

**Yehudah Levi**

# **TORAH STUDY**

*A Survey of Classic Sources  
on Timely Issues*

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## The Opinions of the Torah Leaders of the Past Generation

In the beginning of chapter 2, we noted that R. Samson Raphael Hirsch regarded the study of science as a necessary adjunct to the fulfillment of Torah life. Elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> he explains himself at length, but does not detail the manner in which such study should be undertaken after elementary school. About sixty years ago, Jews began to question university study, which had been common among observant Jews in Western Europe (like his teacher, R. Ya'akov Ettlinger, the author of *'Arukh LeNer*, R. Hirsch himself briefly attended university). Eastern European Jewry equated this practice with the then rampant Haskalah, which attempted to eradicate the "backward" Jewish Orthodoxy. Consequently, when young Shime'on Schwab came from Germany to study in the Eastern European yeshivoh, he asked the Torah authorities of Lithuania and Poland for their opinion.

The Gerer Rebbe, R. Avraham Mordekhai Alter, refused to answer in detail, but R. Schwab quoted him to me thus: "It is certainly forbidden to study alien wisdom. But we must surely look out for the dignity of R. Hirsch, the saint of Frankfurt, who was a living *Mussar Sefer* (book of ethics)." Note that Rav Hirsch is credited with successfully preparing strictly Orthodox youth for university attendance.

(On the other hand, R. Pinchas Menachem Alter, R. Avraham Mordekhai's son, informed me that his father had not prohibited secular study entirely. He even allowed some people to study medicine in Berlin, giving them specific guidance; whoever followed these instructions came to no spiritual harm.)

Three yeshiva deans and one rabbi responded at length: R. Avraham Yitzchak Bloch of Telshe, R. Elchanan Wasserman of Baranowicz, R. Barukh Ber Leibowitz of Slobodka-Kamenitz and R. Yosef Rozin of Rogozov.<sup>2</sup> In evaluating these responses, we should recall the impact of the Haskalah in Eastern Europe. Many yeshiva students were drawn

away from the yeshiva, to the university, believing that a general education promised wealth and honor, in contrast to their peers' life of grueling poverty and deprivation. Nearly all these university students ultimately abandoned Torah.

### 1. R. Avraham Yitzchak Bloch<sup>3</sup>

R. Bloch differentiates between four types of study:

#### (1) Heretical studies

He forbids academic disciplines tending toward heresy, such as the philosophy that is taught at universities nowadays, which is generally based on premises inimical to faith. Nevertheless, select individuals may study them to achieve one of three goals:

- 1 To learn to guard against them and caution others.
- 2 To know how to answer a heretic.
- 3 To pursue some other Torah objective.<sup>4</sup>

But even then, only if:

- 1 "They have perfected a Torah outlook and saturated themselves with Talmud."
- 2 They study them part-time only.
- 3 "They do not assimilate them into their mental make-up."

#### (2) Scientific studies mixed with some heresy

"True scientific matters, which have become mixed with heretical material, such as natural science, medicine, etc... are not prohibited, but one must separate the chaff from the wheat... and it would be very welcome if textbooks were written by God-fearing men involved with Torah." Here, too, certain conditions must be met:

- 1-2 A youth should be taught them "after he has already learned Torah and gained faith from the holy books." Yet one should "teach him the basics [of science] in his early youth, before Talmud study becomes obligatory at age fifteen,<sup>5</sup> for then he must channel all his thoughts and time into the Talmud, examining scientific works only occasionally, when he needs a respite from his Torah studies. [This

restriction applies] unless he studies for the purpose of earning a livelihood.”

- 3 “He should learn from a God-fearing teacher.”
- 4 “One must not make these studies intrinsic to the curriculum; rather, they must be secondary.”

### **(3) Religiously neutral studies**

“Academic subjects that do not impinge on religious matters, such as mathematics, engineering, and foreign languages, are basically not prohibited, although they involve a neglect of Torah study.” They are permitted only:

- 1 “For girls, who are exempt from the obligation to study Torah.”
- 2 “For those whose position requires it.”
- 3 “As a profession.”

The conditions for such study are:

- 1 “Precedence—in both importance and time—must be given to Torah study, even for girls... These studies must not be considered to be on the same level with Torah study; rather, they are like learning a profession.”
- 2 “Every father must aspire to raise his son to study Torah.”
- 3 “No general education may be established [in these fields by the Jewish community], lest the world become devoid of Torah disciples.”<sup>6</sup>

### **(4) Literature**

“It is certainly improper to waste time studying and reading literature and all the useless popular studies, as one can learn proper conduct from our Torah. [This is] especially so because such literature contains erotic and [other] forbidden material.”

## **2. R. Elchanan Wasserman<sup>7</sup>**

Based on Rambam’s prohibition of reading idolatrous texts, R. Wasserman forbids secular studies involving heretical works, since heresy is

worse than idolatry.<sup>8</sup> Rambam actually read such books, but R. Wasserman assumes he did so only for the sake of a mitzvah, and “a mitzvah emissary is safe from harm.”<sup>9</sup> He acknowledges that this principle cannot be invoked if the mission is especially dangerous, but maintains that Rambam, who was particularly pure and wise, surely prepared himself for his venture, thereby rendering it relatively safe. Nonetheless, such preparation cannot protect “inferior beings like us.” In addition, if there is a danger of socializing with gentiles, it is forbidden.<sup>10</sup>

He continues:

If he engages in secular studies to learn an occupation and gain a livelihood, there is no prohibition, for the learning of a trade is a mitzvah... But if one sees that his son yearns for Torah, and is gifted enough to become a Torah leader, in regard to such a son, R. Nehorai said: “I will neglect every occupation in the world and teach my son only Torah,” although R. Nehorai did not dispute the obligation to teach one’s son a trade.<sup>11</sup>

But if one’s profession does not require this study, and he only wants to amuse himself with it, this might be forbidden because it wastes time that should be devoted to Torah study... Aside from this, perhaps he should not study them regularly, lest they become as important to him as the Torah... For indeed, all science is necessary to maintain the world, but it is not the goal, only the means thereto... and one who makes secular studies his steady occupation seems to indicate that they are an end in themselves, which is contrary to the Torah.

### 3. R. Barukh Ber Leibowitz<sup>12</sup>

In contradiction to the preceding two *roshey yeshivah*, R. Leibowitz appears to oppose secular study entirely. He writes: “Once one tastes Torah, he understands how hateful secular studies are.”

He also cites his teacher, who permitted one man to send his son to a place where Sabbath desecration would be required, in order to keep him out of the army (which, apparently, was life-threatening), but forbade another to send his son to the “Gymnasium” (high school) for the same purpose—for this involved heresy, which is forbidden even if one’s life is threatened.

R. Leibowitz quotes Rema to the effect that all of one's time should be devoted to Torah subjects, and only occasionally may he learn secular subjects that do not involve heresy. From this, he deduces a ban on science study, even for the purpose of acquiring a profession, even though learning a trade, as such, is obligatory.

To explain this, he defines two kinds of Torah neglect:

- a) Simple neglect, which results from any activity which will not compete with Torah in importance.
- b) Active neglect, by studying matters designed to replace the Torah as the ultimate aspiration. These are completely prohibited.

To earn a living, one may engage in the former, but not the latter:

As part of the obligation to study Torah, one must consider the Torah paramount and not believe, God forbid, that any other knowledge or human endeavor is comparable. Otherwise, God would have revealed it on Mount Sinai. Rather, every person should resolve that the Torah reigns supreme, and nothing else leads to human perfection—for [if it did,] it would make the Torah secondary. Furthermore, he must not combine any other matter with Torah. Although one spices food to enhance its flavor, mixing other disciplines with the sacred Torah would degrade it. Furthermore, if one learns something steadily and it is important to him to demonstrate his virtuosity, this is called "abandoning the Torah" Lest those who engage in secular study declare that they ascribe no importance to it—that it is merely like a needle to a tailor or a pen to the scribe—Rema has already pointed out that one may learn these matters occasionally, but not regularly, for this would be [active] neglect of Torah.

According to R. Leibowitz, it is forbidden to study science on a steady basis, even for the sake of a livelihood or any other mitzvah, because studying it regularly equates it with the Torah, regardless of one's intent; he does not cite any basis for this ruling.

#### 4. R. Yosef Rozin<sup>13</sup>

R. Rozin, “the Rogocover,” makes several novel points. First briefly:

- a) Knowledge of nature has fundamental halakhic importance; for whole categories of halakhah are determined on the basis of scientists’ opinions.
- b) According to Rambam, a father must teach his son not only Torah and a trade, but also “wisdom.” R. Rozin concludes that “wisdom” must refer to the sciences, even the social ones.
- c) “‘You shall speak of them’—... You should not admix other things with them.” From this passage in the *Sifrey*, he deduces that only admixture is forbidden, but studying secular subjects separately is permitted.
- d) Every father may teach his son secular knowledge, but this permission does not extend to the community as such.

We proceed to examine these innovative observations in detail.

- a) A knowledge of nature is undoubtedly necessary for the performance of many mitzvot. However, it might be argued that this knowledge may be derived from the Torah itself. R. Rozin proves the opposite: A scholar’s facility with veterinary physiology had to be certified before he was accredited to rule on the status of first-born animals. This accreditation, like all Torah-related certification, could be granted only by the *Nasi* (Prince) in Eretz Yisrael. However, certification of the prerequisite veterinary expertise itself could also be issued by the authorities in Babylonia, indicating that such knowledge is not Torah knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

R. Rozin also implies that the physician’s knowledge of the extent of a person’s injuries—life-threatening or not—cannot be derived from the Torah, except for the rule that a wound inflicted by an iron instrument, no matter how small, can be fatal.<sup>15</sup> This ruling is the only medical-related issue which remains outside the physician’s province.

- b) Rambam (*Hil. Rotze-ach* 5:5) cites the Talmudic ruling that a father is required to teach his son “Torah, **wisdom**, and a trade.” the Rogocover deduces from his wording that the requirement to teach one’s son wisdom refers to science.

This is somewhat difficult to reconcile with other facts. It is clear from the wording of the Talmud, which Rambam cites as his source,<sup>16</sup> that the wisdom mentioned refers to moral instruction, not science, as the duty to teach one's son "wisdom" is based on the Talmudic statement: "Even though he learns [Torah], [the father who strikes his son] is performing a mitzvah [by chastising him to instill the proper personality traits]." This is also evident from Rambam's commentary on the Mishnah, in which he lists the obligatory subjects as Torah, **good personality traits**, and a trade.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, good personality traits are termed "wisdom" elsewhere in Rambam's writings,<sup>18</sup> Rambam defines anyone who has achieved good and balanced personality traits as a "wise one." It is therefore difficult to understand the words of R. Rozin on this point.

- c) R. Rozin's reasoning, based on the wording of the Midrash—that only the mixture of Torah and secular science is prohibited, but each by itself is permitted—is similar to R. Hirsch's reasoning based on the same Midrash: one may study sciences if they are considered secondary to the Torah.
- d) In his commentary on the Torah,<sup>19</sup> R. Rozin emphasizes that community instruction in science would be prohibited by the Torah. His source for this prohibition seems somewhat obscure. However, others exhibit the same reluctance to introduce public secular education within the framework of Torah education. R. Chaim Berlin writes in his ethical will that "[HaNetziv] was ready to sacrifice his life to prevent secular studies from infiltrating the Yeshiva of Volozhin. Therefore the yeshiva was shut down [see note below—Y.L.]... He ordered me not to agree to such a thing under any circumstances and not to articulate anything even approaching permission. He said that God Himself hinted at this in His Torah, which tells us 'to distinguish between the sacred and the profane.'" Similarly, Chazon Ish<sup>20</sup> states: "In the councils of the great Torah authorities, it was decided not to permit yeshiva students to engage in secular studies while they are engaged in Torah study with their youthful fervor. They considered this a weakening of [the students'] defenses, which would cause them harm... Therefore, they declared this a *milchemeth mitzva* ['holy war']".

Thus, while there is no reference to this halakhah in the Torah (the verse R. Berlin cites is evidently only an allusion), it is considered an emergency decision regarding a perceived clear and present danger. R. Rozin's words imply that this decision is absolute and based on the Torah. This requires further clarification, especially because we have seen that, at least since the time of the Gaonim, schools and "*chadarim*" have customarily taught arithmetic and the vernacular.<sup>21</sup>

*Note:*

Under heavy pressure from the Russian government, the spiritual leaders of Russian Jewry agreed reluctantly to introduce a modicum of secular studies into the Volozhin Yeshiva program. These classes were to be strictly supervised by the dean of the yeshiva, HaNetziv, and taught outside the yeshiva building.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, the government insisted on the following conditions:

- a. Secular studies must be conducted from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM.
- b. The yeshiva must close at sunset.
- c. No one may study more than ten hours a day.
- d. The head of the yeshiva and all teachers must hold academic diplomas.

Clearly, it was futile to maintain the yeshiva under these conditions.<sup>23</sup>

The following report by the author of *Torah Temimah* (and nephew of HaNetziv himself) concerning the level of secular knowledge at the yeshiva is of special interest:

It was obvious to all that there was broad academic knowledge of the sciences and languages at the Volozhin Yeshiva and that students interested in such knowledge could acquire it extensively. Quite a few students read daily, weekly, and monthly papers in various European languages. A spirit of aristocratic nobility and charm enveloped the Volozhin Yeshiva, to such an extent, that it became proverbial that there Torah and *derekh erez* (i.e. general education) went hand in hand. When fathers discussed their sons' education with principals, one would tell the other: "If you wish to see your son become a man of stature, a man of Torah and *derekh erez*, integrated into society and worldly as well, send him to Volozhin."<sup>24</sup>

It is interesting to note that even HaNetziv himself, under special circumstances, prefers secular studies organized by the community over such studies handled on an individual basis. He writes:

If by law they have to learn secular subjects also, this should be supervised by the Rabbi and the leadership, [to ensure] that the teacher be a God fearing man. This would be impossible if each father makes arrangements for his children... Thus perforce he avoids teaching his son secular subjects and that causes the son to rebel and find improper means to attain secular studies. But if the arrangements are in the hands of the community and its heads, they would not avoid these studies.

It is obvious, however, that he proposed this only as a necessary evil; for he concludes: "Although there is no hope that, from such [limited] hours of [Torah] study, the student would become fit for the Rabbinate."

## In Conclusion

Already in the introduction to this work we pointed out that, in a sense, *talmud Torah* is the very foundation of Judaism so that it behooves us to be meticulous in its performance—and just as in the fulfillment of other Torah commandments, here too the Torah itself guides us in the proper fulfillment of the mitzvah.

There is a tendency, among the more action-oriented among us, to be lax in the fulfillment of this mitzvah, which involves “mere” study, while the more intellectually inclined tend to stress it excessively. But deviation from the Torah-prescribed limits, in either direction, can seriously reduce the effectiveness of our study. Superficiality in Torah study leaves us unprepared to face the many challenges with which Torah life confronts us constantly, be they in the area of ethics or ritual obligations—and leaves us totally unqualified to reach the higher levels of perfection (*chasiduth*). On the other hand, an exaggerated emphasis on study, at the expense of active involvement with this world, threatens to turn Torah study into a purely academic activity. The Torah’s admonition not to deviate from God’s commands “either right or left” (Deuter. 5:29) applies here no less than to other mitzvot.

Many are the ways in which such “study for study’s sake” can cancel the enormous potential benefits inherent in proper *talmud Torah*. Such academization may turn Torah study into a sterile intellectual exercise with little impact on our conduct; or, in our excessive preoccupation with individual “trees,” it may cause us to lose sight of the “forest” as a whole. Again, it may seduce us into neglecting the development of the substrates necessary for the thriving of *talmud Torah*, both the economic and the academic ones, which are vital for successful Torah study. Here true love of Torah study may cause us to neglect the very means needed to nurture it as an effective force guiding our life.

In this work, we have surveyed in depth a number of issues bearing on these questions, as they are relevant to today’s Torah student, collecting and organizing the pronouncements of Torah authorities throughout the ages with special emphasis on the opinions of the contemporary spiritual leadership. We have done this in an attempt to present objectively all that we have found on these issues. I hope that this work will help the reader to think intelligently and knowledgeably about his *talmud Torah* program. If so, I consider myself well compensated for my labors.

61. Tosafoth on BT *Shabbath* 116b, s.v. *we-khol shekein*, referring to Psalms 1:1.
62. *Ba-eir Heitev*, SA *Orach Chayim* 307, note 18.
63. *Mor UKetzi'a*, *Orach Chayim* 307:16. Quoted in the responsa of R. Tzvi Chayoth 12. This is similar to the words of R. Yitzchak Abarbanel (*Nachalath Avoth* 5:5), who gives many reasons why a rabbi may accept a wage, despite the prohibition against "making the words of Torah a hoe wherewith to dig." One of these is, "Scholars may accept payments from the community for their political efforts on the community's behalf, through their good advice and public functions."
64. R. S.R. Hirsch on Deuteronomy 4:32.
65. "Chazon Ish," *Emunah UVitachon* 1:8.
66. 'Arukh *HaShulchan*, *Orach Chayim* 307:9.
67. BT *Shevu'oth* 6b, Rashi.
68. R. Mendel Kargau, Responsa *Giduley Taharah* 7, alluding to Song of Songs 2:15.
69. BT *Sotah* 36b; *Sanhedrin* 17a; *Menachoth* 65a.
70. *Teshuvoth HaGeonim*, quoted by *Sefer Ha'Itim* 175 and R. Yisrael Mosheh Chazan, *She-erith HaNachalah*, p. 13.
71. Responsa *Zera' Emeth* (R. Yishma'el bar Avraham Yitzchak) II, *Yoreh De'ah* 107 (119).
72. R. Akiva Eger, *Igroth Sofrim*, no. 18, letter dated I Shevat 5586 (January 9, 1826).
73. Responsa *Rav Pe'alim*, *Orach Chayim* 2:22. See *Igroth Mosheh*, *Yoreh De'ah* III 83 and *Tzitz Eli'ezer* IX 15 and 16.
74. R. M.C. Luzzatto, *Derekh Chokhmah*, end, cited at the end of Chapter 2.
75. *Derushey HaTzeLaCh* 39.
76. R. Shemuel Landau, *Doresh Tzion*, Introduction.
77. R. S.R. Hirsch, *Horeb* 84.
78. R. D. Katz, *Tenu'ath HaMusar* II, p. 183.
79. See R. A.Y. Schlesinger, *Ma'aseh Avoth*, pp. 39, 63.
80. See R. M.M. Yashar, *HaChafetz Chayim*, chapter 42; R. Z.A. Rabiner, *Rabbeinu Meir Simchah*, pp. 149-151.
81. Responsa MaHaRaM Shick, *Orach Chayim* 70.
82. M *Avoth* 5:18.
83. *Likut She-eiloth UTeshuvoth Chatham Sofer* (London 5725/1965) 82:11.
84. R. Avraham ibn 'Ezra, *Yesod Mora* fol. 14a.
85. *Moreh Nevukhim* I 34.
86. 'Ein Ya'akov, BT *Berakhoth* 28b.
87. *She-eilath Ya'avetz* I 41, end.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 5

1. R. S.R. Hirsch, *Gesammelte Schriften* II, pp. 449-466.
2. The responsa are arranged alphabetically according to the author's name following the Hebrew alphabet. See *Sha'arey Talmud Torah*, end, for full text of the responsa.
3. First published in *Proceeding of Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists* Vol. 1 (1966).
4. See chapter 4, section 3(2).
5. M *Avoth* 5:21.

6. The halakhic source of this prohibition is somewhat obscure. Cf. section 4d (in the responsum of R. Y. Rozin). Perhaps it is strictly pragmatic.
7. *Kovetz Shi'urim* II 47.
8. MT 'Avodah Zarah 2:2 and BT 'Avodah Zarah 27b. In R. Wasserman's opinion, the above-cited interpretation [chapter 4, section 3(2) in the name of Rashi, RaMBaM and Meiri] that the study of this subject is only forbidden if the intent is to follow its precepts — does not apply to such books. This is a more severe interpretation than that of R. A.Y. Bloch, who based his permission on the decisions of Rashi and RaMBaM. R. Wasserman does not relate to these opinions and I therefore do not know on what basis he rejects them.
9. BT *Pesachim* 8b.
10. MT 'Avodah Zarah 11:1. In a similar vein, the author of *Giduley Taharah* warns (responsum 7): "Many disciplines are not destructive — such as foreign languages and all mathematics — and one need not be on guard against them. But we do need to guard against those who promulgate these sciences and those who seduce others."
11. M *Kidushin* 4:14. The early commentaries all claim that R. Nehorai did not dispute a father's obligation to teach his son a trade. This is discussed at length in part I, Chapter 2, section 4.
12. *Birkath Shemuel*, *Kidushin* 27. Compare also *Minchath Yitzchak* (V 79), who writes regarding university study, "Undoubtedly, their teachings, which are based on nature, are included in the 'books of heretics.'" His statement can be reconciled with all the opinions cited in chapter 2 if we assume that he refers to philosophic studies, which are heretical; what we have quoted assumes that God guides the universe directly but He generally follows set guidelines, as we have explained in part I. (chapter 1, section 2).
13. Published in *HaMa'ayan*, Nisan 5736, pp. 1-9.  
I am greatly indebted to my revered Rav S. Schwab, who gave me the original ms., which had not been previously published. I am also indebted to my revered friend Rabbi Aryeh Carmell, who — together with his sons R. Avraham Chaim and R. David Yehudah — succeeded in deciphering it.
14. Reference is to the case of Rav, discussed in BT *Sanhedrin* 5b.
15. BT *Sanhedrin* 76b.
16. BT *Makoth* 8b. Cf. also RaMBaM, commentary to that Mishnah (2:2). The bracketed phrase was inserted based on the verse cited in support of the permission to strike one's son: "Chastise your son, and he will give you 'nachas,' and present delicacies to your soul" (Proverbs 29:17).
17. R. Ya'akov Gershon Weiss, personal communication.
18. MT *De'oth* 1:4, *Moreh Nevukhim* III 54 (on the verse Jeremiah 9:22).
19. R. Yosef Rozin on Genesis 50:2.
20. *Igroth Chazon Ish* II 50.
21. See chapter 4, section 3(5).
22. R. Ch. Karlinsky, *HaRishon LeShushleth Brisk*, pp. 381-9.
23. R. Barukh Epstein (author of *Torah Temimah*) *Mekor Baruch*, p. 1013a.
24. *Ibid.* p. 1012a.
25. *Responsa Meishiv Davar* I 44.