

RONALD JASPER

Dear Rabbi Lamm:

Having read your article in
the May-June, 1969 issue of Jewish Life,
I believe the author of the attached
has misstated your thesis and you
might want to reply.

I bring this to your attention
just in case you have not seen it.

Best regards from both Hedy and
myself.

R. Jasper

1-29-70

The Yeshiva World's Outlook On Torah and Secular Studies

The attitude of so-called "right-wing" Orthodoxy toward secular studies has become an emotionally-charged issue. It is therefore not surprising that in discussing this question in a number of recent articles, "modern-Orthodox" thinkers have misstated the position that they oppose. A case in point is Rabbi Norman Lamm's "Modern Orthodoxy's Identity Crisis" (*Jewish Life*, May-June, 1969).

Rabbi Lamm calls on modern Orthodoxy to stop being "apologetic—almost masochistically—towards those to the right of us," and asks for open assertion of the principle "that it is our *religious* duty, our *sacred* responsibility to live the whole Torah tradition in the world, instead of retreating. . . . We must make it explicit and clear that we are committed to secular studies . . . not only because of vocational and social reasons, but because we consider that it is the will of G-d that there be a world in which Torah be effective; that all wisdom issues ultimately from the Wisdom of the Creator, and therefore it is the Almighty who legitimates *all* knowledge; that a world cannot exist, and that certainly an independent Jewish state cannot exist in the contemporary world, in which some of the best of its brains and the most sensitive of its religious spirits will condemn as sinful and dangerous those profane disciplines which alone can keep it alive and prosperous. Our *religious* commitment to such principles must be as passionate and as faithful and as *Jewish* as was that of the Hirschian movement, especially in the first two generations of its history, in the context of conditions that prevail in this second third of the twentieth century."

Orthodoxy would be served by clarifying the views

of many of this criticized group (led and guided by the Roshei Yeshivos) on this issue.

The yeshiva world, by and large, does not disdain secular knowledge; our Sages prescribed a blessing which one must recite when seeing a non-Jewish scholar: "Blessed are You, G-d, our Ruler and King of the universe, Who has given of His wisdom to flesh and blood." All wisdom is recognized as Divine in origin. But when seeing a Torah scholar we are required to recite a different blessing: We praise G-d, "Who has apportioned of His wisdom to those who fear Him." The difference is two-fold: (1) Torah wisdom forever remains part of and unseparated from its Source; and (2) the Torah scholar is never separated from Him; he is not a mere *bosor v'dom* (flesh and blood) but a *yorei*, one who has an intimate relationship with the Giver of this knowledge.

A contemporary *Godol B'Torah* has characterized the difference in terms of the will of G-d being revealed in two areas: in the creation of the world, and in the giving of Torah at Sinai. The two types of wisdom differ in the manner in which they pass from the realm of the potential to the actual: G-d's will as revealed in the Creation is fulfilled perforce, whereas His will as revealed in Torah is observed through the operation of free will. The commandment "Let there be light" is instantly observed, but "Thou shalt not bow down to idols" is relegated to man's will.

When Chazal speak of *chochmos chitzoniyos* ("external knowledge"), they refer to the fact that the *Aseres Ha'dibros* (the Decalogue) are the *p'nimiyus*, the internal content of the *asorah ma'amoros*—the Ten Pronouncements by which the world was created. The wisdom manifest in the Creation is indeed Divine, but it is external and subordinate relative to the wisdom manifest in Torah, which is the internal content and center of Creation.

MENACHEM GREENBERG is a student of the Telshe Yeshiva, and a frequent contributor to *The Jewish Observer*.

"Into me," the Sages have the Torah say, "the Blessed Holy One looked and created His world." G-d revealed His external wisdom only to provide a vehicle for the revelation and fulfillment of the pre-existing free-will system, the Torah. As the Tanna, R. El'ozor, said (*P'sochim* 68b), "Were it not for Torah, the heavens and the earth could not survive" (see *Yirmiyoh* 33:25). The physical world depends on Torah for its existence. In his *Nefesh Hachaim*, R. Chaim Volozhiner writes that one moment's void of Torah study in the world would result in the collapse of the entire creation.

Thus, the Jew who fulfills his obligation to exercise his free will by upholding G-d's Torah commandments becomes *shutof l'ma'aseh B'reishis*—a partner in the Creation—for he helps insure its continued existence. Through the medium of Torah wisdom man can approximate G-dly characteristics and powers. Modern man, delving into the external wisdom of the Creation, has succeeded in describing, measuring, and exploring it; Yehoshua, by reason of his lofty spiritual attainments through the realm of Torah wisdom, was able to *alter* the Creation: "*Shemesh b'Giv'on dom!*" (Sun in Giv'on, stop!) he ordered—and the sun stopped.

The Jew is commanded to learn G-d's ways and His wisdom by studying Torah. To study the external disciplines before mastering Torah is to dote over the scenery and ignore the scenario: the physical world was intended only as a background setting for Torah, the core and real content of Creation.

The Divine nature of all wisdom yet leaves room for this division: some areas of knowledge are Torah and others are not.

Calculus and physics may have utilitarian religious significance, but cannot be equated with *Bovo Kamo*, which is part of the Written and Oral Law given at Sinai and which therefore has eternal, inherent, ultimate holiness, and takes priority in the Jew's intellectual life. We must study even the Talmud's laws of torts, by which we are not governed today, and its laws governing the Beis Ha'Mikdash, its construction, and the sacrifices, which are inapplicable today (just as we study the laws that are vital to everyday life), *before* we study even those non-Torah subjects which have a practical religious significance or application—because the former are an expression of G-d's will and ways, and our studious involvement in Torah brings us close to Him—closeness which is the goal of our existence (as the *Mesilas Yeshorim*, chapter 1, makes clear), and the latter are only indirect means towards this end.

But this philosophic priority has an overlay of practical necessity. The yeshiva world recognizes that the survival of Judaism and Jewry requires a system in which Torah and Torah education are of primary importance.

The Gemoro (*Sukka* 21b) states that even the *sichas chulin*, the seemingly non-Torah conversation of Torah scholars, is worthy of study. When a human being becomes saturated with Torah knowledge, the overflow of his delvings into secular matters becomes worthy of study. It would be foolish to deem the idle chatter of a would-be Torah scholar worthy of study *before* he becomes a scholar; his secular endeavors take on religious significance only after he has become a vessel of Torah. Similarly, on a communal level, secular studies can legitimately become a part of Orthodoxy's horizons only after it has created a generation of scholars with this super-saturated level of Torah knowledge. On the individual level, secular studies are valuable only when they can be successfully assimilated into the Orthodox youth's experience and Jewish worldview—and this is not possible unless he first becomes a *talmid chochom*.

From the very first exile to Babylonia, every physical displacement of the Jewish people has been accompanied by a spiritual displacement, an irreversible lowering of the level of Torah knowledge and study. The Torah leaders of every post-migration era knew that the need of the hour was to implant Torah learning throughout the new areas of Jewish settlement to restore such learning to its central position. Today's *Gedolei Torah*, after living through a Holocaust which dried up Europe's huge reservoirs of Torah, are devoting their lives to insuring the restoration of Torah.

Does such a critical situation allow for unbridled *sichas chulin*? Can Orthodoxy as a whole indulge in secular studies at the expense of the survival of Torah? Have our college youth attained even a fraction of the proficiency in Torah studies which they are achieving in secular studies? It is apparent that many within Orthodoxy have lost touch with Jewish value priorities in today's critical time for Torah.

Yeshiva College's undergraduate newspaper, *Commentator*, recently reported that a guest speaker decried the lack of Shabbos spirit among the students. He attributed this to the heavy burden of a double program which forced students to do their secular studies reading assignments on Shabbos, and suggested lightening the burden, if necessary *by reducing the program of religious studies*. Surely, Rabbi Lamm

would not agree that reduction of Torah study is a proper or effective remedy for lack of Shabbos spirit; and surely, his ideal of the "centrist" philosophy would not place secular studies ahead of Torah studies in a value-system with the expressed aim of insuring the survival of Torah.

Yet it seems that Rabbi Lamm pays only lip service to the primacy of Torah studies. Although he concedes that scientific studies "will never attain the rank of Torah and Talmud," his article aims at finding justification in *din Torah* and in *da'as Torah* for modern Orthodoxy's current attitudes and practices, among them an educational policy which he endorses. What is this policy?

The great majority of this group send their children to college immediately after completion of high school, which is certainly long before the boys have come even close to being *talmidei chachomim*. The fact that the parent professes that Torah is more important is of little significance when his son spends the bulk of his time in those studies which "will never attain the rank of Torah and Talmud." If he believes what he professes, why does the parent practice and justify the opposite: the subordination—or more commonly, the abandonment—of Torah study in favor of secular studies? Does Rabbi Lamm's failure to express concern over his group's not living by its own beliefs indicate that he is seeking a Halachic base not for the beliefs but for the actual practices of his "centrist mass"? How does Rabbi Lamm reconcile his concession of the primacy of Torah studies with his endorsement of modern Orthodoxy's educational practices?

Rabbi Lamm's very approach is unhealthy. The Jew, starting with no preconceptions, is supposed to look into the Torah to find his world-view and his behavioral guidelines. Rabbi Lamm seems to do the reverse: he firmly declares his commitment to modern Orthodoxy's present policies and then calls for the formulation of the preconceived world-view of modern Orthodoxy "in a manner that is Halachically legitimate." His statements that modern Orthodox Jews need "a clear world-view to which they can feel fully committed in good conscience" and that their leadership must fill this "tall order" further imply a desire to create a value system which will coincide with current practices rather than to objectively determine what the Torah wants of the Jew and then to educate the masses to adjust their lives accordingly.

The impropriety of Rabbi Lamm's approach is borne out by the attitude expressed in his article which

is most disturbing to a large segment of Orthodoxy: the "willingness to embrace all the risks" involved in acquiring secular knowledge and the undiminished determination to continue sending our children to the universities "despite the campus' recent notoriety." We must surely distinguish between the "kashrus" of certain areas of secular knowledge (within the aforementioned qualifications) and the manner in which such knowledge is acquired. There is nothing odious about knowledge of the universe and its people; but our universities today, especially on the undergraduate level, are not mere repositories of objective knowledge but agencies and propagators of a pervasive non-Jewish culture, fostering a world-view and behavior patterns which are inimical to Jewish life. To earn an academic degree, the student must take the half which is *kultur* along with the half which is objective knowledge; and even in the latter half, the assumptions and attitudes of those imparting this knowledge are usually anti-religious, resulting in the coloring of the information and ideas they impart in a way that reinforces their basic views and weakens all others. And, of course, the amoral climate prevalent in society today prevails on the campus with a pressure-cooker intensity.

Under such circumstances, many feel that responsible Orthodoxy cannot so flippantly pass over the serious dangers entailed in college attendance. One need only follow the lives of our yeshiva high school graduates as they go through college to detect the enormous tragedy Orthodoxy is experiencing through the spiritual loss of thousands of youngsters who are not sufficiently equipped Judaically to withstand the "liberating" secularist indoctrination that most college students undergo. Few within Orthodoxy would unequivocally advocate a policy which endangers the retention of the religious values and observances of its youth. Consequently, Rabbi Lamm's unconditional affirmation of college attendance for Orthodox youth, *even at the risk of weakening their Jewish ideals, practice, and commitment*, is an *extremist* policy and certainly cannot be a legitimate plank in a "centrist" philosophy of *avodas Hashem*, which Rabbi Lamm wants to see developed.

The yeshiva world, in essence, stands with awe before all manifestations of G-d's wisdom, but recognizes that it is His Torah that G-d commanded us to study and place at the center of our lives. A student may pursue non-Torah wisdom (1) only after he has mastered Torah knowledge, and even then not at the expense of Torah study; and (2) only if the method

by which he will acquire such knowledge does not conflict with Torah. Modern Orthodoxy's current practice meets neither requirement: (1) Youngsters begin higher secular studies at an age when they have barely scratched the surface of deep Torah understanding; and (2) the colleges in which such knowledge is sought do not offer it in a permissible manner, but rather clothe it in a modern secularist form which destroys its religious value; impart it in an intellectual atmosphere of doctrinaire rejection of religious values and in a social atmosphere of libertarian immorality; and mix it with a multitude of subjective studies which cannot be considered Divine wisdom and which, on the contrary, inculcate values and tastes which conflict with those acquired by the Jew from his immersion in Torah.

The yeshiva world compares the 21-year-old who has spent his four post-high school years in a yeshiva gedola with one who has spent them on a college campus and finds a huge difference in the quality and quantity of their Yiddishkeit. Even if the latter has remained observant, the yeshiva world sees in him, at best, a static future for Judaism, while in the former it sees a leap in the level of the Torah scholarship and observance which alone determine Jewry's fate.

Many young men from the yeshiva world who do attend colleges bemoan the *lange Yiddishe golus* which makes it difficult for Jews to properly fulfill the Torah ideal, and recognize the spiritual superiority of their *chaverim* in the yeshiva whose *bitochon* regarding their economic future they place in the Almighty—the *zon um'farnes lakol*—rather than in a sheepskin. They do not seek to idealize their compromise, as does Rabbi Lamm, who is so ashamed of "vocational necessity" that he labels it "the lamest of all apologies."

Two additional points in the section quoted from Rabbi Lamm's article require comment. His statement that secular disciplines alone can keep the State of Israel alive and prosperous is offensive to the religious spirit. A basic tenet of our tradition is that the fate of Klal Yisroel and Eretz Yisroel is determined in a manner different from that of other nations and lands. The Torah repeatedly warns that our people thrive on Torah study and observance and suffer when we replace them with other interests. And the Holy Land is just that: it does not tolerate sin and regurgitates sinners from its midst.

We do not believe that it was Israel's superior technology or intelligence which brought about its victory in the Six Day War and previous wars, but rather G-d's

Will in casting confusion into the enemy camp—an enemy which Israelis themselves admitted in the fearful, despairing days preceding the war was armed with superior weapons and led by expert foreign advisors. Nor can we attribute Israel's progress and prosperity to the Israeli technologists who operate their plants on Shabbos, the doctors who perform unauthorized autopsies, the agronomists who violate the *mitzvos hat'luyos bo'oretz*, or the legislators who vote to draft women into the army. Perhaps, rather, the daily loss of Jewish lives on Israel's borders can be traced to them. But if G-d has favored Israel with the grace necessary for its existence and prosperity, we might better attribute it to the power of the Torah, mitzvos, and prayers of the Torah community in Israel, which continues to grow despite the generally sad state of religious affairs there.

Surely an independent state needs educated professionals, but an independent Jewish state needs a technologist who is a *lamdon* to know how to keep essential services operating without *chilul Shabbos*; a learned doctor who will ask a rabbi a *sheiloh* when one needs to be asked; a farmer who knows how to observe *sh'mitoh*, *kil'ayim*, *trumos uma'asros*, and other such mitzvos; and politicians who legislate in accord with Halochah, not against it. The damage to Israel's safety and prosperity done by such professionals who are not *b'nei Torah* far exceeds the value of the worldly services they perform.

The second point is Rabbi Lamm's oblique reference to the Hirschian movement. The following quotation from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's commentary on Torah (*Vayikro* 18:4-5) should make clear his attitude concerning the place of secular studies in the life of the Torah Jew:

"Only as accessory knowledge and in as far as they serve to truly help the study of the Torah and are subordinated as the *tofel* (minor) to the *ikor* (major), are they to be studied. . . . We are not to consider Torah-knowledge as being the same as other knowledge, so that the Torah is for us only *another* branch of all other knowledge. . . ."

Great misunderstanding has resulted from Rabbi Lamm's article. He should correct this misunderstanding by clearly affirming the centrality of Torah in Jewish life as the prime object of educational endeavor and the supremacy of Torah values as the only criteria by which we determine whether, when, and in what fashion we may pursue secular non-Torah knowledge.