

HAMODIA

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Why Can't Yankel Read, Write and Do Arithmetic?

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Virtually every yeshiva katana in the United States today allocates some of the school day to the study of secular subjects. The amount of time allocated and what is taught varies from yeshiva to yeshiva, but nonetheless time is indeed taken from what could be used for Limudei Kodesh so that the Talmidim can be taught to at least read and write English and do arithmetic. For many years I have tutored Mesivtha boys in mathematics, and it has been my experience that there are a considerable number of these boys who have attended certain types of elementary schools who are woefully lacking in the skills that one would expect them to have. (I want to point out at the outset that I have not conducted any sort of survey, and that this remark is anecdotal.) In short these products of some of the so-called "right wing" elementary yeshivas in Brooklyn cannot read and write at a high school level and are sorely lacking in the basic mathematical skills that are necessary for them to prepare for the New York State Mathematics Regents.

However, there is more to this situation than simply a lack of basic skills in elementary secular subjects. Some of the products of these elementary schools end up with an attitude that completely belittles the study of secular subjects. This can and often does lead to problems in high school. I was once told a story about two Mesivtha students who did very well in Limudei Kodesh. However, during the time allocated for secular subjects they were fooling around and causing disruption problems in the classroom, something which is apparently not uncommon. In short they were wasting the time that had been set aside for these subjects. Finally the disruption got to the point that these boys were sent to the Rosh Yeshiva. He told them the following. "It was decided by Gedolim that in the United States it was necessary to introduce secular subjects into the yeshiva curriculum. These Gedolim sanctioned taking time from the study of Limudei Kodesh for the study of secular subjects under the condition that this time be used for the study of these subjects. If one wastes this time by fooling around, this amounts to Bitul torah!"

What should our attitude and that of our children be towards secular studies? There is, of course, no question that Limudei Kodesh is considerably more important than Limudei Chol. But does this mean that secular studies are of no value at all? R. Yhonason

Eybeschütz in *Yaaros Devash* 2:7 (as translated by L. Levi in *Torah and Science* pages 24-25) writes:

For all the sciences are “condiments” and are necessary for our Torah, such as the science of mathematics, which is the science of measurements and includes the science of numbers, geometry, and algebra and is very essential for the measurements required in connection with the *Eglah Arufah* and the cities of the Levites and the cities of refuge as well as the Sabbath boundaries of our cities. The science of weights [i.e., mechanics] is necessary for the judiciary, to scrutinize in detail whether scales are used honestly or fraudulently. The science of vision [optics] is necessary for the Sanhedrin to clarify the deceits perpetrated by idolatrous priests; furthermore, the need for this science is great in connection with examining witnesses, who claim they stood at a distance and saw the scene, to determine whether the arc of vision extends so far straight or bent. The science of astronomy is a science of the Jews, the secret of leap years to know the paths of the constellations and to sanctify the new moon. The science of nature which includes the science of medicine in general is very important for distinguishing the blood of the *Niddah* whether it is pure or impure ... and how much more is it necessary when one strikes his fellow man in order to ascertain whether the blow was mortal, and if he died whether he died because of it, and for what disease one may desecrate the Sabbath. Regarding botany, how great is the power of the Sages in connection with *kilayim* [mixed crops]! Here too we may mention zoology, to know which animals may be hybridized; and chemistry, which is important in connection with the metals used in the tabernacle, etc.

(It is worth noting that similar lists may be found in R. Abraham Ibn Ezra’s introduction to *Chibbur Hameshicha Vehatishbores* and R. Bachya’s commentary on *Avos*, end of Chapter 3.)

The above list of secular subjects given by R. Eybeschütz is in truth very comprehensive. Quite frankly I know of no yeshiva that even attempts to give its Talmidim such a secular grounding. Instead we find in some yeshivas a deemphasis of secular studies that often leads to students thinking that they are worthless and that it is a waste of time to even attend classes in which these subjects are taught. Furthermore, some yeshivas have adopted the practice of using teachers who are not really qualified to teach the subject matter that it to be studied. This seems to have become the norm in certain right wing elementary yeshivas. Some of the products of these yeshivas cannot speak, read and write English properly. Furthermore, their mathematical skills are also at best rudimentary.

There are those who would argue that this is really not a problem. After all, it is excellence in Torah studies that really counts, so what difference does it make if, for example, a young man cannot write a grammatically correct sentence in English. However, to allow a young person to finish his elementary and secondary education with substandard secular skills is to prevent him from pursuing a wide variety of options when he gets older. Virtually every career path that involves more than basic physical labor requires good communication skills. And make no mistake, this statement applies today

to almost all vocations that do **not** require a college education as well. At a minimum one must be able to read, write and speak English correctly if one wants to pursue almost any career today.

It is the responsibility of parents to equip their children with the tools they will need to function successfully in today's technological world. The reality of the situation is that most yeshiva graduates will one day end up working in occupations that are outside of the yeshiva world. Since the Talmud obligates a father to train his son in a trade which is "easy and clean" in order to keep him away from crime or dishonest dealings (Kedushin 82b), parents would seem to have a **religious** obligation to make sure that their sons get at a minimum a decent secular education in elementary school. To do less is to shirk one of the responsibilities of the Torah. The way to make sure that our sons do indeed get a proper grounding in secular studies is for parents to insist that our yeshivas provide a quality education that produces a student equipped to live successfully in today's world.