



Torah im Derech Eretz

וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה: אֶת מִשְׁפָּטַי תַּעֲשׂוּ וְאֶת חֻקֹּתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ לִלְכֹּת בָּהֶם...

You shall fulfill My laws and you shall keep My statutes to follow them... (Vayikra 18:4)

The *Toras Kohanim* expounds on these words: לִלְכֹּת בָּהֶם: עֲשֵׂם עֶקֶר וְאֵל תַּעֲשֵׂם טַפְלָה, לִלְכֹּת בָּהֶם: שְׁלֹא יִהְיֶה מִשְׁאָךְ וּמִתְנַךְ אֶלָּא בָּהֶם, שְׁלֹא תַעְרֹב בָּהֶם דְּבָרִים אֲחֵרִים בְּעוֹלָם, שְׁלֹא תֹאמַר — לְמִדְתִּי חֻכְמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲלֹמֶד חֻכְמַת אֲמוֹת הָעוֹלָם, תִּלְמֹד לִזְמַר, לִלְכֹּת בָּהֶם אֵינְךָ רָשָׁאי לִיפְטֹר מִתּוֹכָם — *To follow them: Make them primary [essential, the essence] and do not make them*

subordinate [nonessential]; “to follow them”: that you have no dealings except in them, that you not admix them with other matters, that you not say, “Now that I have studied Torah, I will study other sciences.” As the Torah says, “To follow them”—You are not permitted to take leave of them.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, in his commentary on *Chumash*, points out that the words “make them primary and not subordinate” do not forbid a person from pursuing secular studies as a means to gain a deeper understanding of the Torah. On the contrary, “make them primary” implies that there exists something that is subordinate, auxiliary, and that is the study of other disciplines.

Rav Hirsch based his educational system of *Torah im Derech Eretz* on the *Toras Kohanim’s* words here. This approach, says Rav Hirsch, is supported by the Rambam, who writes in his letter to Reb Yonasan Hakohen that secular studies should be the spices and seasonings that enhance the food of Torah. Torah study must be one’s top priority, and one may not equalize other sciences to the wisdom of the Torah. Even when one studies other sciences he may not exempt himself from Torah study, meaning he should study other disciplines as an enhancement to his study of Torah.

In 1934, when I was a young man, I posed a question regarding the permissibility of secular studies to the great Torah giants of that generation. I received a number of responses. The answers of Rav Baruch Ber Leibowitz, Rav Elchanan Wasserman, and Rav Avraham Yitzchak Bloch are well known (mostly advising great caution in the pursuit of secular studies), while the responses of the Rogatchover Gaon and others are less so. My saintly *rebbe*, Rav Leizer Yudel Finkel, the Mirrer Rosh Yeshivah, advised me not to pursue the matter further, for fear that the responses would constitute “a decree that the majority of the community cannot uphold.” I also had the good fortune of meeting with the former Gerrer Rebbe, the Imrei Emes, who admonished me to protect the honor and reputation of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, saying: “Remember that Rav Hirsch was a great tzaddik, a living book of *mussar*, and you must be very careful to safeguard his honor.” In the meantime, many of these responses have been published by others, and the issue of Torah Jews studying secular studies remains a controversial matter to this day.

In 1984, the Rav published a pamphlet entitled “These and Those,” in which he elaborated on the two sides of the controversy. The following are some excerpts delineating the principles of *Torah im Derech Eretz*, as he understood them.

Nothing exists outside the scope of the Divine teaching; all is contained within the Torah and is subject to application. Nothing the Creator has

fashioned could escape the attention and the concern of the revealed will of the Divine Lawgiver. Therefore, the “four squares of halachah” encompass the whole wide world, as the Sages said, אין לו לקדוש ברוך הוא בעולמו אלא ד’ אמות של הלכה בלבד.

This nation, with all of its material endeavors and intellectual striving, is to become a *ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש*, a Divinely controlled organism unlike any other political, cultural, or economic entity, subject only to the sovereign rule of the Torah. The Torah nation is to blaze the trail for all other nations to follow toward the universal messianic goal of free man’s total submission to the absolute will of the Alm-ghty.

The object of true Torah education, therefore, is to make the student conscious at all times of this Divinely imposed task. To acquire Torah knowledge is our foremost duty, because without it, we cannot function at all. However, the prime purpose of all Torah study is its translation into conscious and enlightened Torah life. גדול תלמוד שמביא לידי מעשה.

At all times the Torah’s unchanging teachings must be applied to the ever-changing *derech erez*. All of our actions, attitudes, relationships to man and beast, and positions within nature and history are subject to the jurisdiction and evaluation of the Torah.

What follows is that the Torah scholar should be well informed of the “ways of the Earth.” The laws of nature and the paths of history should be known to him. He should be well aware of what happens in the world that surrounds him, for he is constantly called upon to apply the yardstick of halachah and the searchlight of *hashkafah* to the realities that confront him.

What also follows is that the greater the wisdom of Torah, the more crucial it is that this wisdom be conveyed to the Jewish contemporary world. It must be transmitted in a language that our generation understands and that will attract the searching youth, the ignorant, the estranged and the potential *ba’al teshuvah* to a joyous acceptance of the yoke of Heaven. The Torah leader must be able to dispel the doubts of the doubter and to counter the cynicism of the agnostic. He must, therefore, speak their language masterfully so that he can convince and enlighten them.

There is indeed a dire need for *gedolei Torah*, great Torah scholars, who devote their entire lives to the study and dissemination of Torah.

The Jewish world today needs many *talmidei chachamim* whose life's task is to enlighten and inspire it with the love and the fear of G-d. We are ready to accord to those "messengers of G-d" the highest respect and a loyal following. These are the *kohanim* and *levi'im* of today. Like the members of the Levitic tribe of old, they are to serve all the other tribes and teach them the living Torah.

Yet education and leadership cannot function in a vacuum. Therefore it becomes mandatory for the present day "Tribe of Levi" to initiate and encourage an educational system that can serve the other "eleven tribes" who comprise the vast majority of our people. It becomes mandatory for the Torah-conscious educator not to inspire fear of the world and hesitancy to meet its challenges, but rather, to fortify the vast majority of our youth to meet head-on the thousand and one pitfalls of professional and business life. Our youth must be inspired to courageously and intelligently brave the onslaught of scientific arrogance and the sensual poison that is masked as intellectual liberalism.

The Divine purpose for which Yisrael was created can be served in every capacity, in every profession, in all human endeavors, as long as they are not excluded by the halachah.

In his writings, Rav Hirsch stresses time and again the foremost obligation to make Torah the main object of study and never to forget to emphasize the essential, the *ikar*, above the non-essential, the *tafel*. On the other hand, the secular disciplines, which are the "*Hilfswissenschaften*," should also be pursued with religious sincerity for the "sake of Heaven."

It is *Torah im Derech Eretz*.

Properly understood, it means G-d's Torah, in its totality, utilizing *derech eretz* as a means to bring about the Torah's full application. It means Torah as the Divine nourishment and human *derech eretz* as the aromatic ingredient that helps bring the Torah's intrinsic flavor to its most perfect bloom. It means the Torah's conquest of life and not the Torah's flight from life.

It refers to Torah casting a light into the darkness, rather than hiding from the darkness. And it means applying Torah to the Earth rather than divorcing it from the Earth.

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Rav Hirsch also had behind him a solid *mesorah* from *gedolim* who showed him the way. From the time of *Chazal* through the period of the *Geonim*; the Rambam; the *Chachmei Sepharad* through the *talmidei HaGra* all the way down to his own *rebbe*, the *Aruch L’Ner* and his disciples, Rav Hirsch had his *mesorah*.

To summarize the Hirschian worldview, it is not Torah “U”, it is not Torah “Ve”... or even Torah “Im”... but **Talmud Torah** *im Derech Eretz*, with emphasis on the first two words. He quotes, in his commentary on *Parshas Acharei Mos*, the words of the *Toras Kohanim*: עָשָׂם עֶקֶר: לְלֶכֶת בְּהֶם: וְאֵל תַּעֲשֶׂם טַפְלָהּ. This implies that there is some involvement with studies that are outside Torah thoughts, but we are supposed to make the study of Torah the *ikar*, our main occupation. The goal of *limud haTorah* is to do so in the full sense of the word, לְלַמֹּד וּלְלַמֵּד לְשִׁמּוֹר וְלַעֲשׂוֹת וּלְקַיֵּם אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי תִלְמוּד תּוֹרָתִיךָ כִּי הֵם חַיֵּינוּ וְאוֹרֵךְ יָמֵינוּ וּבָהֶם נִהְיָה יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה. Engagement with the world is *tafel*, secondary. All forms of human knowledge are the auxiliary sciences, or, as Rav Hirsch called them, *Hilfswissenschaften*, or as the Rambam says in one of his letters, רֶקָחוֹת וְטַבָּחוֹת—*spice mixers and cooks*, for the main dish, which is Torah.

The relationship between Torah and *derech eretz* is very similar to that which exists between the *guf* and the *neshamah*, the body and the soul. The Torah is the soul, without which we cannot live. But it pleased Hashem to place the soul into our body. Like a lamp, the soul’s light is to penetrate all the innermost chambers of the body. נֵר אֱלֹקִים נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים חוֹפֵשׁ כָּל חֲדָרֵי בָטֶן. Our body has to be fed and groomed and clothed because most of our mitzvos are carried out by it. Yet the body is temporary; it came from the dust and goes back to the dust. While the body houses the *neshamah* it acts out the *derech eretz* of human behavior; and when the *neshamah* leaves it, the body disintegrates. The *neshamah* is the essential man and lives forever.

Selected Speeches, page 243

