

Torah & Secular studies in the Educational system

By: Michael Avichai

Introduction:

A few years ago, I came across an article in a Jewish-American magazine that dealt with the theory and practice regarding the balance between Torah and secular studies in the American Jewish educational system. The author of this article bemoaned the existing situation, in which the emphasis is put on the ideal of Torah-and-only-Torah, while secular studies - which in the long run would enable our younger generation to make a reasonable and productive living - are given only a backseat. This, claimed the author, endangers the healthy existence of our religious society, both financially and spiritually, since we need not only reasonable "parnosoh" - we also need a next generation of seriously religious doctors, lawyers, philanthropists and all other professions. A whole society that bases its living on receiving handouts will not be able to continue indefinitely. He called for a revolution in the existing educational institutions in order to put us back on course.

Since this subject had been of interest to me before (and since this author happens to be my cousin...), I felt I would like to share my own thoughts with him. I tried to carefully lay out my humble understanding of how to achieve the correct balance between the ideal (and the need!) for a life of Torah and the practical need of making a living.

Today, a few years later, the subject is, of course, still relevant and I thought it might be appropriate to share this letter with others at NDS.

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Dear J.,

I received a photocopy of your article on contemporary yeshiva education. Since you asked for reactions, I wish to share my thoughts with you. On the whole, besides a few differences in nuance and emphasis, I agree completely with your deliberations and have

raised them myself on various occasions. The most recent discussion I have had on this subject was with an ambitious teenager, who decided on his own, at the young age of 15, to stop his secular studies and dedicate himself to Torah. I would, however, like to add a few points and reflections of my own to yours:

The situation in the U.S., compared to that in Eretz Yisrael: I have always thought that in the States there is more of a balance between secular and religious education. The YU-type people I meet in the professional world and hi-tech industry here seemed to support my assumption. From what you describe, the influence of the "Torah-and-Only-Torah" attitude is as widespread there as in Israel.

But in Eretz Yisrael there is a halachic dimension to this question. The Hatam Sopher writes that everyday work done in Eretz Yisrael is part of the Mitzva of *Yishuv Ha'aretz*. It is a Mitzva no less important than donning Tefillin and benching the Eitrog. Apparently, this can apply not only to agriculture and construction work, but also to other secular activities that strengthen our existence here.

A significant addition here is army duty, which demands another 3 years more or less (depending on the type of service chosen: Hesder, Officers' course etc.). So this already overloaded period of life becomes even more crowded. To sum up the dilemma: in the eight or so years of a young man's life, between ages 16 and 24, he is expected to finish the high school system, go through the army, get a good yeshiva education, get married and somehow acquire a profession enabling him to make a living. Of course, this is practically impossible, so something will always end up being sacrificed.

The world of today is far more complex than it was, say, 150 years ago. It is not as easy today to acquire a profession and earn a living by learning on the job from scratch, as did the typical businessman, blue-collar worker and other kinds of workers common in the past. Today, if you want to earn a decent salary and still have time for your family and for *kvi'at itim latorah* - you really have a problem.

I can see in my social surroundings a wide variety of examples of products of the existing educational system. The greatest percentage is *ba'al-batim* who keep different levels of connection with Torah learning. For a few, such as Rabbis and educators, the Torah is their occupation. A handful of "*yehidei segula*" - with assorted non-Torah-oriented occupations - have stayed unmistakably *talmidei hachamim yirei shamayim*, while

*having good jobs and being well established in the secular world. Still others, after spending years in yeshivot, improvise at making a living - as **sofrei stam**, drivers, clerks, "machers" - anything that doesn't require a higher education. The irony is that the latter's deep desire for Torah - to stay as long as possible in the Torah world and not waste time on anything else - has caused them in later years to spend their time constantly on the run to make ends meet. Typically, they may work long, inconvenient hours, that leave them little time and peace for serious studying. This is in contrast to some of the ba'al-batim who are the faithful participants in daily shi'urim and hevrutas.*

All this may sound more than a little discouraging. However, I'm not in despair. I am only skeptical about the possibility of forming an institution, not to mention a whole system, in which we can achieve a stable balance between Torah and secular studies, financial and spiritual stability, and synthesis of all the good in the world. Over the generations, various people and movements have tried to achieve such a balance but it has proved at best to be the equivalent of walking a tightrope and has never lasted. Such attempts would either veer off the middle path towards the "Torah-only" school or to the more secular-centered style, or else they would produce what one of my teachers called "ducks": they can do a little bit of everything: they can fly, swim and walk, but they can never really compete with the real swimmers, flyers or walkers... (I think the metaphor doesn't need any further explanation...)

The gemara in Kiddushin (daf 29-30 and in the last mishna of the masechet) - has a lengthy discussion about the responsibilities of parents towards the spiritual and physical upbringing of their children. It is interesting and maybe a little perplexing to see how the poskim deal with sources that seem to contradict the common practice over the ages. The overall picture that emerges from the sugiyot is that a Jew is expected to set himself up between the three points of a triangle: Torah, family and work (Parnasah). Each one of these in itself can be a full-time occupation, yet we are obligated to live with the constant, but fertile, tension and dynamic interaction between them. This challenge is different for every individual. The exact balance of forces of the three elements may depend on the individual's (and later, on the couple's) abilities, talents, character, spiritual and physical strength, awareness and, of course, background and social surroundings. It may change over the years and generations. This is natural since we, and the world around us, are constantly changing.



This individualistic approach may be the only practical means for preparing ourselves, our offspring, and our students to cope with our complicated world in the Jewish way. A succinct way of stating it would be thus: "Equip yourself with as much basic knowledge and experience as you can, then find your personal combination which will fit precisely for you. It won't come easily and not as early in life as you would like, but sooner or later, you should set it as your aim to forge such a synthesis". This is not to say that the Torah is not the Fountain of Life for all; rather, each one's connection to the Fountain of Life is not necessarily identical to that of his neighbor. To put it another way: "toratchah keva u'melachtehah arai" cannot be defined in quantities; it needs to be expressed and felt in the wholeness of everyday life. A "Life of Torah" can be expressed in your attitude towards your co-workers, your friends, your 9-hour workday and your family.

*Last but not least, let us not forget an entire half of the story. The discussion up to now has dealt with the **bochur-yeshiva**, but what about his wife? Whatever the **bochur-yeshiva** achieves in the long run will depend on the cooperation, understanding and ambitions of his "**Ezer-Kenegdo**", in the deepest meaning of the word. Our wives, mothers and daughters may not be technically obligated to learn Torah themselves, beyond the studies required to attain basic and wide knowledge of the Halacha and Emuna, but they are the ones that actually create the atmosphere of "a home of Torah", frequently supporting the studies of their husbands and sons from a spiritual and even a financial standpoint. So let us not leave the women out of the revolution, whatever shape it may take.*

This cannot be considered a comprehensive thesis, only a few thoughts and ideas that I had after reading your article. I hope they interest you, and you are welcome to use them as you like.

*Love to all,
Michael*

Epilogue:

Today, a few years later, I may add a note that may, or may not, add some perspective to what we wrote above. Over the 6-odd years since this letter was written, a few new institutions and trends have appeared, that may represent promising attempts to balance between the spiritual and practical needs of our

world. In addition, our children are growing up, widening our perspective and giving us new experiences. For instance, the ambitious young man I mentioned at the beginning of my letter, who decided at age 15 to stop his secular studies and dedicate himself to Torah, is now excelling in his yeshiva society. He apparently is on his way to be a deep-thinking Rabbi or teacher, while at the same time achieving a deepening understanding of the world around us. Does this prove that this is what all of us should do? Not necessarily, he himself admits in retrospect; while it may have been the correct move for him, most of his friends who tried to do the same gained nothing from their short-lived venture, and generally returned rather quickly to the standard yeshiva high school system. As for my cousin, he summed up some of his reflections as of today by writing me:

"...I will probably come out looking like a hypocrite, given the fact that my (new – M.A) son-in-law sat and learned in a well-known yeshiva for five years, and, although now in law school, is still not working to support himself and his wife. My son wound up at a wonderful yeshiva where he is eating up and excelling in gemorrah, but the secular studies have not lived up to their billing in terms of level and intensity. (Our High School for Girls, where all my daughters have attended, including my youngest this coming year, sets a standard for serious limudei kodesh and serious limudei chol that no yeshiva can touch.)... Time will tell."

No, I would not blame him with hypocrisy. He also is doing his best to work towards an ideal in a non-ideal world. I think that the well-known quote from Pirkei Avot is relevant here too:

לא עליך המלאכה לגמור ולא אתה בן חורין להיבטל ממנה

Indeed, we will have to let time tell, but for now, in my humble understanding, each individual can and should strive to find his way to a life of Torah in the existing world and bring up his children to be prepared for this challenge.

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