to his students if they be religious Jews or irreligious or

even non-Jews for that matter? 5. Finally, there is the question of mood, is scholarship a way of life which can be employed by a serious *oved Hashem* to fulfill the demanding call to "fear and love God" of the Torah, of Chazal, of the *baalei mussar*, of the *talmidei Baal Shem*, etc.? Is there something about the detached neutrality, the formalized pedagogy, the absorption in intellectual pursuits other than Torah and *tefillah* which would make it very hard for a scholar to be a *tzadik*, an *oved Hashem beshlaimut*?

My answers to the above questions are personal, hesitant and fearful. To take the responsibility for issuing *hadracha* for others especially in areas of primary importance for the Jewish soul as it lives in this world and will eventually stand in eternity with God is terrifying. Who are we to lead another along a path that may cause him to falter spiritually, to lead him to untold religious deprivation in both this world and the next? I, therefore, speak for myself and to myself. The following is what I have done for some time and constantly filled with error, stumbling and constant nagging self-scrutiny will continue to do until such time as God in His mercy shows me an alternative course.

OBJECTIVITY AND THE SPIRITUAL

First, I think there is little doubt that our understanding of history, sociology and psychology must be radically altered if we are to be Torah true. These fields as currently understood (outside of some small enclaves of traditionalist Christians and the boundaries of a resurgent Islam) do not take into account spiritual realities. A serious Torah account of reality must accord metaphysics objective status. *Hashgacha pratiyot, Torah maginei uma' tzalei, zechut avot, taharat ha-nefesh, tumah, ruach ha-kodesh, koach ha-tefillah* (Individual Divine Providence, the Torah protects, merits of the Patriarchs and Forebears, purity of the soul, defilement, Divine

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insight, the power of prayer) and so on add infinitum, are all constantly and profoundly impacting upon the inner fabric and outer manifestations of Being. To ignore the above data (and the wisdom of *Kabbalah* for that matter) must result in a basic falsification of cultural, personal and historical cause and effect. A Torah Jew when exploring these fields must do so with intense and radical scrutiny, a scrutiny forever aware of the false world view upon which their "objectivity" is based.

Now, this is not to imply (why, oh why must we always force reality into simplistic, either/or categories?) that there are not truths about society, the mind and the past of great insight in all three disciplines and (if we subscribe to a belief in the intrinsic importance of knowledge) of significance as well. What we do mean is that a God centered world view in general and a Torah centered world view in particular will approach this area with a full arsenal of criticism of a willingness to radically theorize and that given the intellectual temper of modernity and in all probability post "modernity" this will have to be a process both impassioned as well as rigorous.

A HUMBLE FAITH

As to the question of conflict between scholarly data and Torah objectivity we must realize that indeed, *Torat Hashem* is *Torah Emet*. Any understandings of Torah which are acceptable within its traditionally delineated dogmatic framework may be attempted in order to square matters with academic research. When this cannot be done then the scholar must say in submissive humility, "My data points in this direction, but things cannot be so for the Torah has taught us otherwise." God is by nature supra-rational and we are his servants.

Let us go a step further. Not only must the researcher approach his data in this manner, but he must so present it to the public. Torah is not the personal, tribal mythol-

ogy of the Jews. It is the objective truth of Being. If an academic is to be a true practitioner of his craft he must relate the picture of reality which the source of existence itself, namely God, has revealed. If other members of the ivory tower are horrified by this, well, so be it. If this calls into question his academic credentials in a decadent civilization dominated by a priori materialism, well, so be it. We are Jews and will not lie to flatter the errant or advance/preserve our own careers.

SHIVITI HASHEM

How conscious must an academic be of his religious rationale for engaging in scholarly disciplines? A strong and continual sense of God's presence is what all *sifrei avodah* call for. To properly heed their call is to effectively eliminate neutral events from one's life. One either abstains from "neutral" or "superfluous" interests and actions or one in some way makes them spiritual. This applies to a working man as well as to an academic. In a sense, though, the latter's task is more difficult for the former need only confront the distracting nature of his work's form. Its purpose is clear, namely, *parnasah be-kavod*. The student of knowledge must not only face the diverting nature of his task, but also confront how its ultimate purpose will increase the "glory of Heaven" and his own sanctification. (Unless, of course, he pursues it merely as a means to a livelihood.)

This requires not merely the disciplining of mind and heart which "setting God before me always" demands but, a world view capable of fitting the totality of Being (natural, historical, reflective etc.) into a Torah centered vision. Without this doctrinal grounding reality becomes severed; knowledge, peoples, events, creativity etc. are reduced to disparate, random happenings. The parts of God's world separate and their linkage to each other and above all to Sinai is severed. Until the scholar establishes in his heart

this connection then his pursuits must be seen as frivolous from the perspective of serious *avodah*.

Indeed, not only must the scholar's heart feel this harmoniousness, but if he is not to lead his students astray he must reveal its dimensions to them and do so frequently. If not, then they too will come to see large stretches of existence as divorced from the God of Torah, *Gemara* and *emunah*. This is a task little attempted but greatly needed.

ACADEMIC AS BAAL AVODAH?

In the end what is to become of our scholar? Can he open a *Mesilat Yesharim*, R. Yisroel Salanter's writings or *Hovat ha-Talmidim* and heed their impassioned cry for inspired love, fear and attachment to God? Here the answer must, of necessity, be both personal, subjective and qualified.

Yes, an academic can be an *oved Hashem* who sets twenty-four hour *yirat shamoyim* as his *only* goal, if he is seriously committed to *amelut ba-Torah* ..., if he is devoted to ever improving *avodat ha-tefilah* ... if his heart burns with enthusiasm for Torah observance by all Jews and cries at the sin and heresy unleashed by assorted movements in recent centuries ... if every "small paragraph" in the *Shulchan Aruch* is absolutely binding upon him, etc.

The academic must return to his faith constantly and renew it whether he find his spiritual sustenance in *Hovat Ha-Levavot* or the *Nefesh Ha-Hayim* or the *Shomer Emunim* or Talner *seforim* to cite some diverse examples. And, indeed, he must (perhaps more so than others) lead a life of *taharah*. He must be meticulous in observance of *kashrut* and *tzniut* in all forms and of all *mitzvot* the *segulah* effect of which are well-known. His *Tehillim* should be well worn and (if the reader will indulge my *Hassidic* sensibilities) he should be a frequent *mikveh* goer.

As an observant wit once re-

marked, "Odds are that we'll be dead much longer than alive." Eternity will be spent with our Creator. When heading off on that final journey all we will take with us will be the spiritual baggage of our very fleeting worldly sojourn. Our ultimate consolation forever will be based on our loyalty and dedication to Torah and *mitzvot* in our lifetime. This is not just the first *perek* of the *Mesilat Yesharim* but a basic cornerstone of *emunat Yisrael*. The scholar worships God by studying His world. Yet, he must be both a sincere worshipper as well as constantly aware who the Author of his subject matter really is.

Is any of this applicable to popu-

lar culture which is the real temptation of contemporary times? This problem unleashes a flood of most difficult questions unfortunately rarely posed by Torah thinkers who if they speak of such matters generally relate them to "high" culture questions. It is time to wake up and realize that the masses of "open" Orthodoxy are not tempted by Darwin, Welhausen, Hegel, Freud, Marx or even Norman Thomas and Bertrand Russell. They live in a world of sight and sound, of pleasure and pain, of popular entertainment, athletics and music, of trips and dining out and of "just relaxing." What, if any of this can be sanctified? What, if any, of this is permissible? This is perhaps the ques-

tion for the leaders of "open" Orthodoxy to answer.

I leave that query for a later date. For the present the reader is left with merely my personal conviction that the indivisibility of truth makes academics and *avodah* harmonious, provided that the latter be constantly fed by Torah *taharah* and attachment to God and the former be forever humble, bending its knee before Him.

Rabbi Mayer Schiller is a maggid shiur at Yeshiva University High School for Boys. He is the author of The Road Back, and a frequent contributor to Jewish Action Magazine. □

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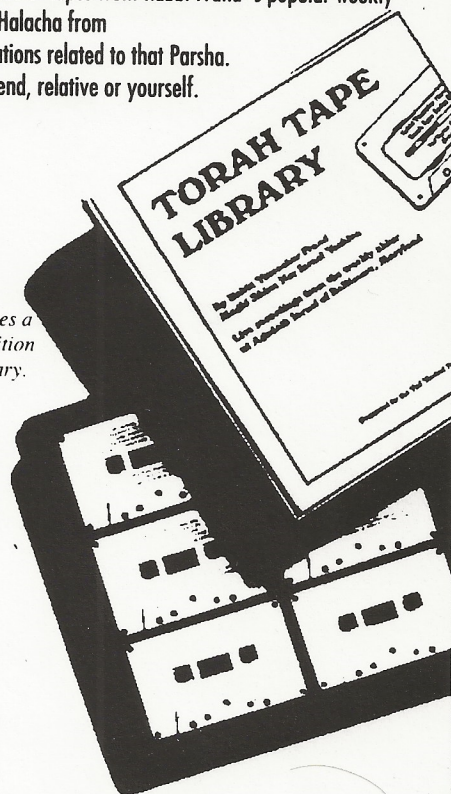
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