Do Not Fold, Spindle, or Mutilate

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Growing up in suburban New York City, I never heard the phrase “secular humanism,” or if I did, I did not find it meaningful enough to remember because I had no concept of religion as a life-encompassing endeavor against which to compare it. Certainly, life offered choices. I could choose to become a doctor or a lawyer, and I might even be so bold as to move to Africa to work for UNICEF, but the mentality of my secular Jewish upbringing would remain underneath any career or geographical choices. In the end, I would be “learning” the *New York Times* wherever I went. One of the hardest tasks in life is breaking out of one’s Weltanschauung. Few do it, and it is a bona fide miracle that people find their way to Torah observance, which can be a whopper of a life-change in our era.

A quarter of a century ago when I became *frum*, the yeshivot for *ba’alei teshuvah* essentially were Hareidi, or they tried to appear so. My limited experience in the Torah world left me unable to categorize them as such just as my prior life as a secular Jewish middle-class American did not seem to me at age 18 a life choice but rather life itself. I lacked the words to encapsulate it and to contrast it from anything else.

Even though I did not become observant via a *kiruv* organization, but rather through thinking and reading, I made my way to yeshiva when enough of the people I encountered recommended it. I had expected yeshiva to be a place for further exploration of the religion and of my own thoughts and feelings about it, in part because it was advertised as such, but that’s not what it was at all. Rather, it was a kind of factory for producing Hareidi Jewish men.

I do not say that with outrage. Many of my old classmates function fairly well as Hareidi Jewish men, better than they were functioning as secular Jewish men. They took to yeshiva and found a productive place in life through the lifestyle it promoted. Most importantly, of course, they are *Shomer Shabbat.*

The problem was for the people who did not precisely fit the mold. If this matter of single-sizing is causing trouble in the schools for the *frum*-from-birth (FFB), the trouble is magnified for *ba’alei teshuvah*. Consider, for example, what happens to the academically inclined person who had spent his entire life immersed in secular studies. Whether this happens in public school, which serves largely as preparation for college, or college itself, or graduate school, or a PhD program, or Sunday afternoons

with the *New York Times*, it comprises a life's work for many people. Suddenly, one hears that it is all *narishkite*, emptiness, and lies. Try it on yourself; say "My life's work was a waste of time." That is a bitter pill to swallow, and it has nasty side effects.

This would not be such a problem if indeed it were all emptiness and lies. *Emet* serves as an excellent replacement for *sheker*. Normally, one is happy to unload rocks from his backpack. But what if they are not really rocks?

Consider my coming to *Yiddishkite*. As I said, I found my way on my own, not through a *kiruv* group. Ironically, I did it largely through "secular" studies. Despite the claim that the non-Torah observant thinkers and writers of the world are all heathens and enemies of God, there are in fact many who write about morality, monotheism, and spirituality. For example, it was none other than conservative political and social commentator William F. Buckley, whose writings taught me about the concepts of faith, self-restraint, and morality as pursuits to encompass every facet of life. He talked about eschatology, that is, the idea that life on a personal and global level takes place in stages with heaven and hell coming last. He introduced me to the catchphrase "Don't immanentize the eschaton," which is an exhortation against utopian secular philosophies such as communism that try to make heaven (the eschaton) on earth. The phrase stems from the writings of Eric Voegelin, a German-born political philosopher who taught at University of Notre Dame and University of Munich.[1]

I am not suggesting that either Buckley or Voeglin were *b'nei Torah* or that seminary students in Lakewood should read their writings. I am saying merely that the bifurcation of humanity into camps of pure truth or complete lies is not the complete truth. Wonderfully, I have learned after years in the *frum* world that many great figures from our history would concur with my statement. Take for example what Rabbeinu Bachya wrote in his introduction to *Duties of the Heart*:

I also quote the pious and wise men of other nations whose words have reached us—such as the words of the philosophers, the discipline of the ascetics, and their admirable codes of conduct—for it is my hope that my readers will incline their hearts to them and listen to their wisdom. Our Masters of blessed memory have already said [in this regard]: One verse says, "But you have acted in accordance with the laws of the nations around you" (Yechezkel 11:12), and another verse says, "Nor have you acted [in accordance with the laws of the nations around you]" (*ibid*. 5:7). What is the resolution [of the two verses]? You have not acted like the refined among them, but you have acted like the corrupt among them. (*Sanhedrin* 39b).[2]

Here we learn that not only did Rabbeinu Bachya study the works of gentile thinkers but he incorporated some of their ideas into his masterpiece. Let us remember where *Duties of the Heart* stands in the cannon of Jewish thought as the Rambam, the Vilna Gaon, and the Hatam Sofer, each one a seminal figure in the Hareidi world, studied and praised it.[3] The grandson of the Hatam Sofer said that "Almost all of his ethical teachings and practices were from the words of this holy book."[4] In our times, the Steipler Gaon wrote, "Whoever has not seen the lights of the holy words of the *Duties of the Heart* will be missing very much, he will be wanting inside, in the purity of all that is holy."[5]

So what do we do with secular studies, much of which obviously is not fit for Jewish eyes or human eyes for that matter? I do not have a simple answer. But I can tell you this, pressuring a person to surrender truths only because of their source or to force them into different terminology that does not feel as true can yield destructive results. As I said, it is a miracle that many people become *frum*.

The *gaon* Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky was sensitive to this idea. He advised *kiruv* professionals that their goal should be simply to help non-observant Jews to become observant, that is, to keep the mitzvoth. One should not try to impose personality change or to destroy the essence of what defines the person. One should not impose conformity.[6] In other words, do not fold, spindle, or mutilate, to borrow a phrase that used to be printed on machine-readable cards for computers. Rav Yaakov said that it is essential that a *ba'al teshuvah* feel normal in his Torah observance. He said that, for example, the typical *ba'al teshuvah* will not feel normal if he does not complete his college education so he should

not be discouraged from doing so.[7]

For many *ba'alei teshuvah*, life in a contemporary Hareidi environment will not feel normal, particularly if one's mentors are not striving to follow the advice of Rav Yaakov. I have been to more than one *shiur* where the speaker declared how all secular music was prohibited. Each time I thought to myself, "Bridge over Troubled Water" is *osur*? Seriously?" I combed through the lyrics, "When you're weary, feeling small, when tears are in your eyes, I'll dry them all." What is the problem here? Is this a *hok* like *shatnes*? Am I never allowed again to hear this song that has comforted and inspired me throughout my life? In my view, most of the people who I observed entering and leaving the *frum* world left not because they could not handle mitzvoth observance but because they could not cope with the more extreme approaches to it. That is a tragedy. Hence, there was and is a great need for Modern Orthodox *kiruv yeshivot* where the answer to incorporating the good of the secular world is not met with a *shochet's* knife, but rather, with discussion, with decisions, and with indecision.

Note that I use the term Modern Orthodox in the broad sense to mean not "Torah only" or not contemporary Hareidi. There are different shades of Modern Orthodox. For example, in my view, the *litvaks* of old Europe and even mid-twentieth-century America would not fit neatly into either camp. However, the Modern Orthodox world tends to allow more room for a person to match the complete *litvish* approach to Torah life which usually included the pursuit of *parnassah* at younger ages and often included secular studies and other matters that we associate today with the Modern Orthodox. As the Hareidi world narrows its scope, the Modern Orthodox world absorbs approaches to Torah life that are not characteristically modern.

I cannot speak for the contemporary *kiruv* world as I have long moved on to the daily focus of earning a living. But the English speaking *kiruv* world of decades ago I knew pretty well, particularly the *yeshivot*. There really was only one place for people who all ready had earned college degrees that I could describe as espousing "Modern" Orthodox sensibilities of any significance and the rabbi who I met after knocking on the door spent our interview testing me on the Gemara. What I did not know at the time, what he evidentially did not know either, is that I was seeking to learn more about *Torah Im Derekh Erets* and *Torah u'Maddah*. As the expression goes, you don't know what you don't know. I did not know these terms so I did not know to inquire about them. I only knew that the outlook I was trying to hoist upon myself was not working as promised.

You might be surprised if you came into my home today to see very little secular material lying around. One reason for this is my fear that young people in this era cannot manage both Torah and *maddah* successfully, particularly as the academic world and general society have drifted into some really bizarre and indecent territory. I cannot get my mind around what passes for culture and entertainment today. But also, I want to spare my family the painful choices and sacrifices that I had to endure. I often think that some *ba'alei teshuvah* would be wise to retain a small percentage of their old interests, as long as they are halakhically permissible. At some point, you have to make peace with your past. You can only discard so much. But as Rabbi Avigdor Miller used to say, you can like chocolate cake, but you don't have to tell the whole world about it. Let the FFBs in my house have some peace; let them enjoy the simplicity that just was not their father's lot in life.

[1] William F. Buckley. *Execution Eve and Other Contemporary Ballads*. New York: Penguin, 1975.
[2] *Duties of the Heart*, trans. by Daniel Haberman. New York: Feldheim, 1996, 47–49.
[3] Daniel Haberman, *Duties of the Heart*, II–III.
[4] R. Shelomo Sofer. *Chut Ha-Meshulash He-Chadash.* Jersualem: Machon Chasam Sofer, 89–90, cited in Daniel Haberman, *Duties of the Heart*, II.
[5] Approbation to the *Lev Tov* edition; cited in Daniel Haberman, *Duties of the Heart*, III.
[6] Heard from his grandson R. Yitzchak Shurin and from R. Leib Tropper.
[7] R. Yitzchak Shurin and R. Leib Tropper.