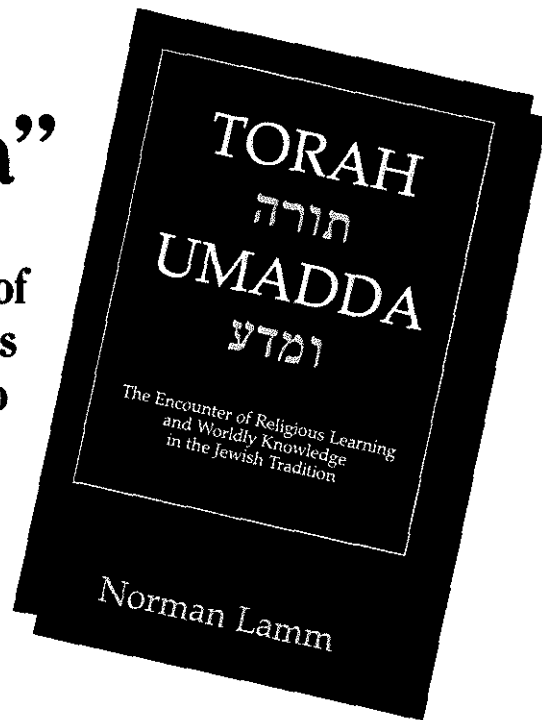


“Torah Umadda”

A critique of
Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm's
book and its approach to
Torah study and the
pursuit of secular
knowledge.



A NEW APPROACH TO AN OLD CHALLENGE

It is over 200 years since Moses Mendelssohn brought to the fore of German Jewry the issue of Judaism's stance towards the surrounding culture, and of the proper relationship between Torah learning and secular studies. And when Napoleon's armies spread the French Enlightenment 30 years later, the confrontation between Torah and secular ideals reached Eastern Europe as well.

But the nature of the struggle between Jewish life and modernity has changed over the years. The intellectual challenge to Torah today is, if anything, less than it was sixty years ago. It is doubtful that any current Rosh Yeshiva would feel the need to prove that Torah is deeper than Kant, as one well-known *mashgiach* did in post-World War I Lithuania. Nor is there any modern-day parallel to the intellectual attraction that socialism and Zionism once exercised on yeshiva students.

Though hedonism and materialism seem more powerful lures today than great ideas, modern, post-tech-

nological society poses its own unique set of challenges. The isolation in which Jewish communities once flourished is but a historical memory. It is inconceivable today to imagine large numbers of Jews unable to speak the language of their host country, as was true in Eastern Europe a century ago. The openness of American democracy, the pervasive nature of the modern media, and the fact that most of us are consumers of advanced technology, make it harder than ever to erect barriers to the outside world. With the world a far smaller, more integrated place than ever, knowledge of the surrounding society often seems more necessary than in previous generations.

Budding yeshiva students, kollel fellows, and Torah-directed laymen must all deal with a secular world, its resources of information and its value system. Through the years, *Gedolei Yisroel* have prescribed different approaches to this challenge. Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman, *ה"ר*, for example, addresses the question in a letter, published in *Koveitz Maamarim*, wherein he limits secular studies to areas that do not deal with prohibited topics—such as alien forms of worship or atheism—and that are essential for career preparation. (Of course, *psak halacha* re-

quires comprehensive knowledge of both the circumstances of the case being judged and the *halacha*.)

By contrast, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, exponent of *Torah Im Derech Eretz*, assigned a place to secular knowledge as an auxiliary of Torah knowledge, but only to the extent that it first pass the test of consonance with Torah. In the Hirschian worldview, there is no place for the sciences or the humanities as a source of values, or as a co-equal to Torah as an area of study.

In his recently published work, *Torah Umadda: The Encounter of Religious Learning and Worldly Knowledge in the Jewish Tradition*, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University, presents yet a different vision of the relationship between Torah learning and non-Jewish studies. Before examining his approach to this topic—which defines the Jew's view of himself in the broader world—it would be appropriate to briefly sketch the traditional approach to Torah learning.

THE PRE-EMINENT MITZVA: TORAH STUDY

The study of Torah, we affirm daily, is not only pre-eminent among the *mitzvos*, but equal

Rabbi Rosenblum, a member of a Jerusalem Kollel, is a regular contributor to these pages.

to all others combined (*Shabbos* 127a). That study is the necessary precondition for the proper performance of all other *mitzvos*. In addition, only through the study of Torah can one hope to achieve the spiritual refinement of soul which imbues the performance of all other *mitzvos* with its fullest perfection: "An ignorant man cannot be scrupulously pious" (*Avos* 2:6).

Most importantly, the study of Torah brings man into the closest contact possible with the Divine, for Torah was the blueprint from which the Holy One Blessed Be He created the world (*Zohar*: "He looked into the Torah and created the world"). Torah allows man to apprehend *Hashem* directly—nature and history, only indirectly. For that reason one who turns from the study of Torah to marvel at the wonders of nature is worthy of death (*Avos* 3:9; see *Pachad Yitzchak*, *Chanuka*, 4). Through the study of Torah, man attaches himself to the Upper Realms and thereby elevates and transforms both himself and the

Torah does not reveal its secrets easily. Those secrets are withheld from dilettantes seeking yet one more form of knowledge. Without total immersion, over a prolonged period of time, success in Torah learning is impossible.

physical world around him.

But the Torah does not reveal its secrets easily. Those secrets are withheld from dilettantes seeking yet one more form of knowledge. Without total immersion, over a prolonged period of time, success in Torah learning is impossible: "For every day that you abandon me, I will leave you two"

(*Yerushalmi Berachos*). One must be willing to forgo sleep, food, and financial security, if necessary, to hope to achieve greatness in Torah: "This is the way of Torah: eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure, sleep on the ground, live a life of deprivation—but toil in Torah" (*Avos* 6:4).

There is virtually no statement in the foregoing description with which Dr. Lamm does not agree at one point or another in *Torah Umadda*. At the same time, however, he undermines the traditional vision of Torah learning in significant ways through the open-ended approbation he gives to secular studies and the value that he attributes to these studies.¹

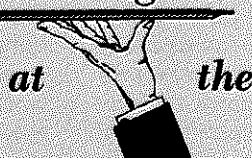
This unqualified endorsement is just one of the facets of *Torah Umadda* that gives us pause. In addition, Dr. Lamm offers various models for his approach toward synthesis of Torah and secular studies, and as we will show in Section II, none of these models seems to carry the meaning he assigns to them. Finally, he uses his formulation of *Torah Umadda* as the basis for what he identifies as a highly desirable creativity in Jewish Life. This vision of creativity is a troubling one, and will be addressed in the third section of this article.

I. TORAH AND MADDA AS COMPLEMENTARY AND EQUALLY VALID WAYS TO VIEW THE WORLD

Let us first examine how Dr. Lamm invests secular studies with intrinsic religious value: Throughout *Torah Umadda*, he dwells on the potential for "fascinating creativity" offered by a "synthesis" of Torah and Madda (p.2), on the op-

¹ This is not to say that secular knowledge has no worth or that the Orthodox community has not benefitted from it. We can readily concede that (1) a proper understanding of both science and history can bring one to a deeper appreciation of *Hashem* as both Creator and as the moving force in human history; (2) there are those who will require some post-high school education to earn a livelihood; and (3) the Orthodox community has benefitted in recent years from the infusion of the skills of *ba'alei teshuva* with broad secular educations and from their demand for sophisticated answers to the deepest questions of faith. But so broad are Dr. Lamm's claims for the value of secular education, that one might grant any or all of the above propositions without conceding anything of his essential thesis.

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portunity afforded by worldly knowledge "to create something new and original in the world of the spirit" (p.128). Worldly knowledge, he claims, offers to the religious Jew, "a large and embracing vision... and a more capacious theoretical framework into which [one] can integrate his most precious Jewish ideals" (p.85) than he would have in a pure Torah-only setting.

The effect of this emphasis on synthesis is to transform Torah and Madda into what appear as co-equal forms of knowledge. Torah and Madda are presented as composite parts of some primordial unity of all knowledge (p.141, 184), complementary—and equally valid—ways of viewing the world, just as the apparently contradictory descriptions of light as waves and as particles are both true and complementary (pp.232-236).

"Torah, faith, religious learning on one side, and madda, science, worldly knowledge on the other, together offer us a more overarching and truer vision than either one set alone. Each set gives one view of the

Creator as well as His Creation, and the other a different perspective that may not agree at all with the first....Each alone is true, but only partially true; both together present the possibility of a larger truth...."²

So great is the value of Madda for Dr. Lamm that the distinction between it and Torah finally blurs altogether:

"So long as we continue to learn Scripture and Oral Law, to acquire new knowledge and to refrain from forgetting what we know, then the study of the sciences and humanities is, in effect, the study of Gemara and thus a fulfillment of the study of Torah" [emphasis added] (p.165).³

This conclusion leads him to en-

²This extraordinary quotation gives us some idea of the vast gulf between Rabbi Lamm's *Torah Umadda* and the *Torah Im Derech Eretz* of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch—a theory which Dr. Lamm finds wanting in comparison to his own. Complementarity requires, Dr. Lamm argues, that the distinct methodologies of the Torah and secular studies be preserved and that secular studies not be taught from a Torah perspective. This position is diametrically opposed to that of Rabbi S.R. Hirsch, for whom Torah was always the litmus test for the value of any idea from non-Torah sources.

³We shall consider the validity of this view in Section II.

ertain seriously such questions as: Should one recite *birkhat ha-Torah* on entering the chemistry lab? May one study calculus all day and thereby fulfill his obligation of Talmud Torah? (pp.163-64).

Torah learning, devoid of secular knowledge, becomes in this view deficient. In a recent speech to Yeshiva University alumni entitled, "Is Chiddush a Chiddush?", Dr. Lamm maintains that one no longer hears of students in traditional *yeshivos* who are *oker harim* [lit., "uproot mountains"], blessed with creative insight, as opposed to being repositories of vast stores of knowledge. The very concepts of creativity and innovation, he maintains (based on two bits of anecdotal evidence heard second-hand), are suspect in such *yeshivos*.⁴

And in *Torah Umadda* he ex-

⁴One wonders what precisely Dr. Lamm means by creativity and innovation. If he is referring only to *chiddushei Torah*, then his comments reflect nothing more than ignorance of what is going on in traditional *yeshivos*. But if he is championing some other type of innovation, then his criticism of traditional *yeshivos* may indicate an even more fundamental divergence of approach.

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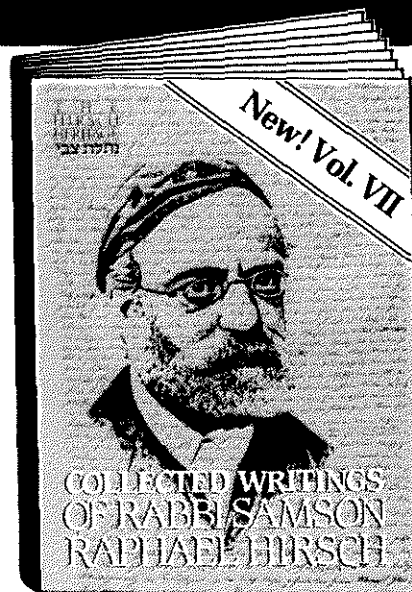
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presses his fear that the "ignorance of the facts, realities, and temper of contemporary life" of *poskim* produced by traditional *yeshivos* "will distort the knowledge base that goes into proper halachic decision-making" (p.230). He gives no examples of such distortions nor of the superiority of decisors with a secular education.⁵ By implying that the ability to be *oker harim* or

⁵ Formal scientific training is demonstrably not a prerequisite for acquisition of the knowledge base necessary for proper halachic decision-making. Many of the leading halachic works dealing with modern medicine and technology are the work of *poskim* with no formal secular training. The *posek* for the Machon of Technology and Halachah in Jerusalem is Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Halperin, who has no formal scientific training. Similarly, three of the major, recent works in the area of *Hilchos Niddah*, which in-

a *posek* depends on a broad secular education, Dr. Lamm leaves us puzzled as to how such talents were found among the Jewish people in the 32 centuries predating Yeshiva University. Similarly, one wonders why there are not infinitely more *chiddushim* in institutions that encourage secular studies than in the traditional *yeshivos*.

volves a great deal of medical knowledge, were written by *poskim* with no secular education—*Badei HaShulchan*, by Rabbi Feivel Cohen; *Gufet Halachos*, by Rabbi Joshua Wolhender; and *Shevet HaLevi*, by Rabbi Shmuel Halevi Wosner. With respect to a lack of knowledge of the "temper of contemporary life," Dr. Lamm is simply pointing to what is perhaps the central point of dispute between so-called Modern Orthodoxy and those to the "right": Is *halacha* to be brought into conformity with the "temper of the times"?


So great is the value that Dr. Lamm places on non-Torah studies that he is quite content to sacrifice the immersion in Torah studies which has always been considered the *sine qua non* of any substantial achievement in Torah (see *Mashiv Davar* 44). *Torah Umadda* is by Dr. Lamm's own admission an apologia for Yeshiva College (p.XIII) and its bifurcated curriculum—Torah studies from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. and the rest of the day in Madda, with it being left to the individual himself "to perform...the essential synthesis of the teachings that [make] up Torah Umadda" (p.35).

II. THE SEARCH FOR A PEDIGREE

The bulk of *Torah Umadda* is taken up with a search for "models" for Dr. Lamm's broad approbation of secular studies. Before considering these various "models," a few general observations are in order. The first is that Dr. Lamm cites virtually no sources in either the Talmud or the vast halachic literature in support of his position.⁶ Throughout he shows a decided preference for the most esoteric sources—e.g., Lurianic kabbala, the dicta of Rav Kook—precisely, one suspects, because the meaning of these passages is so notoriously hard to pin down, much less to attach to any particular educational program. Even within the "models" he does find, Dr. Lamm, by his own admission, only focuses on implications in the thought of those who were far removed from his approach: they were either explicitly opposed to secular studies (such as Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner or the great Chassidic masters) or their closest disciples did not find in their master's

⁶ Dr. Lamm attempts to finesse this point by terming the issue of educational policy one of *meta-halacha*, which is based on "one's total *Weltanschauung*" (p.72). He then quotes Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Bloch, ז"ל, the Rav of Telshe, who described the law in this area as contingent on the nature of the individual as well as conditions of place and time. But to say that one cannot give a decision for all people in all times and places is not to remove the issue from the realm of *halacha*. Moreover, Rabbi Bloch went on to give a series of guidelines that he considered valid for all times and places, guidelines that are all inconsistent with the curriculum of Yeshiva University.

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thought a sanction for broad secular studies (as in the case of Rabbi Avraham Isaac HaKohen Kook).

Dr. Lamm's presentation is throughout more imaginative and passionate than it is convincing. One small example will give some sense of the leaps to which his argument is prone.

Explaining *Hashem's* commandment to Avraham "*vehiyei tamim*—be whole" (*Bereishis* 17:1), the *Ramban* refers to the command to "be *tamim* with the Lord your G-d" in *Devarim* (18:13). There the command follows a series of prohibitions concerning all forms of foretelling the future through recourse to necromancy or other forms of magic. The *Ramban* thus explains that the earlier command is a requirement to attribute everything to G-d and nothing to any other source. Dr. Lamm claims (p.224) that this explanation accords with his own view on the possibility of religious growth through secular studies. Apparently he means that since everything comes from *Hashem*, study of any aspect of that world or of man's cre-

To say that there is no power in the world other than *Hashem* does not turn the study of every aspect of the created world and human society—i.e., sociology, anthropology, political science, etc.—*ipso facto* into Divine service.

ations becomes a study of *Hashem*.

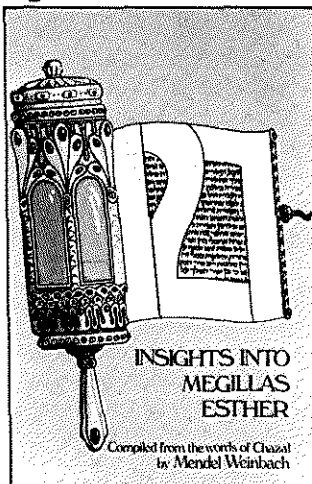
But to say that there is no power in the world other than *Hashem* does not turn the study of every aspect of the created world and human society—i.e., sociology, anthropology, political science, etc.—*ipso facto* into Divine service.

Major Thinkers... and College Students

Torah *Umadda* is replete with lists of major Jewish thinkers who had a wide familiarity with aspects of the non-Torah knowledge of their day (albeit nothing comparable to the literature or social sciences of our day). One can readily admit that such seminal figures as the *Ramban*, *Maharal*, and *Vilna Gaon* read in non-Torah texts without conceding that their example serves as a precedent for institutionalized secular studies. There is an absolute chasm between such giants and the average college student raised in a cultural milieu in which the non-Jewish influences may be at least as strong as the Torah influences, and who is often at least as familiar with present day sports heroes and popular culture icons as with Abaye and Rava. This is not, as Dr. Lamm seems to think, a mere practical distinction. When it comes to the reading of non-Torah sources, it depends on who is doing the reading; there is an absolute

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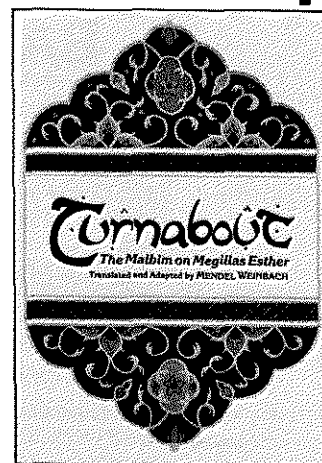
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There is an absolute chasm between a person whose perspective has been shaped by decades of intense Torah study and a young college student, who is simultaneously exposed to Torah and secular studies and left to work out their interrelation for himself.

chasm between a person whose perspective has been shaped by decades of intense Torah study and a young college student, who is simultaneously exposed to Torah and secular studies and left to work out their interrelation for himself. The difference is roughly the same as between inoculating a person with vaccine and then exposing him to smallpox, and exposing him first and only afterwards giving him the vaccine.

With the possible exception of the *Rambam*, the non-Torah studies of all those Dr. Lamm cites formed a small fraction of the time they spent in Torah learning, and, in every case, came only after acquiring a mastery of To-



rah to a degree unfathomable to us. This is a far cry from a day divided between Torah and secular studies—including art, dance, drama and modern literature—each with its fixed times. Most importantly, the non-Torah reading of each of these figures was based on a clear vision of how those readings were of an aid either to understanding the Torah, to conveying Torah, or to intensifying one's love of Hashem, or else related to their roles as leaders of their generation; it was not based on some diffuse notion that the study of any aspect of "G-d's world" is a reli-

gious act. Certainly there was no intention to "synthesize" Torah and worldly knowledge to create something new in the world of the spirit. The Vilna Gaon, for instance, bitterly criticized the *Rambam* for having been drawn after philosophy and for having been caused to err by the need to reconcile the plain meaning of the Talmud to his philosophy. All those who followed the *Rambam*, says the Gaon, refused to follow him in his attraction to philosophy (see *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 179 [13]).

In Search of a Source in the Talmud

On only one occasion does Dr. Lamm attempt to find sanction for his position in the Talmud (pp. 64-69). The *Gemora* in *Menachos* 99b records the position of R' Shimon bar Yochai that one fulfills the verse, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth; but you shall pronounce it day and night..." (*Yehoshua* 1:8), with the recitation of "*Shema*" morning and evening. The *Gemora* then records an exchange between R' Yishmael and his nephew in which the nephew asks if one such as himself *who has learned all of Torah* can learn Greek wisdom. R' Yishmael answers, on the basis of the verse from *Yehoshua*: "Find a time that is neither day nor night and you can learn Greek wisdom." Finally, the *Gemora* brings the opinion of R' Yonasan that the verse in *Yehoshua* is a blessing to *Yehoshua* for his devotion to Torah, not a *mitzva* at all.

Since R' Yishmael forbids Greek wisdom only on the grounds of *bittul Torah*, argues Dr. Lamm, and since two other *Tannaim* disagree with his interpretation of the verse on which he bases his proscription, therefore the majority opinion favors learning Greek wisdom. This is a truly remarkable conclusion in view of the fact that neither R' Shimon nor R' Yonasan said a word about Greek wisdom, and R' Shimon's opinion precedes any mention of Greek wisdom. Moreover, the entire question of Greek wisdom only arose with respect to one who knows the entirety of Torah. Finally, it must be remembered the R' Shimon is the same R' Shimon who

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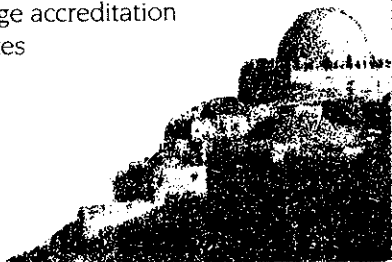
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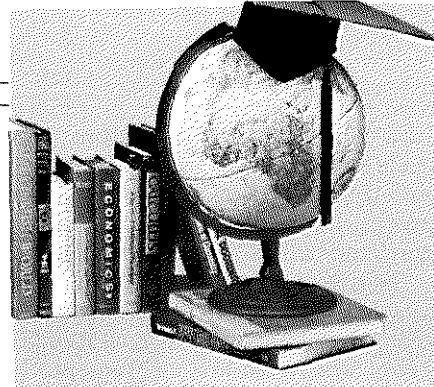
says elsewhere (*Berachos* 35b) that one should not even take time off to sow one's crops and gather them in the appointed seasons lest Torah be lost. Rabbi Lamm must assume a total reversal in R'Shimon's "hard-line" view regarding any temporal pursuits to read this innovative, permissive interpretation into the *Gemora* in *Menachos*. The accepted reading of R' Shimon's opinion in *Menachos* is not a softening of his previous stance, as Rabbi Lamm claims. Rather, in *Menachos* he was discussing a Jew's minimal obligation to study Torah; in *Berachos* he delineates the type of Torah study necessary to preserve the world (see *Tos. HaRosh* to *Berachos* 35b): The world does not exist, in R' Shimon's opinion, for the sake of those who fulfill only their minimal obligations. Read this way, R' Shimon's position is the very antithesis of support for non-Torah study of any sort!

"Textless Torah"

Dr. Lamm attempts to enunciate both a Misnagdic and a Chassidic model of secular studies. The former is based on the following syllogism: (a) Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner made a distinction between different levels of Torah learning—e.g., between the study of *Gemora* and *Tehillim*; (b) Nevertheless he did not view the study of *Tehillim* as *bittul Torah*; (c) Non-Torah studies may be considered a form of "textless Torah"; (d) Therefore non-Torah studies are not *bittul Torah*. Now, Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner made an absolute distinction between knowledge of G-d through nature and through Torah, and even between different types of Torah study. In this novel interpretation, Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner is stood completely on his head.

Dr. Lamm's entire argument that there is such a thing as "textless Torah" is predicated on the statement of the *Rambam* that those things that are called "*Pardes*" are included in the category of *Gemora* (*Hilchos Talmud Torah* 1:12). Dr. Lamm extrapolates from this statement to the conclusion that "the study of the sciences and humanities is, in effect, the study of *Gemora*" (p.165). But even the most

cursorial glance at the first four chapters of the *Rambam's Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*, where he discusses the knowledge included in the category of *Pardes*, demonstrates how unwarranted any claim is that the *Rambam* is discussing science or humanities, in general. The *Rambam* identifies the *Pardes* as two categories of knowledge—*ma'aseh merkava* and *ma'aseh bereishis*. Knowledge of the latter can be taught only to individuals, and knowledge of the former cannot be taught at all (*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 4:10-11). These caveats on the learning of *Pardes* would seem a death blow to any claim that such learning can serve as a basis for today's college curriculum. Obviously the *Rambam* is discussing some very deep esoteric knowledge; knowledge so deep that even some of the greatest men in the generations preceding him did not attain it; knowledge which should not be sought by anyone who has not "filled his belly" with the study of the *mitzvos* of the Torah (*ibid.* 4:13), a criterion not met by Dr.



Lamm's curriculum, no matter how *Pardes* is defined. And finally, it is knowledge leading directly to the fulfillment of one of five *mitzvos*: knowledge that there is a G-d; recognition that there is no other god; understanding of His unity; love of G-d; and fear of G-d. Any resemblance between the *Rambam's Pardes* and the modern college curriculum is purely coincidental.

Without the concept of "textless Torah," the entire house of cards, upon which the "mitnagdic model" is built, falls. Moreover, Dr. Lamm acknowledges, the inclusion of all sciences and humanities within the category of Torah poses another prob-

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lem: Torah is to be studied in "fear and trembling." Dr. Lamm knows too well that college students do not approach their studies with any reverence, much less "fear and trembling."

Though few of those studying in *yeshivos* themselves sustain the level of fear and trembling, at least there is a constant recognition of Torah study as activity of a radically different nature from any other. But when everything is defined as Torah, then nothing is Torah, and all sense of awe is lost.

The Chassidic Model

It is in part to surmount this problem that Dr. Lamm then turns to a "Chassidic model," according to which secular studies have religious significance as long as one approaches them with a generalized sense that all life is service of *Hashem*. Dr. Lamm ultimately finds the "Chassidic model" the most promising for his version of Torah Umadda, notwithstanding that the Chassidic leaders he quotes were uniformly hostile to all forms of secular study. Dr. Lamm's starting point is the concept of *avoda be'gashmiut*, Di-

vine service through one's mundane physical activities. The oft-quoted source for this concept in Chassidic writing is the Midrash that the Biblical Enoch was a cobbler, who recited the words, "Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever" over each stitch. And its most radical formulation is found in *Noam Elimelech*: "For the *tzaddikim*, there is no difference between the study of Torah and prayer [on the one hand]...or eating and drinking [on the other]. All are...[forms of] the service of the Creator, and it is merely a matter of switching from one form of service to another." Asks Dr. Lamm, if *Hashem* can be served through eating and drinking, why not through intellectual activity such as non-Torah learning?

Rabbi Lamm himself admits that the radical formulation of *avoda be'gashmiut* found in *Noam Elimelech* should not be taken too literally.⁷ The underlying idea that every physical

⁷ The *Noam Elimelech* is, to say the least, an odd choice as the celebrant of physicality. He was renowned for his asceticism. In his famous *Tzettel Kattan*, he writes that after reciting the blessing over bread, one should always recite the following prayer: "...I am not eating for any physical pleasure,

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action can be elevated if it is performed in the prescribed manner, that nothing we do in life is spiritually neutral, is hardly revolutionary. But to say that eating may be transformed into a *mitzva* by the recitation of a *bracha*, is far from saying that one should become a gourmand, spending vast amounts of time concerned with the food he consumes. If eating itself becomes one's focus, even with the recitation of a *bracha*, one becomes a *naval be'reshus*

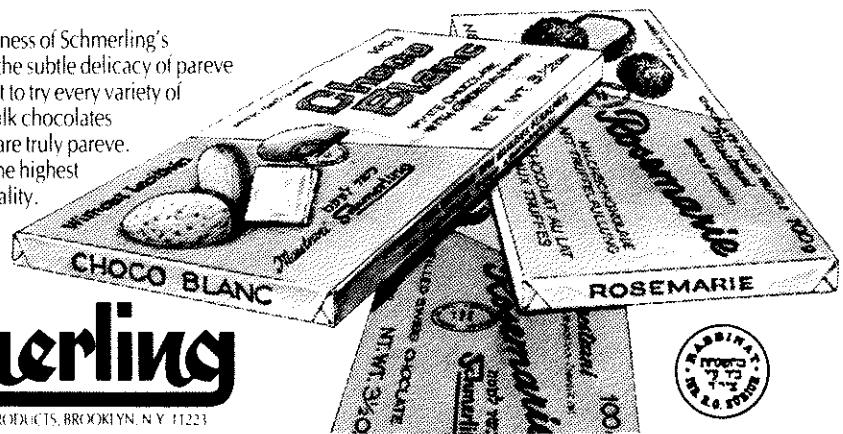
chas veshalom, but only so that my body should be strong and healthy for the service of *Hashem*...." Any time a person is not involved in Torah study, he advises, he should occupy himself with thoughts of being cast into a roaring flame for *Kiddush Hashem*.

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haTorah—a disgusting person, who nonetheless has not transgressed the Torah's minimal obligations. There is certainly no warrant, then, in the idea of *avoda be'gashmiut* for focusing large parts of one's mental energy on inquiry into secular disciplines. Chassidism may have begun, in part, as a reaction against the exclusive focus on the intellectual activity of learning Torah; it was certainly not the substitution of one form of intellection for another.

Moreover, Rabbi Lamm points out, within Chassidus itself, there was a wariness of radical, potentially antinomian extrapolations from *avoda be'gashmiut*. That is why that form of service was specifically limited to *tzaddikim*, as we saw in the quoted passage from *Noam Elimelech*. Both the Midrash about Enoch and the restriction of *avoda be'gashmiut* to a spiritual elite strongly suggest that highly refined *kavanos* (intentions) are central to the doctrine. Thus the concept of *avoda be'gashmiut* cannot solve Dr. Lamm's problem that no one approaches secular studies with the *kavana* required to confer upon those studies religious value. (The problem is hardly solved by the recitation of prayers such as the one Dr. Lamm composed to be recited upon entering the chemistry lab or opening a sociology text—p.210.)

III. TWO VISIONS OF CREATIVITY

The weakness of Dr. Lamm's "models" indicates that they were meant to be merely suggestive, not precedents in the sense used in halachic argument. One senses that Dr. Lamm does not consider such precedents necessary. This impression is confirmed by a mini-essay on the principle of the decline of the generations—*hiskatnus hadoros*—which suddenly appears in the midst of Dr. Lamm's treatment of the *Rambam*.⁸ After acknowledging

⁸ Dr. Lamm is ostensibly responding to Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman's argument that the *Rambam*'s very greatness precludes him from being used as any kind of precedential model for institutionalized secular education. But nothing Dr. Lamm writes in any way diminishes the point that no comparison is possible between the *Rambam*—perhaps the greatest Jewish figure of the post-Talmudic period—and the average college student.

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that the decline of the generations is a pervasive theme in both Talmudic and post-Talmudic rabbinic literature, Dr. Lamm proceeds to argue that nevertheless such decline is neither inevitable nor does it *always* occur in *every* respect. Each generation is left its own *makom...le'higader bo*—space in which to grow (Chullin 7a). The unstated conclusion is that there are no satisfactory precedents for Torah Umadda, but nonetheless, even at this late date in Jewish history, one may completely transform the age-old content and form of Jewish education.

Dr. Lamm does attempt to establish the right to introduce changes by adducing implication that later generations theoretically overrule earlier ones, but these attempts amount to little more than quibbles and trivial qualifications. Dr. Lamm cites the Talmudic rule that a later *beis din* greater in wisdom and numbers can overrule the *takanos* of an earlier *beis din* (p.92), as proof that the pattern of decline since Sinai is not theoretically inevitable. But as a practical matter, we find no such instances; nor would

a few such examples vitiate the general principle of decline. Moreover, it is possible that such a *beis din* greater in wisdom will one day exist—but only in the days of *Moshiach*. No serious student of *Gemora* has ever failed to be overwhelmed by his sense of inadequacy vis-a-vis earlier generations, and this feeling is reflected in the writings of the greatest scholars throughout the ages. Similarly, Dr. Lamm attributes to Rabbi Yosef Karo the view that the refusal of *Amoraim*

(Rabbis of the Talmud) to overrule *Tannaim* (Rabbis of the *Mishna*), or *Acharonim* (later commentators) to overrule *Rishonim* (early commenta-

⁹ This interpretation of voluntarism is rejected by the Chazon Ish; see exchange of letters with Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman in *Kuntras Inyanim*, Bnei Brak 1975.

tors), is only out of voluntary self-restraint (p.93)⁹. But again, that restraint has been virtually universal and reflects later generations' feeling of their comparative inferiority.

Finally, one is at loss to see what Dr. Lamm hopes to prove by quoting the Chazon Ish's statement (p.101): "I have taken it upon myself to search in

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the Talmud as best I can, even though [my conclusions] may go against the *Rishonim*." As the Chazon Ish specifically writes, the failure to carry on that search would reflect a lack of true involvement in Torah study, without which it is not possible to understand the *Rishonim* either. And in terms of

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fixing the *halacha*, the Chazon Ish definitively states in the quoted passage that one may not follow his own opinion if there is an explicit contrary *psak* (halachic ruling) in the *Rishonim*; on many occasions he refused to follow in *psak* his own reading of the *Gemora* against that of the *Rishonim* (see *Chazon Ish, Yoreh De'ah* 2:23).

It may be true, as Dr. Lamm observes, that a dwarf on the shoulders of a giant sees further than a giant. But not every dwarf succeeds in climbing onto the shoulders of a giant; most dwarfs remain just dwarfs.¹⁰ Only by committing every fibre of one's being to learning can one begin to climb at all. The traditional attitude to preceding generations is nicely captured by a story about Rabbi Aharon Kotler, ז"ל. Reb Aharon once celebrated having found a solution to a difficult *Be'ur HaGra* which had puzzled him for years. "I was only privileged to find a solution," said Reb Aharon, "because not once in those many years did it occur to me that the problem lay with the Gaon and not with me."


Creative Understanding or Innovative Legislation?

After all the quibbles with the principle of the decline of the generations, what remains is only Dr. Lamm's plea that we not act as if there is no place in Judaism for *chiddush* or creativity (p.91). The need for creativity runs through *Torah Umadda* as a major subtheme. But Dr. Lamm confuses two types of creativity: the Jewish creativity, which is a byproduct of one's fullest efforts in Torah, and a more modern

¹⁰ Both with respect to the dwarf metaphor and his discussion of Niels Bohr's complementarity theory in the final chapter, Dr. Lamm confuses metaphor with proof. With respect to a physical quality such as height, it is easy to see how the height of a dwarf can be added to that of a giant. It is far less clear, however, that we can add to the Torah vision of earlier generations whose grasp of the entirety of Torah was far more all-encompassing than our own and whose perfection of *middos* is unknown today. Of course, the process of *halachic* decision-making involves much more than simply looking up what was decided previously. New questions are constantly arising, whose proper resolution requires the *poseik* to reason both on the basis of his vast knowledge of Talmud and of relevant *halachic* precedents. Creativity is thus a requisite of the *halachic* process, but not its goal.

idea that stresses novelty for its own sake, and makes leaving one's mark on the world the self-conscious goal of life. Every individual Jew is a creator born with the potential to transform the world through his Torah study and performance of *mitzvos* [see Dovid Freund, "Thinking About Trees: The Jew as Creator" in Janu-

ary, 1992 JO—ed.]. And every Jew must strive to fulfill his unique role in recreating the perfect world. But his ability to thus transform the world does not depend on performing a *mitzva* no one has ever performed or arriving at a conclusion in the *Gemora* that no one has ever reached. If one comes to a full understanding



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of a *Tosafos* through the complete engagement of all his mental abilities, that too is a *chiddush*. In our time, said Rabbi Chaim Brisker—perhaps the most creative Talmudic thinker of the past 150 years—a *chiddush* is achieved by properly understanding the *Rishonim*.

The desire to leave one's mark, as a goal in itself, is fraught with danger. Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (*Meshech Chochma* to *Vayikra* 26:44) explains that it is part of human nature to seek to make a name for oneself—the more talented the person, the greater the urge to add something new. And it is precisely the lack of ability to add to the Torah of earlier generations which led Jews in *golus* to look for new ways, outside of Torah, to place their stamp on the world, and what inspired those Jews of Rabbi Meir Simcha's time who found their greatest source for innovation in German culture, to replace Jerusalem with Berlin.

IV. AND WHY NOT?

Dr. Lamm is far too astute, and his association with Yeshiva University far too long-standing, for him not to recognize the very grave dangers inherent in an open approach to virtually every aspect of secular knowledge. He writes: "Madda certainly does confront students with an array of ideas, many of

By juxtaposing the high price paid for Torah Umadda with grand rhetoric about its potential spiritual achievements, Dr. Lamm implies that it is worth the cost. But the reader is given precious little evidence upon which to reach that conclusion by himself.

which are thoroughly incompatible with traditional Jewish beliefs, and many more of which pose indirect challenges to the premises of religious faith. Moreover, the lifestyles of modernity, enshrined in literature and often justified by the social sciences, are inimical to sacred Jewish values of modesty, sexual temperance, family cohesiveness, respect for parents and elders, and the like" (p.49). And elsewhere he gives a laundry list of the underlying assumptions of mo-

dernity, which are "enshrined in literature and...justified by the social sciences": the substitution of experience for tradition, a rejection of authority, radical individualism and preoccupation with the self, a repudiation of the past, secularism, and the rejection of particularisms in favor of universalism (p.12).

"Many religious casualties have already resulted from this historic program of Torah Umadda, and there are more yet to come," Dr. Lamm acknowledges (p.134). But despite this acknowledgement, Dr. Lamm consistently downplays the danger that lies in an exposure to heretical ideas or in an educational structure that conveys the message to students that Torah and non-Torah studies are fully compatible. Objections on these grounds are consistently dismissed as "prudential," not theoretical (pp.149-50). And even the admission of casualties past, present, and future is dropped as an aside within a passage filled with high-flown rhetoric about the infusion of the holy into the profane promised by Torah Umadda.

Though he frequently notes that the particular vision of Torah and Madda for which he is an apologist is at least fifty years old, Dr. Lamm does not examine that history for the evidence needed to perform the cost-benefit analysis. We are neither told the precise nature of the casualties nor shown the examples of a grand synthesis of Torah and Madda, the spiritual monuments which would justify these costs.

Proof of the dangers posed by modernity is all about us. The history of the last 200 years of Jewish life is largely that of the attrition of all religious knowledge and practice in the face of the attractions of modernity. Aspects of modernity that may appear innocuous at first have frequently turned out to be wolves in lambs' clothing. The example of Moses Mendelssohn is instructive. Despite his own *mitzva* observance, his attraction to contemporary German culture left him without a single Jewish descendant within two generations. A reader of the recent alumni magazines of Yeshiva University and its affiliated professional

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schools would have come across pictures of alumni dressed up in formal attire for a night at the opera; or listings of honorary degrees being bestowed on great authors who are celebrated for their works that ridicule the yeshiva world or cast doubt on the veracity of Torah. Loss of faith is far from a problem of the past. A recent demographic survey ¹¹ of American Jewry shows that, despite tens of thousands of *ba'alei teshuva* and an extremely high birthrate among Orthodox Jews, the number of those identifying themselves as Orthodox is not growing numerically—i.e., the defections equal the newcomers. Certainly there are too many spiritual defections from every sector of Orthodoxy for any group to greet these findings with equanimity. But it is also undeniably true that by far the largest percentage of losses are experienced by those who define their Orthodoxy in terms of their modernity.

Dr. Aaron Rakefet, a prominent author and Modern Orthodox educator, recently told a group of Yeshiva University alumni that "parents have been so busy giving their children the message that they can live a normal life" that their children have a hard time recognizing that there are any limits at all (*Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 31, '92).

Dr. Lamm's primary response to those fearful of the consequences of the exposure of young Jews to the full panoply of secular knowledge and of an Orthodox school sponsoring the acquisition of that knowledge is: the infiltration of modernity into our lives is, in any event, inexorable (pp.49-50). That is like arguing that because one will get his feet wet jumping on rocks across a stream, he might as well plunge into the water. Just two sentences later, Dr. Lamm characterizes the current revival of "shtetlism" as an astonishing phenomenon (p.49). In other words, the traditional yeshiva world has, to a large extent, protected itself against foreign ideas even while functioning in the midst of a modern, technological society, but in his view that is worthy of a perjorative. Cutting ourselves off from *Madda*, Dr. Lamm warns, risks consigning Judaism to the status of a sect—forever outside the main-

¹¹ by the Council of Jewish Federations


stream of history—not a nation (p.51). But a people that has preserved its national identity over two millennia, without land or political power, bound together only by a common allegiance to Torah, needs no instruction in the true meaning of nationhood. Dr. Lamm, however, is concerned that we risk eschewing any role in evolving human history. We, however, need not become like all the nations to have an impact on the world. The Jewish people are a nation destined to dwell alone, a nation whose leading role in bringing the world to its ultimate fulfillment lies precisely in preserving its distinctiveness from all the other nations. A believing Jew, far from feeling himself removed from the fate of the world, knows that ultimately he has been blessed with the greatest capacity to improve the world. As Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner teaches in *Ruach Chaim*

The effect of this emphasis on synthesis is to transform Torah and *Madda* into what appear as co-equal forms of knowledge.

(1:3), *Hashem* desires to shower the world with all manner of blessings, but can do so, *k'veyachal*, only when we fulfill His will, which is known to us through the Torah. The Jew, then, has the greatest potential to serve as a conduit for blessing to the whole world.

The only other concrete argument offered by Dr. Lamm for the need to

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invest years in the acquisition of worldly knowledge is that such knowledge is a prerequisite to reaching out to secular Jews, to being able to speak their idiom and to counter their arguments.¹² This argument

¹² Dr. Lamm also suggests that we must know the demonic aspects of secular culture so that we can defend ourselves (p.51). After the Holocaust, however, it is doubtful that we need any instruction in the demonic potential of various secular ideas or that our defense lies in schoolbooks. Moreover, the standard college curriculum is value-free, dealing with all branches of knowledge on equal terms, as if Torah and Shakespeare (*lehaudil*) were of identical validity.

**The Ultimate Trade-Off:
For What Benefit?**

Dr. Lamm ultimately fails to provide any reason why one should lessen his study of that which brings us the World-to-Come for that which primarily enhances our appreciation of this world; why one should exchange the study of Torah, through which Hashem is apprehended most directly, for the study of nature, through which He can only be deduced. The Torah is eternal and unchanging; much of Mada is ephemeral, with new "discoveries" supplanted in their turn. (Dr. Lamm himself critiques both the Rambam and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch for having been enchanted with philosophies—neo-Aristotelianism and German idealism, respectively—which today seem outdated.)

To Dr. Lamm, the distinction between a Jew and a human being is an "artificial" one (p.143). And thus he is led to the celebration of a life of exploration of what it means to be fully human (p.216)—a life in which the study of the music of Beethoven, the painting of Cezanne, and the poetry of Wordsworth takes its rightful place alongside the study of Torah, for that study reveals the potential with which the Creator has imbued those created in His Image (p.223).

The distinction between a Jew and a human being, however, is fundamental: All men are created in the Divine Image; only Jews are called children of the Omnipresent. And that special closeness is reflected in the gift of the Torah, given to Israel alone (Avos 3:18). Our task in the world is not to discover what it means to be fully human, but what it means to be fully Jewish; it is to develop ourselves in those areas given to us alone and thereby reveal Hashem's Will to mankind. ■

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