

Just Because It Is Jewish Does Not Make It Kosher, But Not Everything That Is Gentile Is Treif

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Not long ago posters appeared in a number of shuls in Boro Park banning a recently published book which, according to these posters, contains misleading halachic rulings. Many readers will no doubt recall that this is certainly not the first time that bans on books have been issued. It is not the purpose of this article to take a stand on whether a given ban was justified. Nonetheless, there is no question that observant Jews have to be careful about what they read. In particular, our youth are impressionable, and for this reason it is important that the books they read do not contradict or undermine the Torah values we want instilled in them.

In recent years we have seen an explosion in the publishing of books for the Orthodox reader by publishers that cater to this market. This is a wonderful development, because today the Orthodox reader has many more choices of “appropriate” books and periodicals than were available, say, fifteen years ago. However, this does not mean that every book that one can purchase in a Jewish book store is “100%” kosher for your family.

The situation is similar to the choices presented by the large variety of products for sale in a “kosher” grocery store. Fifteen years ago there were relatively fewer items available under supervision than there are today. Still, this does not mean that every product in the store meets your particular kashrus standards. Each of us makes choices regarding what we will use and what we will not use in our kitchen.

In short, there is no question that observant Jews have to be careful about being influenced by ideas that are not compatible with Yiddishkeit. We live within a Gentile culture that literally bombards us with values that clash with our Torah values. We must be most discerning about what we accept from the Gentile world.

Does this mean that everything from the Gentile world is to be rejected? I have heard some people go as far as to categorically condemn anything that they consider to be “*Goyishe*.” Are observant Jews required to completely turn their backs on the culture around them? Must they shut themselves off from the entire Gentile world? Should one try to shield one’s children from all “outside” influences and hence restrict their secular education as much as possible? If so, then this has become an increasingly difficult task given that we are bombarded by outside influences.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808 – 1888) lived in Germany at a time when many Jews were abandoning their religious observance. When he came to Frankfurt in 1851, he found a Jewish community controlled by “reformers” who had done their utmost to

introduce Gentile influences into the Jewish life of a community which had once been a bastion of Jewish tradition and learning. He had to confront the issue of Gentile influences head-on.

Rav Hirsch did not condemn *everything* in the non-Jewish world. In an essay entitled “Religious Education” he writes,

Our children need not forego the benefits of a worthwhile secular education; they need not sacrifice opportunities for the study of the arts and sciences in order to obtain all the treasures of truth and wisdom that Judaism holds for their lives. If both studies are nurtured hand in hand, there will be ample room for both; the one will reinforce the other and the result will be a Jewish education that will find favor in the eyes of both God and man.

Of course, problems are bound to arise if your children receive the main part of their education at non-Jewish or (what is even more detrimental) at un-Jewish* institutions where the Jewish element in the curriculum is at best ignored or, as is mostly the case, presented from a distorted non-Jewish or un-Jewish vantage point. (**Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Volume VII**, page 21)

The “curious” term un-Jewish has an asterisk next to it that refers to the following editors’ footnote: “R. Hirsch uses the term ‘un-Jewish’ (*unjudisch*) to mean not in the spirit of Torah Judaism, as distinct from ‘non-Jewish.’”

Rav Hirsch does not lump all things of Gentile origin into the same class. Some things that come from Gentile sources are indeed completely incompatible with Judaism. These he classifies as un-Jewish, to be avoided at all costs. However, there are many things that stem from outside the Jewish world that are to be considered as non-Jewish, that is, their source is not from Judaism, but they are compatible with *Yahadus*. Therefore, we need not turn our back on the entire Gentile world and reject it “out of hand.” There are non-Jewish things that may be incorporated into our Torah lives that may very well enhance our approach to the world.

Let me give a simple example of something that comes from the non-Jewish world that is entirely compatible with Judaism. The Pythagorean Theorem gives a relationship between the legs of a right triangle (a triangle containing a 90 degree angle) and its hypotenuse. If the legs of a right triangle are labeled a and b , and if the hypotenuse is labeled c , then the theorem says that $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. Although this statement is named after the Greek mathematician Pythagoras, knowledge of the result almost certainly predates him. Here we have a non-Jewish piece of useful knowledge that in no way contradicts anything in Judaism. It is non-Jewish, but it is *not* un-Jewish.

Of course, the Pythagorean Theorem is a result that is completely “pareve” when it comes to Yiddishkeit. The point is that Orthodox Jews are not required to reject all knowledge coming from secular sources. For example, there are many stories extant

about the medical knowledge of the Hazon Ish. Indeed, there were times when doctors were dumbfounded by the correctness of his “diagnosis” of a medical problem.

But what exactly defines something of Gentile origin that is un-Jewish and hence unpalatable for Orthodox Jews? It is certainly difficult to give clear-cut, definitive parameters. Indeed, the reader may find the following surprising.

In his excellent biography, **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Architect of Torah Judaism for the Modern World**, Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Klugman writes about the relationship that Heinrich Graetz (1817 – 1891), who eventually became a famous historian, had with Rav Hirsch (pages 242 – 243).

In 1836 Graetz wrote to Rav Hirsch asking to become his student. Rav Hirsch agreed and Graetz lived in Rabbi Hirsch’s home for three years. In his diary “Graetz describes how he and Rabbi Hirsch began the day at four o’clock in the morning with the study of *Gemara* and *Tehillim*. He also studied Kant [1724 – 1804] with Rabbi Hirsch.” In addition, “together they once read *The Salon* by Heinrich [Chaim] Heine [1797 – 1856], a book about the history of religion and philosophy in Germany.”

Rav Hirsch obviously considered portions of the writings of these authors to be non-Jewish but not un-Jewish. For the record, Graetz eventually broke with Rav Hirsch. Indeed, Rav Hirsch eventually wrote a scathing criticism of some of Graetz’s writings pointing out a multitude of errors in them. He made it clear that these errors stemmed from Graetz’s anti-Orthodox prejudices.

Insight into the basis for Rav Hirsch’s approach may perhaps be gained from the following:

The realm of Jewish learning is not insular, remote from nature, from history, from the world and from the realities of life. On the contrary, it calls upon its disciples to study the heavens and the earth, to reflect on the connections that link the events and developments of history, to take an active part in every phase of physical, intellectual, moral and social life, and to gain the clearest, sharpest possible insight into all things and their relationship to one another. Moreover, consider that Hebrew, the language of the sacred literature of Judaism, because of the simple construction of its roots and forms, is singularly suited, as hardly any other, to stimulate and develop the powers of the human intellect and the aptitude for languages. As a consequence, Jewish learning can relate to every field of secular studies, helping and furthering their aims even as, in turn, it may look to secular learning for help and furtherance.

And so these two areas of learning do not hamper one another, are not mutually detrimental. Rather, they can strengthen and reinforce one another in such a manner that the lofty goal toward which we strive in the education of our young can be promoted and achieved in the framework of normal school hours, without subjecting our young students to undue mental strain. And what is that goal? It is

to educate our children to satisfy all the just demands that will be placed upon them by the age in which they live, on the one hand, and by Judaism, on the other. Equipped with the best of all truly humanistic training and guided by the Jewish Law of G-d and the heritage of our Sages that will constantly give them new strength, light, counsel, admonition and inspiration, they will be able to meet the challenges that life will hold for them. (**Collected Writings VII**, pages 24-25)

Rav Hirsch indicated how we should view the Gentile world.

The Jew knows that the good and righteous men among nations are working alongside him to build the Kingdom God on earth. He also knows that the best seeds of the Jewish spirit have been implanted and taken root not only to rescue mankind from heathendom more than two thousand years ago but for the benefit of manifold areas of human endeavor. And then the Jew is heartened to develop all his energies in the service of God. He welcomes each new truth as a valuable contribution to the ever more penetrating revelation of God in nature and history. In each new art form, in each new science he sees a welcome addition to the means for perfecting the service and worship of God.

Hence the Jew will not be opposed to any science, any art form, any culture that is truly ethical, truly moral, truly contributing to the welfare and progress of man. He will measure everything by the eternally inviolable yardstick of the teachings of his God. Nothing will exist for him that cannot stand up before the Divine Will. The more firmly he stands on the rock of his Judaism, the more conscious he becomes of his Jewish destiny, the more he will be inclined to accept and gratefully absorb all knowledge, wherever he will find it.

Never at any time will the Jew sacrifice one iota of his Judaism, at no time will he bring his Judaism in conformity with the times. But he will gladly accept all values that his time will have to offer as long as they conform with the spirit of Judaism. In every age he will regard it as his task to evaluate the time and its conditions from the Jewish viewpoint in order to develop the spirit of his "old" Judaism to ever-fresh vitality, applying the new means produced by every age, with the new circumstances created by every period of history. Thus, with ever-renewed faith and devotion, he will be fully equal to the great tasks of his beloved Judaism. (**Collected Writings VIII**, pages 9 – 10)

It is clear that according to Rav Hirsch one should not reject something out of hand simply because it has a Gentile source. Instead, one should evaluate it to see if it is non-Jewish, simply of Gentile origin, or un-Jewish, not in the spirit of Judaism. One must be most careful to stay away from all things un-Jewish. Not to do so could well lead to a lessening of one's commitment to a Torah way of life.

On the other hand, there are clearly things that come from the Gentile world that need not, indeed, perhaps should not, be rejected. If something Gentile is non-Jewish, as opposed to being un-Jewish, then one need not reject it. On the contrary, one might very

well incorporate it into one's Torah *weltanschauung* and end up strengthening one's Yiddishkeit. All of Gentile culture and knowledge should be evaluated in this light. The Torah does not require us to reject something of Gentile origin simply because of its source.

Of course, the greatest of care should be taken in deciding what is un-Jewish and what is non-Jewish. Such decisions have never been easy. They are even harder to make today when we live in a world obsessed with moral deterioration. Many things considered acceptable now by the Gentile world would have been labeled scandalous thirty years ago. For example, some of the ads that now appear in "respected" newspapers would never have been run thirty years ago. The same is true for the topics that some newspaper articles deal with. I doubt that readers will disagree with the observation that today's secular publications place an inordinate emphasis on violence and immorality. The same is true for the field of "entertainment." Indeed, there are many non-Jews who have expressed concern about what the media promotes and what this is doing to societal values.

Nonetheless, the challenge of deciding what is non-Jewish and what is un-Jewish is one that each of us has to deal with on one level or another. These decisions have to be made while exercising a goodly amount of *seichel*. One must keep in mind that just because it is Jewish doesn't mean it is necessarily kosher; and not everything that is Gentile is to be considered treif.