

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**

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INTRODUCTION

In a very profound sense, the debate between *Torah only* and *Torah and derekh erez* enthusiasts is a misplaced one.¹ The extreme positions are imaginary constructs that no serious Torah scholar embraces. That is, no serious Torah scholar would deny the value of *derekh erez*, 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).² 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 erez* ever denied the centrality of Torah, or imagined that *Torah* and *derekh erez* 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:

1. The binary terminology used here was introduced by R. Shimon Schwab, *These and Those* (New York, 1967), 7.

2. *Derekh Erez* in rabbinic parlance bears a variety of meanings, but never “secular study” or “general culture.” See, e.g., the entry *derekh erez* in *Enzyklopedyah Talmudit* (Jerusalem, 1956), VII, 672–706. The plain sense of the term at its *locus classicus*, M. Avot 2:2: “*yafeh talmud torah ‘im derekh erez*” appears to be “worldly occupation” or “gainful employment.” See, for example, R. David Z. Hoffmann’s German translation of, and commentary to, M. Avot 2:2 in *Mischnaïot*² (Berlin, 1924), 332. The broadening of the term *derekh erez* in that context to include secular study, and even more broadly to include general culture, while rooted in medieval commentary, is a modern phenomenon. For the medieval roots, see R. David b. Abraham Maimuni, *Midrash David*, commentary to M. Avot 2:2 (Jerusalem, 1991), 26. For pre-Hirschian broadening of the term in the modern period, see R. Yishmael ha-Kohen (d. 1811), *She’elot u-Teshuvot Zera’ Emet* (Livorno, 1796), II, 119a, §107. Cf. the usage by R. Samuel Landau (d. 1834) in a passage from 1816, cited below, p. 165.

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.³

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.”⁴

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?”⁵

3. Introduction to *Be’ur ha-Gra, Shulhan ‘Arukh, Oraḥ Hayyim*.

4. Introduction to *Be’ur ha-Gra*.

5. *Sefer Uklidos* (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,” *AJS Review* 12 (1987): 95–121, especially pp. 115–19, who argues persuasively that it is to be ascribed to Schick.

R. Abraham Simḥah of Amtchislav (d. 1864):

I heard from my uncle R. Ḥayyim 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,⁶ through which he could fathom the plain sense of various rabbinic passages in the Talmud and Midrash.⁷

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. . . .⁸ First he turned to mathematics . . . then astronomy.⁹

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. . . .¹⁰ It took place when the Gaon of Vilna celebrated the completion of his commentary on Song of Songs. . . . He raised his eyes toward

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-Romiyim*. 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 Schulman's translation of Josephus' *The Jewish War, Milḥamot ha-Yehudim 'im ha-Roma'im* (Warsaw, 1862), II, v–vi.

8. The term *seven branches of wisdom* (Hebrew *sheva' ha-ḥokhmot*) 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 (ca. 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. Bahya b. Asher (end of thirteenth century), commentary on M. Avot 3:18, in R. Charles Chavel, ed., *Kitvei Rabbenu Bahya* (Jerusalem, 1970), 591; and R. Jonathan Eibeschutz, *Ya'arot Devash*, ed. Makhon Yerushalayim (Jerusalem, 1984), II, 122–23. In general, see Dov Rappel, *Sheva' ha-Ḥokhmot: ha-Vikuah 'al Limmudei Ḥol be-Yahadut* (Jerusalem, 1990), 12–66.

9. Introduction to the Gaon of Vilna's commentary on the Torah, *Adderet Eliyahu*, ed. M. Shulsinger (New York, 1950), 6.

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 *Tikkunei 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 pharmacology 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.¹¹

Even if one allows for a measure of exaggeration in these reports, in fact they were published by contemporaries of the Gaon (with the exception of the second report which, however, is reported in the name of a contemporary of the Gaon) who knew him personally. Moreover, the tradents themselves were men of integrity whose scholarly credentials were impeccable.¹² These, then, should hardly be treated as

11. *Pe'at ha-Shulhan*, ed. Abraham M. Luncz (Jerusalem, 1911), 5a.

12. R. Bezalel Landau, *Ha-Gaon be-Hasid 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 misconstrue 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 *Perakim be-Toledot ha-Hevrah ha-Yehudit bi-Yemei ha-Beynayyim u-ve-'Et ha-Hadashah* (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 *daiyan* in Minsk, published his report during the lifetime of the Gaon. Its content complements and is in harmony with all else that is known about the Gaon's attitude toward *hokhmah*. R. Abraham Simḥah of Amtchislav (see above, n. 7), a nephew and disciple of R. Ḥayyim of Volozhin, the Gaon's disciple, refers to Schick's report approvingly; so too the editors of the classic biography of the Gaon, *'Aliyot Eliyahu*, ed. Lewin-Epstein (Jerusalem, 1970), 45, n. 25. Landau's suspicion, at least in this case, appears to be unwarranted. The Gaon's positive attitude toward *hokhmah* was sufficiently well known 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 Bruenn, 1797. The true author, R. Pinḥas Eliyahu Hurwitz, was forced to reveal his name in the second edition (Zolkiev, 1807) in order to set the matter straight. See R. Pinḥas E. Hurwitz, *Sefer ha-Berit* (New York, 1977), second introduction, 7b.

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 positively 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 eschatology 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 erez*, lived, breathed and taught the centrality of Torah. They repeatedly underscored their conviction that *derekh erez* 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 Ḥatam Sofer, R. Yosef Baer Soloveitchik (author of *Bet ha-Levi*), the Ḥafez Ḥayyim, R. Elhanan Wasserman, the Ḥazon 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, Zadok ha-Kohen of

13. See *Kol ha-Tor* (Bnei Brak 1969); R. Menahem M. Kasher, *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.

Lublin, Israel Salanter, Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook, and Joseph B. Soloveitchik reflect the incredible richness, depth, and latitude of Orthodox thought in the modern period. Alongside the dominant position of rejection of general culture, there were other *gedolei yisrael*—some sat on the *mo'ezet gedolei ha-Torah* of Agudat Yisrael, others would occasionally join together on broadsides with members of the rabbinic court of the *'edah ha-ḥaredit*—who embraced general culture. Some did so enthusiastically; others reluctantly. Some were natives of Central and Western Europe; others of Eastern Europe. Some thought it essential that the yeshiva curriculum address and incorporate aspects of general culture; others thought it proper for certain individuals to embrace general culture, but not institutions (i.e., yeshivot).

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