
Torah u'Mada: A Re-Appraisal

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No theme has attracted more attention among contributors to *L'Eylah* than the self-definition of 'Modern' or 'Centrist' Orthodoxy. Rightly so, for at stake is the entire complex of questions about the proper response of Orthodoxy to the modern world.

One central issue is the question of the relationship between Torah and 'secular' studies. Samson Raphael Hirsch used the phrase *Torah im Derekh Eretz* to describe his ideal synthesis of Torah and the best of Western culture. Yeshiva University chose the maxim *Torah u'Mada*, 'Torah and Science'.

Jeffrey Woolf here argues that there are two ways of understanding the 'and' in 'Torah and Science'. One is to see it as joining together two separate spheres of human knowledge. The other, and Maimonidean, way is to see 'secular' knowledge as an indispensable part of religious knowledge. We arrive at knowledge of God, at least in part, through knowledge of His creation: the world and man. On this second view, which Rabbi Woolf advocates, 'and' signifies not intellectual tension but integration.

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The Crisis of 'Modern Orthodoxy'

'Modern' or 'Centrist' Orthodoxy has always struggled with and agonised over issues of self-definition, self-validation and self-justification. Yet, despite the incredible amount of time and effort, ink and paper dedicated to the definition of an Orthodoxy true to itself yet open to the 'Outside World', many of the discussions have been unsatisfying, the presentations flawed.

To begin with, arguments for *Torah u'Mada* (to use the best known expression of this idea) are inevitably highly apologetic, if not downright defensive. One senses acutely that as far as a number of the proponents of this philosophy or Orthodoxy are concerned, it is *their* responsibility to prove their case vis-à-vis the traditional community, and not the other way around. Neither are they themselves always convinced of the legitimacy of their own *Weltanschauung*.

Almost every presentation of 'Modern Orthodox' thinking contains, if it does not commence with, an apologia stating that the author would never think to criticise, much less doubt the legitimacy (if not the superiority) of the traditional Orthodox community. What the writer almost always proposes is a 'Me Too!' position, asserting that 'Modern Orthodoxy' can also be legitimate. The result of this is that the reader comes away with the distinct impression that the non-*Charedi* option within Orthodoxy is at best an ideologically weak, tactical compromise and at worst a self-serving, convenient capitulation to modernity.¹

No wonder then, that by all accounts non-*Charedi* Orthodoxy is in a state of pained self-examination and crisis, that it has not succeeded in either attracting a significant portion of the *Ba'al Teshuvah* movement or in creating a new generation of young ideologues and leaders. The unfortunate fact of the matter is that as presently espoused, *Torah u'Mada* is an outlook without élan and lacking in the self-confidence which has served *Charedi* Orthodoxy so well.

The root of the problem is, in my opinion, located in the conflicted self-image held by many Modern Orthodox thinkers (and most Orthodox Jews that I

know) and expressed by the slogan around which they rally, *Torah u'Mada*. If we carefully reconsider this phrase it turns out to be hopelessly flawed, self-defeating and innately contradictory. Consider if you will, the three component parts of this expression: 'Torah', 'and' and 'Mada' (Science).

The first, 'Torah' is of self-evident importance, but ironically is nonetheless problematic. This is due to the fact that study of Torah for most Orthodox Jews denotes not only an act of intellect and worship, but a specific modality and atmosphere surrounding that study, ultimately based upon the Yeshivot of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and their successor institutions. These Yeshivot were (as their successors still are) exclusively centred on Talmud study, to the practically total exclusion of other traditional Jewish scholastic pursuits (not to mention 'secular' subjects). Nevertheless a strong nostalgia for these Yeshivot permeates Modern Orthodox circles with the result that there abides a strong sense that authentic Torah study may only therein be pursued, with the corollary that any study pursued in a different manner lacks authenticity. For purposes of our model, this means that well-intentioned Orthodox Jews cherish a conception of Torah study which, as presently envisioned is at the very least inimical, if not downright hostile, to any attempt to widen the curricular and spiritual horizons of Orthodoxy.

The second, conjunctive element of *Torah u'Mada* is similarly ill-starred. 'And' suggests that something should, even ought to be, combined with Torah, something outside thereof. This however is the height of folly, since no loyal Orthodox Jew would have the temerity to suggest that the Torah can or should be combined with anything.² Indeed, precisely this point provides the most effective target for the bolts of writers opposed to Modern Orthodoxy, to wit, that the Torah can never be combined with anything else!³

Finally, use of *Mada* (Science) as the counterpoint to Torah is both inadequate because it ignores two thirds of human creative endeavour, namely the Humanities and the Social Sciences, which are equally eligible partners

of Torah. It is deceptive because there is a long tradition of Jewish scientific excellence existing alongside of Orthodoxy.⁴ Hence, it presents the most facile exit from a thornier problem.

Toward A New Model

Based upon a deep and abiding conviction in the vital necessity for a non-*Charedi* Orthodoxy, I would like to propose a radically different model for our community, one which has far-reaching consequences for the way we look at ourselves, at the *Charedi* community and at the world generally.

I propose that we take our cue from Maimonides, who is so often held up as the model of 'our' type of Orthodoxy.⁵ In a remarkable, and all too rarely noted passage at the beginning of the *Guide for the Perplexed*, the Rambam states:

It is not the purpose of this treatise to make its totality understandable to the vulgar or to beginners in speculation, nor to teach those who have not engaged in any study other than the science of the Law — I mean the legalistic study of the Law. For the purpose of this treatise and of all those like it is the science of the Law in its true sense (*Chochmat Ha-Torah al pi Ha-Emet*) [*italics mine?*].⁶

Maimonides here is discussing the study of philosophy, specifically Aristotelian philosophy. Nevertheless, he terms it 'the science of the Law in its true sense', as opposed to the 'legalistic study of the Law', namely Talmud and Codes to which it is at least equal.⁷ In other words, for Maimonides, philosophy was not a necessary addendum to Torah, it was an integral part of Torah, an essential part of the Revelation at Sinai without which Torah is somehow deficient.⁸ The Rambam clearly spells this out in the *Mishneh Torah*. In the first chapter of *Hilkhot Talmud*

Torah he writes:

The time allotted to study should be divided into three parts. A third should be devoted to the Written Law; a third to the Oral Law; the last third should be spent in reflection, deducing conclusions from premises, developing implications of statements, comparing dicta, studying the hermeneutical principles by which the Torah is interpreted, till one knows the essence of these principles, and how to deduce what is permitted and what is forbidden from what one has learned traditionally. This is termed Talmud.

For example, if one is an artisan who works at his trade three hours daily and devotes nine hours to the study of the Torah, he should spend three of these nine hours in the study of the Written Law, three in the study of the Oral Law, and the remaining three in reflecting how to deduce one rule from another. The words of the Prophets are comprised in the Written Law, while their exposition falls within the category of the Oral Law. *The subjects styled Pardes (Esoteric Studies) are included in Talmud.* [Emphasis added].⁹

And lest anyone err as to the definition of *Pardes* according to the Rambam, he sets his position forth in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*.

The topics connected with these five precepts, treated in the above four chapters, are what our wise men called *Pardes* (Paradise), as in the passage, 'Four went into *Pardes*' (*Chagigah* 14).

The four chapters of *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* referred to by the Rambam deal with Aristotelian metaphysics (Chapters 1-2) and Cosmology à la Ptolemy (Chapters

3-4). And yet this is what Maimonides identifies with *Pardes*, the most sublime portion of the Torah!¹⁰ The power of this declaration by the Rambam must not be underestimated. By asserting that philosophy was part of Torah, he willy-nilly demolished any arguments that he was grafting something alien onto Judaism.¹¹ On the contrary, he effectively turned the tables on his opponents by asserting that any Judaism not sensitised by rationalism was not only incomplete, it was tragically, though unavoidably, deficient.¹² To use a vulgarism, Maimonidean Judaism represents the *L-chatchila* with the alternative a distant, begrudged *be-di'avad*.¹³

In my opinion, the Maimonidean model is the only viable one for what is now called Centrist (once Modern) Orthodoxy. It presents Modern Orthodox Jews with an integrationist posture with which to approach the two poles of their intellectual and spiritual existence, namely Torah as traditionally conceived on the one hand and the entire scope of human scholarly, scientific and literary creativity on the other instead of the paralysing, demoralising polarity which is at present so typical. While not an easy task, the tensions which inevitably result from such an effort can be extremely creative and fructifying in nature.¹⁴ This, nevertheless, does present certain serious problems. The most obvious of course is the possible fate of more traditionally conceived Torah study. In brief, if so much now becomes 'Torah', then what happens to the Torah? Where are we to draw the line as to what is, or is not, to be included in our 'Torah in the wider sense'? What about issues in which there are conflicts between plain halakhic tradition and these new disciplines? Once again, the best place to look for answers is the model offered by the Master, Maimonides.

It is clear that the Rambam never intended to undermine traditional learning. He is quite emphatic that each student must acquire a solid talmudic education, and continue quality study of Torah in the traditional sense. Indeed, he himself was continually and deeply involved in both practical and theoretical Talmud study.¹⁵ Thus, this wider definition of what is legitimately Torah is in no way meant to displace *lehernen*. What it is meant to do is to state categorically, that Torah study and life (in the 'narrow' sense) must be enhanced and sensitised by other forms of study.¹⁶ In a word, the 'wider' Torah is a *Chumra* and not a *Kulah*. It requires more of the non-*Charedi* Jew in that he must master more intellectually than his Fundamentalist counterpart. It abjures him to struggle and to strengthen himself to exist in the world, rather than to go spiritually and intellectually 'soft' in a hermetically sealed community. He does this, moreover, from the firm belief that one's Torah knowledge is deficient in an exact ratio to one's deficiency in the knowledge of all other wisdoms.¹⁷

In truth, however, the positive requirement that we incorporate other disciplines into the Orthodox intellectual curriculum, goes beyond the ancillary and touches upon the essential. Judaism despite (or better because of) its absolute halakhocentricity, requires other disciplines to inform it, sensitise and spiritualise it. In the past this role has been served by study of Aggadah,¹⁸ by Bible Study,¹⁹ Philosophy,²⁰ or Kabbalah²¹ to name but a few. All of these have taught the way to the Service of God, via halakhic observance.

In our day, it is the Humanities along with the Social and Natural Sciences which present themselves before us for inclusion in this select club of disciplines, as forming a corpus of knowledge, the study of which can lead men to greater Love and Service of God. Mastery of these disciplines will deepen devotion to Torah by

exposing its unlimited wisdom, it will heighten appreciation of Creation in all of its lustre by insight into its intricacies, and integration of Jewish Studies into Torah will enrich our understanding of the dazzlingly rich and diverse manifestations of Normative Judaism, all halakhic, which have been true of our people in the past. This latter will have a truly liberating effect on Modern Orthodoxy in providing a dizzying collection of spiritual and curricular options within 'Shulchan Arukh' Judaism.²²

As to the overall question of what is to be included and what not, and what of conflicts between the elements of this model? These are questions requiring extensive thought and judicious judgement, and certainly far exceed the limited forum afforded here. Certainly, things which are totally indefensible halakhically are not to be included. This, of course, leaves a lot of leeway and room for large differences of opinion. This is to be expected. The important point, however, is that decisions in these matters should be made from the inside by *Talmidei Chakhamim* of high calibre who themselves accept and embody the model as presented. Such men, whose training, nurturing and support must be among our chief priorities, will certainly arrive at their decisions based on sensitised awareness of the issues, and not on blanket Fundamentalist Rejectionism, such as is all too often the case at present.

As for points of conflict, as was the case with Maimonides, in all cases of conflict the benefit of the doubt should be awarded to traditional understandings.²³ The mechanics of resolution should be worked out by this self-same leadership as a result of judicious, sensitised study.

Conclusion

The Rambam thought of rationalism as a process for intellectual and spiritual growth. Ideas are the food for that growth. I have offered this proposal in the hope of galvanising the process of growth which has stopped in the Modern Orthodox community. I firmly believe that following this model to its obvious conclusions individually, communally and especially institutionally will guarantee us our proper place as the vanguard of Orthodoxy both in the Diaspora and Israel. The creation of a militantly open, halakhically sound, intellectually broad and compassionately moderate Orthodoxy is the greatest *Kiddush Ha-Shem* of which we could ever hope to be a part.

Notes

- 1 Many of these points were put succinctly, eloquently and effectively by Lawrence Kaplan, 'The Ambiguous Orthodox Jew', *Judaism*, 25, 1979, pp.439-448.
- 2 This is despite the admonition of Mishneh *Avot* III:21. More representative is the exchange between R. Ishmael and R. Shimon bar Yochai, recorded in *Berakhot* 59b. It should be noted that R. Ishmael position has a strongly apologetic tincture to it.
- 3 Illustrative of this point are the responses elicited by R. Shimon Schwab from a number of prominent pre-war Roshei Yeshivah, as to the permissibility of secular studies. See L. Levy, *Sha'arei Talmud Torah*, Jerusalem, 1981, Part VII.
- 4 I am not denying that present-day scientific teachings do not challenge traditional ideas and understandings of Torah. What I am arguing is that scientific involvement has always had a secure place in the Jewish curriculum and hence poses fewer essential problems than do the other disciplines.
- 5 Most of what follows is based upon the writings of my teacher, Professor Isadore Twersky of Harvard University. The application of his interpretation of Maimonides to contemporary issues is mine alone for which I bear full and sole responsibility.
- 6 Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Shlomo Pines, Chicago, 1974, p.5.
- 7 Actually, Maimonides clearly held philosophy to be the superior subject, but his does not mean that he denigrated more traditional Torah study. On the problem generally see I. Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*, New Haven, 1979, Introduction and Chapter VI.
- 8 See *Guide for the Perplexed*, I:71 and III:51 ('the Place Metaphor').
- 9 *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* I:11-12. (Cited in I. Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, New York, 1972, p.65.)
- 10 See I. Twersky, 'Some Non-Halakhic Aspects of the Mishneh Torah', *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altman, Cambridge (Mass.), 1967, pp.95-118 esp. 106-116. The issue is discussed definitively in Chapter VI of his book on the *Mishneh Torah* (see above note 8).
- 11 In his own eyes, he was the restorer of a lost tradition. See *Guide* I:71.
- 12 In *Guide* III:51 the Rambam assigns a much lower place in the next world to *Talmidei Chakhamim* who have not studied philosophy, as opposed to those who have.
- 13 No doubt this conclusion was responsible, at least in part, for the aggressive character of the Maimonists in the following two centuries, see. A. Shohat, 'Clarifications of Episodes in the First Maimonidean Controversy', Hebrew, *Zion*, XXXVI, 1971, pp.26-60.
- 14 See Kaplan *ibid.* pp.446-447.
- 15 See the example cited by Twersky, 'Non-Halakhic Aspects', p.111, n.70 and the letter of Maimonides to his disciple, Yosef ibn Aknin in *Iggerot HaRambam*, ed. D. Baneth, Jerusalem, 1946, pp.68-69.
- 16 The major thesis is developed by Professor Twersky in 'Religion and Law', *Religion in a Religious Age*, ed. S. D. Goitein, Cambridge (Mass.), 1973, pp.69-82.
This is not to suggest that these cognate studies will necessarily have a direct bearing on the halakhic process, a process which operates by its own rules and canons. While some writers have albeit adopted this position, one for which it seems there is now some precedent (see Bezalel Safran, 'Leone da Modena's Historical Thinking', *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. I. Twersky and B. Septimus, Cambridge (Mass.), 1987, p.390, n.42) it is nevertheless problematic. See, *per contra* the remarks of Jacob Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah*, Hebrew, Jerusalem, 1984, pp.2-7.
- 17 See the citation of the Gaon of Vilna by his student, R. Baruch of Shklov, in the latter's translation of Euclid's *Geometry*, *Oeclides*, Hebrew, The Hague, 1780, fol.1b. The entire question of the involvement of the Gaon in and his support of 'secular' studies has been re-examined by David Fishman, *Science, Enlightenment and Rabbinic Culture in Belorussian Jewry: 1722-1804*, (unpublished PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 1985), Parts I and II.
For a later formulation of the same ideas, see the comments of R. Naphtali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (*Netziv*) in his commentary on the Pentateuch, *Ha'amek Davar*, on *Shemot* 37:19 and *Bamidbar* 8:2.
- 18 See Jacob Katz, 'Post-Zoharic Relations Between Halakhah and Kabbalah', *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. B. Cooperman, Cambridge (Mass.), 1983, pp.283-287.
- 19 See Twersky, 'Religion and Law', pp.76ff.
- 20 See above, note 10.
- 21 See Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah*, Part I, *passim*.
- 22 See Kaplan, p.447.
- 23 Cf. *Guide* II:25. ■