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THE CASE FOR SECULAR STUDIES IN YESHIVAS

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
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"When I was in the illustrious city of Vilna in the presence of the Rav, the light, the great Gaon, my master and teacher, the light of the eyes of the exile, the renowned pious one (may Hashem protect and save him) Rav Eliyahu, in the month of Teves 5538 [January 1778], I heard from his holy mouth that according to what a person is lacking in knowledge of the "other wisdoms," correspondingly he will be lacking one hundred portions in the wisdom of the Torah, because the Torah and the 'other wisdoms' are inextricably linked together ..."

(From the Introduction to the Hebrew translation of Euclid's book on geometry, Sefer Ukiidos [The Hague, 1780] by R. Barukh Schick of Shklov, one of the main talmidim of the Vilna Gaon.)

The role of secular subjects in the education of young people has been a controversial issue for generations. Today, however, some general studies have become part of the curriculum of almost all yeshiva high schools. I say "some," because the level and extent of general studies in yeshivas vary greatly from school to school. There tends to be a decrease in emphasis on secular subjects in so-called "right-wing" schools. Still, even such schools continue to grapple with this issue. Recently the Jewish Observer (May 2004) devoted an issue to this topic under the heading "General Studies in the Yeshiva: A Neglected Frontier."

One would think, given the statement of the Vilna Gaon's featured above, that there would be no question that secular subjects should play a crucial role in the education of a Torah Jew. However, someone who occupies a prestigious position in the Torah world recently told me, "The statement of the Gaon was meant for the people of his time. It does not apply to people like us today."

I do not understand how one can take such an approach. If followed to its logical conclusion, almost any statement by Chazal could be swept away with the result that not much of Orthodox Judaism would be left.

There are definitely problems with the general studies education that many young people receive in high school. There is also the attitude of "It's only English, it doesn't count." The questions to be dealt with are "What are the sources of these problems, and what are the remedies?"

Elementary School Education

There are a number of problems that prevent yeshiva students from achieving their potential. One that must be addressed is the fact that there are boys who have completed eight grades of elementary education whose mathematics and reading skills are far below the level required for a student to master ninth grade secular subjects.< BR>

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Over the years I have tutored boys in mathematics, and there have been some who simply could not read properly and did not know basic arithmetic. Often, but not always, these students attended a chassidishe elementary school. When asked why they did not know fractions or their times tables, they responded, "What do you want from me" I went to such and such yeshiva. "English" was a joke. We learned almost nothing!?

One simply cannot expect a student who does not have the proper background to comprehend any of the subjects taught in high school. The result can only be boredom and

frustration on the part of the student, which usually leads to discipline problems in the classroom. How parents can send their sons to schools that do not prepare them for high school secular subjects and then expect them to perform adequately in high school has always been a mystery to me.

Attitude Toward Secular Subjects

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The negative attitude toward secular subjects held by many mesivta students today is in sharp contrast to the attitude of students in the not-too-distant past. About twenty years ago my eldest son applied to Mesivta Torah Vodaath for admission to the ninth grade. Part of the admissions procedure involved an interview with the general studies principal, Rabbi Moshe Lonner, z"l, who had served in this position for many years. My son and I both met with him, and, during the course of the interview, he asked me about my educational background and what I did for a living. When I replied that I had a Ph.D. in mathematics and that I was a college professor, he was obviously pleased. (I subsequently learned that Rabbi Lonner himself had an advanced degree in mathematics.)

Rabbi Lonner then proceeded to outline the general studies curriculum with emphasis on the mathematics component. He spoke of the math courses in the ninth, tenth and eleventh grades and of the excellent instructors he always strove to hire. I then asked him, "What mathematics do you teach in the twelfth grade?" He became somewhat crestfallen and replied, "What can I tell you, Dr. Levine - It is not like it was years ago, when boys like Rabbi Belsky and Rabbi Steinwurzl would stay after school and attend an extra math class that I taught. It is not like it was years ago."

Interplay of Limudei Kodesh & Secular Subjects

Clearly not all secular subjects can or should be studied in a yeshiva high school. There should be a "Torah reason" for selecting those that are studied. Given this, I find it surprising that yeshivas model their general studies curriculum after what is being taught in the public schools.

The choice of secular subjects taught and how they are taught should be a function of the Torah goals they are to fulfill. In this way secular studies become an extension of Torah studies, rather than a collection of courses appended onto the yeshiva day. Yeshivas should develop curricula that reflect their Torah philosophies and are in consonance with them. The following are some examples of what might be done.

Mathematics: In most "right-wing" yeshivas students take three years of mathematics consisting primarily of selections from topics in algebra, geometry, trigonometry, probability, logic, and statistics. In New York, passing the math Regents is the goal, while in other states, the state guidelines for public school curricula are adhered to. Often there is no mathematics taught in the twelfth grade. I do not understand why the yeshivas do not gear their mathematics courses to the goal of having their students study selections from the GRA's sefer Ayil Me'Shulash in the twelfth grade.

The sefer Ayil Me'Shulash HaMevuar-Ha'GRA, volume 1, by Rabbi Avinoam Solimani was published not long ago in Eretz Yisrael. It contains the text of the first three sections of the GRA's original sefer as well as modern day diagrams and Hebrew explanations of these sections. If yeshiva students were to study this sefer they would not only learn some of the mathematics that the Vilna Gaon thought was important, but they would also have the benefit of studying these topics in Hebrew, something that would no doubt improve their mastery of the language.

Oral Communication Skills: No matter what one ends up doing in life, the ability to communicate clearly and effectively is important. The teaching of the skills required to make good presentations before an audience should be an integral part of yeshiva education. This can be done by incorporating the presentation of material by students to their peers on a regular basis. For example, each day one student could be responsible for preparing a five or ten minute talk on the parsha or on a halacha. It is worth pointing out that such presentations are appropriate during both limudei kodesh and limudei chol.

Writing: The ability to present ideas clearly and concisely in writing is another fundamental skill that our young people should be taught. An effective vehicle for doing this is to have students write precisés of articles or other written documents. (Précis: A concise or abridged statement or view; an abstract; a summary; a summary of the main points of an argument or theory.) Writing a précis requires a person to understand the main points that a written document is making and to be able to differentiate between what is crucial and what is not. The articles to be preciséd can deal with either secular or religious subjects.

Science: One of the many contributions that Rav Avigdor Miller, zt"l, made during his lifetime was to teach us how one can appreciate the Creator from the world He has made. Rav Miller often took something like the ear and spent time explaining its intricacies and the function of each individual part. Such a discussion invariably helped his listeners realize the many miracles involved in hearing just one word. He did the same when it came to other phenomena in nature, such as rainfall and snow. Science in yeshivas should be presented at least in part from this standpoint.

History: Young people should be taught history, but not simply from non-Jewish sources. At a minimum, students should be exposed to what was going on contemporaneously in the Jewish world when they learn about events in the world at large. For example, a mesivta or Bais Yaakov graduate should be able to name some of the great rabbis who were alive when Abraham Lincoln was president and know the events of importance that occurred in the Jewish world during the Civil War. Amazingly, many young people know little about the Holocaust, despite the fact that the Holocaust has had and continues to have repercussions that affect Judaism as no other event in recent history.

Life Survival Skills: This is another vitally important body of knowledge for our young people. Some of what falls under this category used to be taught in the home, but in most cases this is no longer true, due mainly to changes in our lifestyles. Many of these skills are learned as people go through life, often by trial and error: map reading, simple electrical and plumbing repair, simple cooking and sewing, basic accounting, nutrition, childcare, child development, child discipline, comparative shopping, investing, and law. And make no mistake, since these

are survival skills applicable to our lives today, they should all be taught to both boys and girls.

Behavior, Kiddush Hashem, Honor System: Years ago I heard a story about two boys who excelled in their Torah studies but were a constant problem in their general studies classes. Not only were they not paying attention in class, they were disruptive and prevented the other students from learning the subject matter being taught. All efforts on the part of their teachers and the general studies principal to curb this behavior proved futile. Finally, in desperation, the principal sent these boys to the rosh yeshiva, who told them the following: "When the gedolim felt that it was necessary to introduce limudei chol into the yeshivas, they designated time to be taken from learning for these studies. To waste this time is bitul Torah!"

Yeshivas have to stress that no aspect of cheating has a place in the life of any yeshiva bochur or Bais Yaakov girl. Not to do so can lead to far-reaching negative consequences and attitudes that undermine the role of the Jewish people as a nation that is to be "a light unto the other nations."

Given this, I am at a loss to understand why an honor system is not part and parcel of every yeshiva high school. An honor system is an excellent vehicle for teaching ethical behavior, and every mesivta and Bais Yaakov should implement one as soon as possible and make sure that it works well.

Implementation

Implementation of the ideas outlined above calls for an extensive revamping of the general studies curriculum that is presently taught in our yeshiva high schools. Given the limited resources by which almost all yeshivas are bound, and the scarcity of teachers qualified to teach in consonance with this approach, a natural response to these ideas is, "Even if we wanted to do this, we couldn't."

One need not, however, introduce all curricular changes at once. In fact, it is probably best done gradually, so that each innovation can be evaluated and modified as needed. Also, the development of these changes could be shared by various yeshivas.

Finally, there is a resource becoming available that yeshivas should take advantage of. There are talented people with excellent Torah and secular backgrounds who will be reaching retirement age within the next decade. It is likely that at least some of these professionals would be willing to devote their time at little or no cost to assist the yeshivas in developing new courses and directions of study.

Conclusion

The thoughts expressed above are made with the goal of giving secular studies their "just due" within a Torah framework. Often yeshivas simply "tack on" subjects that are taught in public schools at the conclusion of the limudei kodesh portion of the school day, utilizing the same texts and techniques that are part and parcel of public school education.

The approach outlined here is quite different. General studies are to be presented in a manner that makes them a natural extension of religious studies. While limudei kodesh will always be the most important part of a yeshiva education, the goal is to present a general studies curriculum that falls within the framework of limudei kodesh. The yeshiva student will, as a result, be made continuously aware of the important principle that all aspects of life are to be encompassed within the purview of Torah. Students educated within such an environment will learn over and over again that the Torah is to be applied to all of their endeavors throughout their entire lives.

Implementing such a curriculum will require innovation and imagination on the part of those who direct and teach in our yeshivas, in limudei kodesh as well as in limudei chol. But we must move boldly and quickly, because this is an area that sorely needs attention.

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Great article

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One comment: R' Dr. Eliezer Berkovits, in Towards Historic Judaism, notes that one could teach world history via teaching Jewish history, or vice versa.

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