A Peculiar Point in Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's Essays on Education

View PDF



Elliot Resnick is a staff reporter for The Jewish Press. He studies Modern Jewish History at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University. This article appears in issue 4 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Despite the rhetoric emanating from certain camps of Orthodox Judaism, studying secular knowledge *lishmah*—knowledge for knowledge's sake—is a widely accepted notion among Jewish thinkers. In fact, virtually none of the great Jewish personalities who discuss the value of secular knowledge—from Rav Saadiah Gaon and Rambam to Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik—speak of its utilitarian value. Rambam does not praise Aristotle's philosophy for its salary-increasing powers, nor does Rav Kook laud university studies because of their utility in getting into a good law school.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch is a classic example of this knowledge-*lishmah* school of thought. Not only does he extol the spiritual value of secular studies, he explicitly derides those who see knowledge as a tool in advancing one's career. Two quotations (many more can be adduced) from his essays should suffice to establish this point. In "The Relevance of Secular Studies," Rav Hirsch writes:

[A]ny supporter of education and culture should deplore the fact that when these secular studies are evaluated in terms of their usefulness to the young, too much stress is often placed on so-called practical utility and necessity. Under such circumstances, the young are in danger of losing the pure joy of acquiring knowledge for its own sake, so that they will no longer take pleasure in the moral and spiritual benefits to be obtained by study.

And in "The Joy of Learning," Rav Hirsch has this to say:

[W]e forget that by hurrying to impose the yoke of the materialistic, or, as we like to put it euphemistically, the practical aims of life upon the dawn and springtime of childhood and early youth, we only deprive our children prematurely of the bloom of flowering youth and nip our children's spiritual yearnings in the bud. Instead of encouraging our children to get wisdom for its own sake, we raise them to become only clever and shrewd, judging everything in the light of self-interest and respecting only those intellectual and spiritual pursuits that are likely to yield the highest dividends in terms of material gain. A generation raised on such a philosophy of life will never be able to experience that true joy of learning, which regards knowledge itself as the supreme reward.

Rav Hirsch also stresses that educators must not give their students the impression that their secular studies are simply a necessary concession to modern times. Such an impression is both incorrect and harmful, for "[o]nly ideas rooted in genuine conviction will be received with enthusiasm. Products of compromise can expect no more than grudging acceptance forced by considerations of expediency."

Thus far, Rav Hirsch merely emerges as another proponent—albeit an enthusiastic and vocal one—in the long line of Jewish thinkers who see inherent value in studying secular knowledge.

What distinguishes Rav Hirsch, however, and what makes him a fascinating case study is that more than once in his essays on education, he cites statements of Hazal, our Sages, regarding learning *Torah lishmah* to bolster his position that one should study *secular knowledge lishmah*.

For instance, in an essay discussing general—not specifically Torah—education, "Ethical Training in the Classroom," Rav Hirsch cites *Pirkei Avot* 2:6, "*v'lo am ha'arets hassid*" and remarkably translates this aphorism as "[A]n uneducated man will not attain the moral grandeur of selfless devotion to duty." Traditionally, the term *am ha'arets* applies to someone ignorant vis-à-vis Torah, not general, knowledge. And yet, Rav Hirsch either ignores or pretends not to know this.

Even if Rav Hirsch understands *am ha'arets* in a nontraditional sense, he also applies other statements of Hazal to secular knowledge that almost certainly apply *exclusively* to the study of Torah. For example, he cites *Kiddushin* 40b, "*Limud gadol she-haLimud meivi lidei ma'aseh*," and translates this statement as "Knowledge has priority because only the right kind of knowledge can give rise to the right practice." Two sentences later he paraphrases *Pirkei Avot* 4:7 as "[I]t was considered a desecration of knowledge and the striving after knowledge to use learning as a 'crown of self-glorification' or a 'tool for making a living.'" Rav Hirsch applies these quotations to secular studies without even hinting that in their original context they refer specifically to the study of Torah.

Nor does Rav Hirsch limit himself to select quotations. In the same essay he makes this general statement about Hazal:

[O]ur Sages were enemies of ignorance. They regarded education, intellectual enlightenment, and the acquisition of knowledge as the first of all moral commandments. They viewed the dissemination of intellectual enlightenment among all classes of the population as the prime concern of the nation, and the training of a child's mind as the first and most sacred duty of fatherhood. They considered it a matter of conscience for every Jewish father to see that his child should not remain a *boor* and *am ha'arets*; no Jewish child must be allowed to grow up as an ignorant, uneducated person.

Frankly, this is staggering. Rav Hirsch talks of Hazal as enemies of ignorance, generally speaking, not as enemies of *Torah* ignorance—even though most of Hazal's statements concerning education surely apply to Torah education *only*. Nor does Rav Hirsch apparently feel the need to explain himself (and an explanation is desperately needed, especially keeping in mind the vast difference between Torah study and other fields of knowledge in the minds of many Orthodox Jews). Rav Hirsch never says something to the effect of, "Although our Sages speak of Torah education, we can apply the principle behind their statements to other fields of study as well."

While Rav Hirsch's employment of Hazal in speaking of secular knowledge is most pronounced in his essay, "Ethical Training in the Classroom," he blurs the lines between Torah and secular knowledge in other essays as well. For example, in "Education in the Rabbinic Era," which concerns the educational values of the mishnaic and talmudic sages, Rav Hirsch concludes by asking, "If the pure delight in knowledge for its own sake should, once again, become the common heritage of an entire nation, might it not contribute, in some fashion, to the uplifting, the healing, and the greater happiness of all mankind?" Again, Rav Hirsch speaks of "knowledge"—generically—even though the mishnaic and talmudic sages' educational values concern Torah knowledge.

In "Talmudic Judaism and Society," Rav Hirsch, citing *Shabbat* 31a, writes that the second question Heaven asks a person after he or she dies is "[D]id you set aside a fixed time each day for continuing your studies?" The actual question, as found in the Talmud, is "*Kavata itim laTorah?*—Did

you set aside fixed times for the study of Torah?" Rav Hirsch somehow morphs "Torah" into "studies." Further blurring the lines, Rav Hirsch cites this statement of Hazal among a series of other talmudic statements, all of which concern generic knowledge, *not* Torah knowledge.

Finally, in "The Joy of Learning," Rav Hirsch attempts to convince parents of the need to instill a love of learning in their children even though he describes his era as "so materialistic, and materialistic concerns are given such prominence…". He contrasts his age's attitude to knowledge with "the spirit of true scholarship, which, until very recently, was cherished by the members of the Jewish nation." Of course, this "true scholarship" cherished by Jews was Torah scholarship. Indeed, in subsequent sentences in this essay Rav Hirsch writes specifically of "Jewish scholarship." Nonetheless, Rav Hirsch is less than crystal clear in this essay when he employs, without qualification, the words "scholarship" and "knowledge."

With this fascinating discovery in hand, what now? How does one explain what appears to be an intriguing misuse of Hazal and Jewish history?

My short answer to this dilemma is "I don't know." One can write this apparent distortion off to Rav Hirsch's lifelong goal of winning hearts and minds to Orthodox Judaism. However, such an answer is less than satisfactory in that it assumes a certain dishonesty on Rav Hirsch's part. Therefore, I offer the following possible explanation.

Rav Hirsch obviously knew that he took a logical jump in applying statements of Hazal regarding Torah study to the study of general knowledge. Nonetheless, he considered the step more of a logical "skip" than a logical "leap." In other words, unlike the vast chasm many Orthodox Jews currently see between Torah and general knowledge, Rav Hirsch views the two fields of study as basically similar to one another. Both concern God's wisdom. The student of Torah studies the Divine word and the student of nature, history, and the people in it studies the Divine design. Both are divinity students.

Moreover, in his essays on education, Rav Hirsch repeatedly posits that discovering the laws governing nature should inspire people to search for the laws given to govern *their* lives—the moral law. In Rav Hirsch's terminology, the laws of the Creator should lead people to the laws of the Lawgiver. And by "obeying this moral law of his own free choice, man joins the great chorus of creatures that serve God."

If, then, the proper study of Torah, nature, and history (where one sees God's guiding hand) are all closely intertwined with the study of God's moral law, and if "[i]n the view of Judaism, truth is one and indivisible," Rav Hirsch's out-of-context utilization of Hazal's educational statements becomes more understandable. In his mind, secular studies represent another path in one's Divine service. If so, truly how can one misuse such knowledge as a "crown for self aggrandizement" or as "a tool for making a living"? May Hazal not have had these studies in mind when they argued, "*lo am ha'arets hassid*"? Jewish learning is, after all, in Rav Hirsch's opinion, "so broad and universal in character that it happily welcomes any other fields of study that aspire toward an understanding of the realities of nature and history." And if Hazal did not have such studies in mind, are the two not similar enough to, in good faith, apply a quotation said regarding Torah to general knowledge? Very likely, Rav Hirsch felt the answer to this question was an emphatic *yes*.