

Letters to the Editor

TO THE EDITOR:

I read with interest your footnote (*The Torah U-Madda Journal* I (1989), 18, n. 14) questioning my assertion that Dr. Revel did not share R. Samson Raphael Hirsh's intrinsic positive attitude towards secular education, but rather considered secular studies a compromise with the realities of American Jewish life. The late Rabbi Phillip Tatz, a student at Yeshiva College during the nineteen-thirties, related the following incident to me: When he graduated high school, Dr. Revel pleaded with him and his friends to devote the next few years to Torah study only and to delay their college studies. At the time they resented Revel's suggestion, but in later years they came to appreciate its validity. This story and my general knowledge of Dr. Revel's Lithuanian gestalt would indicate that my understanding of Revel's viewpoint is accurate.

In this vein, allow me to share another story with you. When I was privileged to be a student of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, I learned that my *havruta* decided not to continue his studies in Yeshiva College but would rather only devote himself to Torah learning. I "snitched" on him to our rebbe, and the Rov asked me to bring him over. I told my *havruta* that the Rov wanted to see him, and I accom-

panied him back to the classroom. Rabbi Soloveitchik then told him the following which I recall verbatim: "Hāzal tell us that יפה תלמוד תורה עם דרך ארץ. I do not know exactly what *derekh erez* means, but I am certain that *bi-zeman ha-zeh* it means that one must go to college." My *havruta* obviously had to continue his secular studies and, in fact, later graduated Yeshiva College. It is my feeling that the Rov was likewise basically committed to a Lithuanian stance of the primacy of Torah study and just happened to find himself in the Western World.

RABBI DR. AARON RAKEFET-ROTHKOFF
Jerusalem, Israel

TO THE EDITOR:

When I turned to Rabbi Blech's article, "Personal Growth or Communal Responsibility? A Question of Priorities" (*The Torah u-Madda Journal* I [1989], 34-42), I thought there would be a full discussion of the ongoing tension between *limud* and *ma'aseh*, between one's own learning and acquiring a *helek* in Torah vs. the *ahrayut* to serve Klal Yisrael. While men certainly struggle with this constantly, women, too, feel the conflict: Should I go to a shiur or play some more with my child? In a half-hour

lull, should I learn the *parshah* or do laundry?

I was disappointed and sorry to find, instead, a tone of bitterness and anger towards those who have chosen to remain within the *kotlei bet hamedrash*. I am confused about Rabbi Blech's characterization of life in yeshiva as representing a lack of accomplishment in terms of the *zibbur*. The first people to found yeshivot and begin the yishuv in Erez Yisrael were talmidim of the Vilna Gaon. Our existence today is based upon the works of a man who sat and, *baruch ha-Shem*, "stagnated" by learning day and night.

And what are the roots of Rav Soloveitchik, may he have a *refuah sheleimah*? He came from a *zaide*, Rav Chaim Brisker, who did nothing but learn day and night! Would we say that the Brisker Rav or the Chazon Ish had no impact on Jewish history because they remained in the "ivory tower" of Torah?

It seems to me that the article's stance is a reversal of the *derekh* of Klal Yisrael from its very inception, from the time Yaakov Avinu spent fourteen years in *Yeshivat Shem va-Ever*. If one maintains that there can be other approaches, that many people cannot dedicate their lives to *limud ha-Torah* exclusively, that is understandable and is an issue to deal with on an individual basis. But let us not undermine the basic historical position of the Jewish people: Torah is our foundation; learning and living it our ideal.

Throughout the Gemara and *Shulhan Arukh*, we see the idea of *'asarah batlanim ba-ir*, each city having a group of people relieved of all mundane responsibilities in order to concentrate exclusively on their learning. This clearly indicates the importance of ongoing, uninterrupted Torah learning while acknowledging that this lifestyle is for certain individuals only. We

must be careful not to disdain the choice these people have made, and perhaps we need to accept our own decision to follow a different route. But in this perpetual striving to find our own way, it is imperative to retain the ideal of *limud ha-Torah*.

I was particularly taken aback by the implication that a life devoted exclusively to Torah learning is a lack of involvement in *zorkhei zibbur*. Who is more involved in the unceasing needs of Klal Yisrael than our gedolim? Are they not more involved than anyone in questions of life and death, respirators and artificial insemination, rescue work and kiruv, *shalom bayit* and personal struggles? The intense involvement of the gedolim in *zorkhei zibbur* is beyond our comprehension. Apparently, it is precisely their total immersion in Torah which endows them with a dimension of concern and solicitude for all Jews that exceeds our grasp.

Rabbi Blech obviously feels keenly the needs of the *zibbur* and spends his life teaching and serving the *klal*. Perhaps he should re-examine the significant issue he raises and give us further insight into the perpetual conflict, with malice towards none and goodwill towards all.

AVIVA WEISBORD, PH.D.
Baltimore, Maryland

RABBI BLECH RESPONDS:

Hard as I try, I find it difficult to discover what in my article could have prompted the kind of response elicited from Aviva Weisbord. If she was indeed looking for a clear halachic ruling as to whether she should learn the *parshah* or do the laundry, it was not my intent to present a definitive *pesak*. Nor did I presume to write the article she was interested in reading, offering

“a full discussion of the ongoing tension between *limud* and *ma'aseh*.”

What I did hope to accomplish, and was gratified to learn made the point very clearly to hundreds of readers who contacted me, was the need for what Rabbi Meir Berlin once beautifully indicated is the highest meaning implicit in the term “*mesirat nefesh*,” a readiness and willingness to give up part of one’s *nefesh*, the potential for greater personal spiritual growth, in order to respond to the needs of others and the larger community. My biblical proof centered on the laws connected with ‘*eglah arufah*. Here it was the Sanhedrin whom the Torah, and the Talmud in its fuller discussion of the incident, held accountable because they did not do more to create those conditions which would have prevented the murder of an innocent victim. Surely the Sanhedrin could be compared in their level of learning to any present day Kollel “*Yungerleit*.” One might write highly emotional and self-righteous treatises about the value of every single word of Torah emanating from their lips and how the holiness of their *limud* would surely accomplish more from the universal perspective of the very survival of the world than all that their mundane involvement in secular matters of social affairs could ever achieve. But that is not the Torah view.

Even the *gedolei ha-dor*, the seventy greatest scholars of any generation, must be prepared to face their Creator free of the sin of murder—the crime for which they would be culpable if they didn’t disturb their learning time long enough to intercede personally in those communal activities which would prevent the poor from being forsaken and the helpless from being oppressed.

Am I insensitive then to the importance for Jewish survival of the total dedication to Torah study illustrated

by the Gaon of Vilna? To set up an imaginary “straw man” as example of a lifestyle which I, God forbid, would oppose is at least as unfair to me as the horrible implication of the correspondent that I could ever have applied to the Gaon of Vilna the vile canard that he “stagnated” by learning day and night. (More difficult to understand is why the word “stagnated” was put in quotation marks—as if it had ever been used in my original article applied to the Gaon or anyone else who spent his life dedicated to Torah study.)

The Gaon of Vilna was *sui generis*. I recommend careful study of the pertinent passage in the Talmud, *Berakhot* 35b, revolving around the famous dispute between Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai. Here Rabbi Yishmael propounded the view that we are to combine the study of Torah with a worldly occupation. Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai, deeply concerned with “what is to become of the Torah,” felt that total dedication to study would produce the miracle whereby all our work “would be performed by others.” There is a resolution to this *mahloket*: the final words of the passage are, “Said Abaye: Many have followed the advice of Rabbi Yishmael, and it has worked well; others have followed Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai and it has not been successful.”

Classic commentators such as the ‘*Ez Yosef* add the explanation that the Talmud in its final ruling did not want to reject the view of Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai totally. It merely indicated that “*Many* have followed the advice of Rabbi Yishmael and it has worked well.” For the multitude, that is the proper halachic ruling. For the very, very select few, in the category of Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai in terms of both personal saintliness as well as intellectual genius, the way of Rav Simeon may be justifiable.

The words of the Rambam on this issue are highly relevant. Read his strong censure of those who allow their pursuit of Torah study to free them from other responsibilities [*Hil. Talmud Torah* III:10–12]. Obviously even Maimonides himself did not consider himself worthy of emulating Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai.

The Brisker Rav, the Hazon Ish and other gedolim certainly understood quite correctly the need for the few especially gifted in a generation of Torah poverty to enrich us with the results of their total commitment. Yet even they, as well as all the other true giants of past generations, never felt they had the right to claim total exemption from communal affairs and from involvement with the needs of our people simply to allow them greater personal scholarly growth. How many *blatt* did they not learn when they attended the all important conferences dedicated to dealing with the problems Jews faced in Eastern Europe? How many *hiddushim* were not written because they were busy traveling to and fro to raise funds, to

intervene politically or to deal with the exigencies of Jewish survival?

The respondent writes that she is “confused about Rabbi Blech’s characterization of life in yeshiva representing a lack of accomplishment in terms of the *zibbur*.” Nowhere indeed do I characterize it as such. If yeshiva life is understood to mean study for the sake of then giving back to the larger Jewish community the benefits of one’s Torah learning as well as the involvement of a *ben Torah* in the needs of the community, then those who found *yeshivot*, teach children, interact with and are *mekarev* others, indeed are not guilty of the sin of omission. Those, however, whose potential will never allow them to be a Gaon of Vilna, a Brisker Rav or a Rabbi Simeon bar Yoḥai, and who spend their lives supported by the community in a quest for ever greater personal growth without intending ever to share the benefits with *Klal Yisrael* should, humbly and sincerely—without any trace of “bitterness”—reconsider their priorities.

RABBI BENJAMIN BLECH