


 Search


READ COVER STORY [Ethiopian memorial approved](#) [Brooklyn building hit with second swastika](#) [Bill limiting Supreme Court petitions fails in committee](#) [Isr:](#)

WEB EXCLUSIVES

DINING GUIDE

IN THIS WEEK'S EDITION

- News
- Front Page
- Editorial/Letters
- Torah
- OP-ED
- Media Monitor
- Columns
- Features
- Magazine
- Web Exclusives
- Food
- Jewish Community
- Contests/Games

CURRENT COVER PAGE



RELATED SITES

MINYAN LOCATOR



[Front Page](#)

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 'NON-JEWISH' AND 'UN-JEWISH'

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Posted Jul 25 2007

More Articles By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

Not long ago posters appeared in a number of synagogues in Brooklyn banning a recently published book that, according to the posters, contained misleading halachic rulings. It certainly was not the first time a book was banned by some in the Orthodox community, and it won't be the last.

While it is not the purpose of this article to take a stand on whether a given ban is or is not justified, there is no question that observant Jews need to be careful about what they read.

We have seen, over the past couple of decades, a tremendous increase in the number of books by publishing houses that cater to the Orthodox market. This is a wonderful development, as Orthodox readers can now choose from many more "appropriate" books and periodicals than was the case fifteen or twenty years ago.

This does not, however, mean that every book available for purchase in a Jewish bookstore meets the standard of acceptability for every family.

Advertisement

The situation calls to mind the multiplicity of products sold in "kosher" grocery stores. Fifteen years ago there were fewer items available under supervision than there are today, but not every product in these stores necessarily conforms to an individual's particular *kashrut* standards.

In short, there is no question that observant Jews have to be careful about being influenced by ideas that are not compatible with Judaism. We live in a decidedly non-Torah culture and are bombarded with messages and products that

clash with our religious values. We must be discerning about what we accept from the outside world.

But does this mean that everything from that world is to be rejected? We've all heard some people go as far as to categorically condemn anything that they consider to be "*goyishe*." Are observant Jews really required to completely turn their backs on the culture around them? Must they shut themselves off from the entire gentile world?

Rav Samson 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 non-Jewish influences into the life of a community that had once been a bastion of Jewish tradition and learning. He had to confront the issue of those influences head-on.

Rav Hirsch did not condemn *everything* found in the surrounding culture. 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.

[Previous Articles in Front Page](#)



TOOLS

[Print Article](#)

Font Size: [A](#) | [A](#) | [A](#)

Font Style: [Arial](#) | [Times](#)

[Email to Friend](#)

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 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 non-Jewish sources are indeed completely incompatible with Judaism. These he classifies as "un-Jewish" - to be avoided at all costs.

There are, however, 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 *Yahadut*.

A simple example of something from the non-Jewish world that is entirely compatible with Judaism is the Pythagorean Theorem, which, while named after the Greek mathematician Pythagoras, 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 *not* un-Jewish and therefore completely "pareve" when it comes to Yiddishkeit.

But what exactly defines something of gentile origin that is un-Jewish and hence unpalatable for Orthodox Jews? Admittedly, it's difficult to give clear-cut, definitive parameters. 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, 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 the Hirsch 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 with Rabbi Hirsch."

In addition, "together they once read *The Salon* by Heinrich [Chaim] Heine, 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 their errors and making it clear that they 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 God 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 of 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 non-Jewish 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 - perhaps *should not* - be rejected. If something of gentile origin 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 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.

It bears repeating that the greatest care should be taken in deciding what is un-Jewish and what is non-Jewish. Such decisions have never been easy and are even harder to make today, given the moral deterioration all around us. Many things now considered acceptable by the gentile world would have been labeled scandalous thirty years ago.

Indeed, there are many non-Jews who express deep and eloquent concern about the violence and immorality promoted by the media and the entertainment industry and the effect that has had on societal values.

The challenge of ascertaining 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*.

Bottom line: Just because something is Jewish doesn't make it kosher, and not everything gentile is to be considered *treif*.

Dr. Yitzchok Levine is a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey. His regular column, "Glimpses Into American Jewish History" appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine can be contacted at levine@stevens.edu.

Read Comments (0)

[Back to Top of Article](#)



ADS BY GOOGLE

[Holy Land Faith Travel](#)

10% Off on the Land Price of 2012 Faith Travel. *
Download eBrochure!

www.GlobusFaith.com

[Pesach at Ramah Darom, GA](#)

Fun for all ages - hotels & cabins Learn, Dine,
Play & Rest

www.MyPassoverVacation.com

[Trying To Get Pregnant?](#)

Visit An Attain Fertility Center & Meet With A
Specialist Near You.

www.AttainVF.com

[Online Jewish Gift Shop](#)

Your One Stop Shop For Everything Jewish.
Over 4000 Items Online!

www.TraditionsJewishGifts.com

AdChoices 

©2011 JewishPress.com All Rights Reserved. | [Contact Us](#) | [About Us](#)