Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures

Rejection or Integration?

edited by

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Rabbinic Openness to General Culture in the Early Modern Period in Western and Central Europe

Shnayer Z. Leiman
In a very profound sense, the debate between *Torah only* and *Torah and derekh eretz* enthusiasts is a misplaced one. The extreme positions are imaginary constructs that no serious Torah scholar embraces. That is, no serious Torah scholar would deny the value of *derekh eretz*, whether defined minimally as "gainful employment," or maximally so as to include in its purview secular wisdom and all aspects of general culture that enhance one's understanding and appreciation of God's creation: the earth in its fullness, the world and its inhabitants (Psalms 24:1). He could do so only at the risk of undermining Torah itself. On the other hand, no serious Torah scholar who embraced *Torah and derekh eretz* ever denied the centrality of Torah, or imagined that *Torah* and *derekh eretz* were axiologically separate but equal realms. Certainly, in the last three hundred years, the preeminent exemplar of *Torah only* was the Gaon of Vilna (d. 1797). The Gaon did not merely refuse to earn a living; he refused to be gainfully employed either as a rabbi or rosh yeshiva. Instead, he devoted a lifetime to the diligent study of Torah for some twenty hours per day. Regarding his daily regimen, his sons reported as follows:

Throughout his lifetime, he never left his study. He never slept for more than a few hours. He always recited halakhot and aggadot in the morning and in the evening and one half-hour during the day, which he went back to sleep for a half-hour. His singular devotion to Torah—derekh eretz—was hardly rejectionist, as evidenced by his sons—who sometimes received the cable.

He never inquired of his sons or asked after their well-being. He never sent them a letter. His children came to visit him, even when he had seen them for a year or two, he never asked regarding their occupation. After all, he insisted, he must return immediately to his studies. Any study time forfeited during your [travels] is difficult to imagine what exactly a *Torah only* enthusiast. Nevertheless, the Gaon was hardly rejectionist, as evidenced by his sons—"who sometimes received the cable."

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When I visited Vilna in Tevet 5538, the Gaon of Vilna that to the extent one is a hundredfold in Torah study, for Torah is to be ascribed to Schick. Thus, the nations will think that it is to be ascribed to Schick.
Throughout his lifetime, he never slept more than two hours in any twenty-four hour period. He never slept for more than a half-hour at a time, and during that half-hour his lips recited halakhot and aggadot in a whisper. When the half-hour elapsed, he gathered strength like a lion, ritually cleansed his hands, and began learning in a loud voice, after which he went back to sleep for a half-hour. It was his practice to sleep three half-hours in the evening and one half-hour during the day. 1

His singular devotion to Torah knew no bounds. Again, the testimony of his sons—who sometimes received the short end of his singlemindedness—is impeccable.

He never inquired of his sons and daughters regarding their occupation or economic well-being. He never sent them a letter inquiring about their well-being. When any of his children came to visit him, even though he rejoiced greatly, for often they had not seen him for a year or two, he never inquired about the well-being of their family or regarding their occupation. After allowing his son to rest for an hour, he would urge him to return immediately to his studies, saying: "You must make amends in my house for the study time forfeited during your journey here."2

It is difficult to imagine what else one could do in order to surpass the Gaon as a Torah only enthusiast. Nevertheless, the Gaon’s attitude toward secular wisdom was hardly rejectionist, as evidenced by the following passages:

R. Barukh Schick of Shklov (d. 1808):

When I visited Vilna in Tevet 5538 [1778] . . . I heard from the holy lips of the Gaon of Vilna that to the extent one is deficient in secular wisdom he will be deficient a hundredfold in Torah study, for Torah and wisdom are bound up together. He compared a person lacking in secular wisdom to a man suffering from constipation; his disposition is affected to the point that he refuses all food. . . . He urged me to translate into Hebrew as much secular wisdom as possible, so as to cause the nations to disgorge what they have swallowed, making it available to all, thereby increasing knowledge among the Jews. Thus, the nations will no longer be able to lord it over us—and bring about the profaning of God’s name—with their taunt: “Where is your wisdom?”3

3. Introduction to Be’ur ha-Gra, Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim.
4. Introduction to Be’ur ha-Gra.
5. Sefer Ukhidos (The Hague, 1780), introduction. It is unclear whether the justification given at the end of the passage cited here is to be ascribed to the Gaon of Vilna or to Schick. See David E. Fishman, "A Polish Rabbi Meets the Berlin Haskalah: The Case of R. Barukh Schick," AJR Review 12 (1987): 95–121, especially pp. 115–19, who argues persuasively that it is to be ascribed to Schick.
R. Abraham Simhah of Amtchislav (d. 1864):

I heard from my uncle R. Hayyim of Volozhin that the Gaon of Vilna told his son R. Abraham that he craved for translations of secular wisdom into Hebrew, including a translation of the Greek or Latin Josephus, through which he could fathom the plain sense of various rabbinic passages in the Talmud and Midrash.

The Gaon of Vilna's sons:

By the time the Gaon of Vilna was twelve years old, he mastered the seven branches of secular wisdom. First he turned to mathematics then astronomy.

R. Israel of Shklov (d. 1839):

I cannot refrain from repeating a true and astonishing story that I heard from the Gaon's disciple R. Menahem Mendel. It took place when the Gaon of Vilna celebrated the completion of his commentary on Song of Songs. He raised his eyes toward heaven and with great devotion b to with the ability to comprehend the outer manifestations. He explained and is included in it. He indicates wisdom, including algebra, trigonometry, music, explaining that most of the magic secrets of the Tikkunei Zohar it. He explained the significance he had mastered them all. Regarding masterly scholarship, but not scholarship with practicing physicians, but fearing that upon mastering it he would become necessary for him to master all of philosophy, but that he would not continue his study of it. The rest of the story...

Even if one allows for a measure of distortion of the story which, however, is reported in the book published by contemporaries of the Gaon himself, it strongly suggests that the Gaon was upbringinged in the spirit of the Haskalah and was in touch with the Haskalah literature.

6. Josephus was known to medieval Jewry via a garbled Hebrew version, which was thought to be the original Hebrew version addressed to the Jews, called Yosippon. Modern scholarship has established that this Hebrew version originated in the tenth century; see, e.g., David L. Flusser, ed., Sefer Yosippon (Jerusalem, 1980), II, 3–252. This was distinguished by the Gaon and others from the original Greek text of Josephus (first published edition: Basel, 1544), and its many Latin translations (first published edition: Augsburg, 1470), addressed to the Romans, which were referred to as Yosippon la-Romiyyim. Obviously, the Gaon would have preferred a Hebrew rendering of the original Greek, but one suspects that this call for a translation was addressed to eighteenth century Jews adept in Latin.

7. Letter dated 1862 appended to Kalman Schuman's translation of Josephus' The Jewish War, Milhanot ha-Yehudim 'im ha-Roma'im (Warsaw, 1862), II, v–vi. The term seven branches of wisdom (Hebrew sheva' ha-bokhim) was unknown to classical Jewish literature prior to the medieval period, when it was often read into Proverbs 9.1. The concept, which seems to have originated with Varro (c. 116–27 B.C.E.), culminated with the seven branches of learning of medieval scholasticism: the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. For two interesting "Jewish" versions of the seven branches of wisdom, see R. Bajja b. Asher (end of thirteenth century), commentary on M. Avot 3:18, in R. Charles Chavel, ed., Kitvei Rabbanu Bajja (Jerusalem, 1970), 591; and R. Jonathan Eibeschuetz, Ya'aret Denash, ed. Makhon Yeushalayim (Jerusalem, 1984), II, 122–23. In general, see Dov Rappel, Sheva' ha-Fokhmim: ha-Vilna'ah le Limmudei Hivi be-Yahadut (Jerusalem, 1990), 12–66.

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10. R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov (d. 1827) was instrumental in the renewal of the Ashkenazic community of Jerusalem during the first quarter of the nineteenth century.
heaven and with great devotion began blessing and thanking God for endowing him
with the ability to comprehend the light of the entire Torah. This included its inner and
outer manifestations. He explained: All secular wisdom is essential for our holy Torah
and is included in it. He indicated that he had mastered all the branches of secular
wisdom, including algebra, trigonometry, geometry, and music. He especially praised
music, explaining that most of the Torah accents, the secrets of the Levitical songs, and
the secrets of the Tikunei Zohar could not be comprehended without mastering it.
... He explained the significance of the various secular disciplines, and noted that
he had mastered them all. Regarding the discipline of medicine, he stated that he had
mastered anatomy, but not pharmacology. Indeed, he had wanted to study pharmacol­
ogy with practicing physicians, but his father prevented him from undertaking its study,
fearing that upon mastering it he would be forced to curtail his Torah study whenever
it would become necessary for him to save a life. ... He also stated that he had
mastered all of philosophy, but that he had derived only two matters of significance from
his study of it. ... The rest of it, he said, should be discarded.\footnote{R. Bezalel Lardau, Ha-Gaon ha-Hadid mi-Vilna, third edition (Jerusalem, 1978), 217
and 225-26, n. 16, questions the authenticity of Schick's report, suggesting that Schick's
Haskalah leanings led him either to invent the report in its entirety or, at the very least, to
construe whatever it was the Gaon had said. While it is certainly true that some Haskalah
enthusiasts recreated the Gaon in their own image—see, e.g., E. Etkes, "The Gaon of Vilna
and the Haskalah: Image and Reality," (Hebrew) in Perakh be-Toledot ha-Yehudim
bi-Yemei ha-Beynayyim u-ve-'Et ha-Ifadashah (Jerusalem, 1980), 192-217—there is no
evidence whatever that Schick engaged in such activity. For the extent of his Haskalah
leanings—if they can be called such—see Fishman's study (cited above, n. 5). His integrity,
to the best of my knowledge, has never been called into question. The fact remains that Schick,
a Polish talmudist who served as a contemporary of the Gaon, during his lifetime, and immediately
afterwards, that many in Eastern Europe assumed he was the author of an anonymous desk encyclopedia of general science and Jewish thought that appeared in Hebrew in Brunn, 1797. The true author, R. Pinhas Eliyahu Hurwitz, was
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imaginary tales that were reduced to writing for the first time many generations after
the events they purportedly describe. Clearly, the Gaon viewed secular wisdom posi-

tively and instrumentally, i.e., its value depended upon the light it could shed on Torah.

In recent years, the Gaon’s positive view of secular wisdom appears to have
received unexpected support from the publication of R. Hillel of Shklov’s ha-Tor. R.
Hillel (d. 1838) was a disciple of the Gaon who settled in Jerusalem in 1809. His
Kol ha-Tor, an eschatological work based on the Gaon’s teaching, remained in
manuscript form until 1946, when several fascicles of the original appeared in
print. Fuller versions were published between 1969 and 1994 in Bnei Brak and
Jerusalem. R. Hillel cites, in the name of the Gaon of Vilna, an elaborate eschatol-
yogy in which the spread of secular wisdom among Jews at the end of time plays a
decisive role in bringing about the ultimate redemption of mankind. 13

Conversely, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (d. 1888) and R. Azriel Hildesheimer (d.
1899), the modern architects of Torah and derekh eretz, lived, breathed and taught the
centrality of Torah. They repeatedly underscored their conviction that derekh eretz
was subservient to Torah (more about which see below, passim). The issue, then, is
not whether secular wisdom may (or even: ought to) be pursued, but rather: which
secular disciplines, under what circumstances, and by whom. The Gaon of Vilna,
for example, was not prepared to interrupt his daily regimen in order to master Greek
or Latin and read Josephus in the original. But he felt quite comfortable in encouraging
other Jews, whose obligation to study Torah—at least in theory—was no different
than the Gaon’s to translate Josephus into Hebrew.

The extreme positions aside, a spacious middle ground remains, embracing a
broad spectrum of opinion—ranging from those who tolerated general culture only
under the most circumscribed of conditions, to those who, for example, embraced
secular study enthusiastically, and even incorporated it in the yeshiva curriculum.

There can be no question that the dominant position of East European gedolei
yisrael in recent memory has been the open rejection of general culture. This,
despite—and sometimes due to— the advent of modernity and the opportunities
and benefits it has provided for the Jewish community at large. The HaTam Sofer,
R. Yosef Baer Soloveitchik (author of Bet ha-Levi), the HaFez HaYyim, R. Elhanan
Wasserman, the HaZón Ish, R. Aharon Kotler—and virtually every Ḥasidic Rebbe
of note—are among the many Torah giants who shared this view.

Orthodox teaching, however, has never been in the habit of speaking in only one
voice. Diverse figures such as Rabbis Samson Raphael Hirsch, Ḥadokha-Kohen of

13. See Kol ha-Tor (Bnei Brak 1969); R. Menahem M. Kashe, Ha-Tekufah ha-Gedolah
(Jerusalem, 1972), 409–575; and the recent, fuller, annotated version of Kol ha-Tor
(Jerusalem, 1994), esp. pp. 115–126. Much mystery, however, surrounds the publication
of Kol ha-Tor. The original manuscript has not been made available to the public. Thus, it is
unknown how much of the original manuscript was published; how much of it was actually
written by R. Hillel of Shklov; and whether or not the quotes in the name of the Gaon of
Vilna were actually said by him.
The first time many generations after Gaon viewed secular wisdom positively, the light it could shed on Torah. If secular wisdom appears to have held in Shklov's ha-Tor. settled in Jerusalem in 1809. His Gaon's teaching, remained in the 1969 and 1994 in Bnei Brak and of Vilna, an elaborate eschatological Jews at the end of time plays a role.13

The aim of this essay is to present, if only in outline form, a representative account of gedolei yisrael in the early modern period (i.e., the nineteenth century), who sought to relate Torah teaching to general culture. Our focus will be primarily, if not exclusively, on their differing viewpoints vis-à-vis general culture, on the institutions they engendered, and on their impact on the Jewish community at large. This essay does not purport to be an exercise in either history or biography; nor does it make any claim toward comprehensiveness. Rather, it is an attempt to engage in intellectual prosopography, i.e., to present a portrait of one aspect—albeit a crucial one—of the attitudes of a select group of gedolei yisrael who confronted modernity with an openness to general culture. Any attempt to portray all gedolei yisrael in the modern period who, in one form or another, reacted positively to general culture would have resulted in a lengthy monograph, at the very least. Such a volume would surely have tested the patience of most readers, and—in any event—would have moved well beyond my ability.

No hidden agenda need be sought in the presentation. It is intended to be largely descriptive and, hopefully, accurate. Wherever possible, the positions of the gedolei yisrael will be presented in their own words.

One final word. Feelings run high about some of these figures and their respective positions on Torah and general culture. In the heat of argument, their positions have often been misconstrued and misrepresented. It will be no small accomplishment if their views are set out dispassionately and accurately. To the extent that there is an agenda in this presentation, it is a transparent one: to demonstrate that the positions described in this essay are real, not imaginary. They are legitimate alternatives within Orthodoxy, to be accepted, rejected, but not ignored by those genuinely committed to traditional Jewish teaching.

**SETTING**

Rabbinic responses to general culture do not occur in a vacuum. Since our focus is on the modern period, it is essential that we develop a sense of what distinguishes