Rabbi Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad on the Religious Importance of General and Jewish Studies

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Introduction

Rabbi Yosef Hayyim (1834–1909), grandson of Rabbi Moshe Hayyim (Chief Rabbi of Baghdad at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries), was an extraordinary and unique spiritual figure. He was a person of rare intellectual talents, including a phenomenal memory and eloquence in both speech and writing, who took an interest in all branches of Torah scholarship. For those acquainted with great Ashkenazic rabbis of modern times, Rabbi Yosef Hayyim (henceforth: RYH) may be characterized as combining within himself outstanding qualities of both the Gaon of Vilna and the Maggid of Dubno: On the one hand, he was extraordinarily devoted to study and in full command of all branches of traditional Judaic knowledge, and, on the other, he was directly engaged in efforts to bring the Torah to the broad public by delivering public sermons and by composing texts specifically oriented toward a lay readership. The following pages are devoted to an exposition of his views regarding a curriculum for Jewish children and youth that includes both secular and Judaic studies.[1]

Obviously, the number of class hours in a school's curriculum are finite. In a Jewish Day School, any hour devoted to secular studies therefore necessarily constricts the amount of hours devoted to the study of Torah. Since Torah studies are a mitzvah, many Hareidi rabbis hold that ideally, a curriculum should be totally devoid of secular studies (*'al taharat haQodesh*).[2] However, RYH held that this is not the position of Torah itself; while study of Torah is a mitzvah, secular topics are in the halakhic category of "permitted activities" (*mutar*):

> Study of writing, arithmetic and languages is defined as "permitted" (*mutar*).[3] And what is the point of such a definition? To tell you: "Do not say: In this hour, when I am studying writing and arithmetic, it is better that I instead study matters of Torah; why should I waste my time learning writing and arithmetic?" Therefore, these studies were categorized as "permitted," i.e., you are permitted to devote several hours of the day to such study.[4]

What justifies this permission to devote time to the study of non-Torah topics? RYH was aware of the answer given by Rabbi Yitzhaq Bengualid (Tetuan, 1777–1870), that such studies would ensure that "when they grow up they will find a secure livelihood for their entire life."[5] However, he did not consider this very convincing: If the goal is to ensure the future economic well-being of today's children, it would be better for them to learn "the profession of tailors or weavers … from such crafts a person can earn more than by the craft of writing and languages [i.e., clerking]."[6] According to RYH, the primary justifications for engaging in secular studies in parallel with the study of Torah are not pragmatic but rather an expression of Jewish principles and values. These include:

1. *Formation of the Students' Personalities and Character*

> Rabbi Yosef Hayyim writes:
>
> It is worthy to teach both these types of learning to the youth while they are still young in age: study of our holy Torah and study of *Derekh Eretz,* i.e. languages, writing and suchlike. The teachers should engage them in both types of study at the same time, when they are young, and their mind is clear. And it is with regard to this that the Tanna states in *Pirqei Avot*: "Study of Torah together with *Derekh Eretz* is fine, for toil in the two of them drives away sin,"[7] meaning: it is worthy and appropriate that one should engage in these two types of study, Torah and *Derekh Eretz,* at the same time. Because toil in the two of them **together** drives away sin—that is: the evil force that is stored in a person's heart because of his murky physicality—for he will be engaged in matters of the mind/intellect (*muskalot*) and the evil impulse within him will not actualize its potential in the performance of evil deeds.[8]

Torah study and secular learning are both matters of the mind/intellect, and therefore a student's involvement in both together has a positive effect, enabling a student to suppress one's negative impulses and overcome them. This formative influence is especially required when the student is young of age; RYH teaches that this is the thrust of the well-known verse in *Mishlei* 22:6: *hanokh laNa'ar 'al pi darko, gam ki yazqin lo yasur mimenna*.

> This is what is meant by *hanokh laNa'ar*—to guide him in a good, straight path by means of words of wisdom, piety, and matters of intellect; one should thus teach and guide him while he is *'al pi darko*—i.e., at the verge and beginning of his path, before he has entered and become set in it. For at that time, you can easily turn him from one path and lead him on another that is

> good and straight. And as a result *gam ki yazqin lo yasur mimenna*—even when he grows old he will not deviate from the path into which you lead him and he embraced.[9]

This creative reading of *'al pi darko* as "on the verge of his path," i.e., when the young person is about to set out on his or her life's path—seems to be an original interpretation by RYH. It fits well with his position that tandem study of Torah and secular learning should begin already at the earliest stage of a child's education:

> Therefore, the time when it is appropriate to bring children to the hall of study, to teach them Torah and its various branches by worthy and important teachers, and to teach them *derekh eretz*, i.e., other external topics that we shall soon specify—is from the time that the child is seven years of age, until the child is thirteen. But if these studies are only begun once the child is thirteen or more, it will be hard to receive them, unless the child has…a tremendous urge and great desire to study these topics.[10]

2. *Acquaintance with Fields of Knowledge beyond Torah Is Mandated by Reason*

One of the realms of knowledge that Rabbi Yosef Hayyim considers important to acquire is—geography:

> A person has a great need to study geography. As we see in the words of our Rabbis of Blessed Memory (*Hagiga* 12b):
>
> > Rabbi Yosse says:
> >
> > Woe to those persons who see—and do not comprehend what they see; who stand—and do not comprehend on what they stand!
>
> Thus, a person is obligated to know and understand the qualities of the earth, and regarding those who lack this knowledge Rabbi Yose exclaims "Woe!" saying: "Woe to those persons who see—and do not comprehend what they see, etc." From this we learn, that these and other similar facts—a person is required to set his mind upon them and to know them.[11]

However, RYH does not ground the requirement to engage in secular study only this creative interpretation of Rabbi Yosse's apodictic statement.[12] Rather, he grounds that requirement in a completely non-textual source—straight thinking:

> Truth be told, even without that text, Reason obligates this! For how can one hear the sound of thunder, and see lightning, and not understand what they are? And how can one see thunder, and clouds going and coming, and rain pouring down upon the earth—and not understand their quality, and what makes them happen? So too: How can one stand in the city of Baghdad, and now know where is *Eretz Israel*? And where is India? And where is Europe?—Whether ahead of him or behind him, to his right or to his left? Most certainly, a person lacking knowledge of these matters is degraded and lacking even in his own eyes! But if all Jewish persons will be perfect in knowledge of such things, their honor will be great in the eyes of all humans, and all will say of them: "This great nation is a wise and sagacious People" [*Devarim* 4:6].[13]

As other great rabbis from talmudic times onward, RYH holds that a Jew's obligations derive not only from holy texts but also from human rationality.[14] Any intelligent person realizes that a person lacking understanding of the physical and energetic world in which he lives is degraded and lacking in the eyes of others—and rightly so! Furthermore, in human socio-cultural reality, a common criterion for recognizing a person as "wise and sagacious" is his command of knowledge regarding the world in which he lives. Torah speaks of an ideal situation in which all humans will praise Israel, saying "This great nation is a wise and sagacious People." How can Jews in Baghdad (and elsewhere) merit such praise from other peoples? "If all Jewish persons will be perfect in knowledge of such things!"[15]

Details of the realms of knowledge that a Jew should engage in, and attribution of mastery of these topics to a great talmudic sage, are included in Rabbi Yosef Hayyim's reading of another talmudic passage. In *Bava Qama* 66 it is told that Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Assi were sitting and studying under their Master, Rabbi Yitzhaq Nafha. One of them asked Rabbi Yitzhaq to teach them halakha, and the other asked Rabbi Yitzhaq to teach them aggada. RYH explains:

> The meaning of this seems to be, that one wanted him to teach them matters of tradition, i.e., important halakhot, and talmudic explanations of the reasons underlying *mishnayot* and *baraitot*. And the other wanted aggada. For Rabbi Yitzhaq was perfect in his command of worldly knowledge: natural science, geometry, medicine, astronomy, knowledge regarding the nature of creation—inert, plant, and animal—as well as geography, et al. And since all these realms of wisdom are not part of Torah, they are called "aggada."[16]

On this reading, the terms "halakha" and "aggada" do not indicate a subdivision of Torah into normative vs. ideational matters. Rather, they indicate a division of human knowledge into a realm that is unique to the Torah of Israel, and a realm that is universal to all human beings. For Jews, involvement in both realms is important, and therefore, Jewish schools should divide the students' hours of study accordingly:

> For this reason it says: *hanokh laNa'ar 'al pi darko gam ki yazqin lo yasur mimmena:* i.e., do not say: "I will heap a heavy load upon the young person, and teach him only Torah day and night. And I will not teach him writing, and Hebrew, and grammar, and math, and knowledge of nature, and worldly matters such as geography etc., so that he will not waste his time on such things but rather study only the complete and perfect Torah!" Do not do that! Rather, educate

> the young person also “in matters of his Way”—i.e., in matters of this world that is called “Way” […] For although education should be mainly in study of Torah, you should “grasp the one without letting go of the other” (*Qohelet* 7:18).[17]

Many rabbis who allowed time to be set aside from Torah study for the sake of other topics held it to be self-evident that only Torah study is of value *per se*. On this view, study of secular topics is permitted only because of their ability to enable better comprehension of Torah. Thus Rabbi Jonathan Eybeshutz (1694–1764) wrote:

> All wisdom is of value only as providing support for our understanding of Torah. Thus, geometry is the wisdom of measuring [….] it is very much required for the sake of measurements concerning the *‘eglah ‘arufa*, and the cities of the Levites and of Refuge, and the tracts surrounding cities … Astronomy is an Israelite science because of “the Secret of [determining] Leap Years,” to know the movements of the seasons and constellations and to sanctify [new] months.[18]

However, Rabbi Yosef Hayyim unequivocally rejected this view:

> We see that the Master of the Talmud, the great Sh’muel of blessed memory, devoted great toil and effort to delve deeply into the science of astronomy, to the extent that we find him declaring: “The paths of the sky are as clear to me as the paths of [my city] Neharde’a” (*Berakhot* 58b). Now, if he was so proficient in the wisdom of astronomy, it is easy to imagine how much time he had to spend on the study of this wisdom, that is exceedingly deep and great. And if it was merely to learn how to calculate leap years—what need for him to delve so deeply into this wisdom, to the extent that he was as proficient in the paths of the sky as he was in the paths of Neharde’a ?! Rather, it is certainly incumbent upon a person to acquire knowledge and to understand other wisdoms that are not part of Torah wisdom.[19]

Just as RYH dismissed the explanation that study of secular topics is justified because it facilitates earning a livelihood, he rejects the idea that such study is justified because it facilitates understanding and application of Torah. However, we have seen that he did validate other reasons for engaging in such learning:

1. Fulfilling the obligation (mandated by reason) for a person to know and understand the world in which one lives
2. Realizing the goal that the Jewish People be (correctly) perceived by all humans as “wise and sagacious”

We now turn to two additional rationales for study of non-Torah realms of knowledge, which are validated by RYH.

3. *Study of Realms of Knowledge beyond Torah—Enabling Tikkun ‘Olam*

A third valid reason for engaging in general (non-Torah) studies is given by Rabbi Yosef Hayyim in the following passage:

> With God’s help, It seems to me that an additional explanation of scripture’s intent in the phrase *hanokh laNa’ar ‘al pi darko* is, that King Solomon of blessed memory sought to teach us, that a person should not reject any of the kinds of knowledge that are required for the improvement of the world (*tikkun ‘olam*) and the for human perfection (*sh’leimut haAdam*), even though it may seem that this is knowledge of mundane/physical things.[20]

It seems that the characterization of such studies as contributing to “human perfection” relates to an idea that we have already seen in RYH’s writing, i.e., that secular knowledge contributes to the formation of a positive and worthy character. However, the justification of general knowledge because of its contribution to *tikkun ‘olam* is an expansion of the list of rationales that he provides for engaging in such studies.

It is important to note the meaning of this phrase as employed in the above quotation from *Imrei Binah*. In the kabbalistic worldview of Rabbi Yitzhaq Luria Ashkenazi (*ha-ARI*) and most subsequent kabbalists, the terms “*tikkun*” and “*tikkun ‘olam*” relate to the idea that engagement by Jews in activities such as observance of mitzvoth, prayer, and study of Torah—especially if done with appropriate “intention” (*kavvanah*)—causes the release of “holy sparks” that had been captive in the realm of negative dark cosmic reality. Upon release, these sparks return to their original, positive place in the Cosmic scheme; this weakens the negative realm and strengthens the positive, holy side—thus contributing to the repair (“*tikkun*”) of the entire Cosmic system. When this process will be completed, Cosmic reality will return to its original intended state—and this, *ipso facto*, is the ultimate Redemption. Rabbi Yosef Hayyim was a great kabbalist in the Lurianic tradition, and the term “*tikkun* ” appears frequently in his writing. Thus, for instance, he was asked by his disciple, Rabbi Shim’on Agassi: “When a person performs “*tikkun*” by engaging in Torah, mitzvoth, and prayer—does this affect also what was prior to the Sin of Adam, or not?” [21]

Specifically in light of RYH’s extensive employment of this term in its kabbalistic meaning, it is important to realize that when he extols general knowledge as conducive to “*tikkun ‘olam*” he is employing this term in an alternate manner, that became prevalent in the nineteenth century, to indicate human activity that has a positive impact on mundane this-worldly reality. In a related passage in *Imrei Binah* he explains that in an improved social-political reality such as that prevailing in his own time, practical application of knowledge acquired from study of natural sciences brings blessing to the world:

> God did not enable the minds of those who are wise in the natural sciences to be attentive and to observe these sciences until the recent years, close to our time, when the kings made a covenant via ordinances that they enacted to improve the world (*ba'avur tikkun ha-'olam*) that are called *Tanzimat*.[22] And by virtue of this enablement [by God], from these sciences of steam-ships and telegraph there resulted good and benefit for humanity, in several matters … thus, the revealing of these wisdoms in recent generations was good for the world, and is "a good thing rightly timed" (*Mishlei* 15:23).[23]

It is worthy of note that when praising *tikkun 'olam* in the above paragraph, RYH explicitly validates activities for the benefit of humanity in general (rather than to specifically improve only the lot of Jews). By pointing out a causal link between application of general knowledge and *tikkun 'olam*, RYH validates devotion of time by students and teachers in Jewish schools to the study of a wide range of topics in addition to Torah—and implicitly encourages the possibility that as a result, these students will then become empowered to facilitate the well-being of all humankind.

4. *Engaging in Acquisition of General Knowledge as a Path to Deepening Our Connection to God*

Over and above the three justifications for general studies that we have seen until this point, Rabbi Yosef Hayyim adds a fourth—theological—justification: a person's deep religious and spiritual impulse to become close to God cannot be fully achieved without knowing and understanding the world in which we live. In a manner akin to Rambam's determination that knowledge of the Divine is impossible without knowledge of the sciences that are the necessary basis for such knowledge (*Guide* 1:34), RYH writes that it is irrational that a person who

> Desires and yearns to learn what is in the heavens above, does not know the quality and state and condition of the earth underneath upon which he dwells, and what is happening upon it and what is taking place therein before his very eyes.[24]

He stresses that the realm of those matters defined as "permitted,"[25] that are worthy of study in addition and in parallel to Torah, extends far beyond what some persons think:

> One might think that this sector defined as "permitted" includes merely writing and arithmetic. That is incorrect! Rather, there are additional kinds of study that are very much required for a person, i.e., a person should know something of natural science, such as—what is the nature of lightning, and what is the nature of thunder, and what is the nature of the rainbow, and the nature of earthquakes, and of clouds and rain, and other similar matters of the creation that the Creator (may He be praised) created in the world. With regard to some of these matters we bless Him (may He be praised) and say: "His strength and power fill the world."[26]

Several of the phenomena mentioned by RYH—lightning, thunder, earthquakes, and rainbows—are characterized in the last chapter of Tractate *Berakhot* as phenomena that, when experienced, should elicit recitation of a blessing, i.e., should be recognized as a religious experience. It follows that a person engaged in study of the natural world—and understanding of the matters mentioned by RYH requires acquisition of elements of meteorology, physics, electricity, optics, and geology *inter alia*—is engaged in study of matters of religious significance. God created the world and therefore, the deeper our understanding of nature, the deeper is our understanding and appreciation of the "strength and power"—and wisdom—of the Creator.[27]

It follows, that there are two complimentary paths to knowledge of God: engaging in study of Torah, and engaging in study of aspects of creation. This idea finds clear expression in the following passage written by RYH:

> This is indicated by the verse: "His left hand is under my head, and His right hand caresses me" (*Shir haShirim* 8:3). For the world is indicated by the letter *Vav*, that has the numerical value of six, and the world has six extensions: up, down, and the four directions …. And it is known that study of Torah is called "right," for it is strong and dexterous. While matters of *Derekh Eretz*, that are those of this world, are called "left," i.e., the weaker hand. And thus he says: "His left hand is under my head," meaning: "His left" …. i.e., matters of *Derekh Eretz*, "is under my head"—i.e., I engage in this. In addition, "His right hand" … i.e., matters of Torah—"caresses me"; [indicating] that I should engage in it [Torah study] at the same time I am engaged in *Derekh Eretz*. For "grasp the one and the other" together, at the same time. For it augurs well for a person when he studies in this manner.[28]

According to traditional interpretation, *Shir haShirim* presents the loving relationship and the enduring connection between God (the male figure in the Song) and the People of Israel (the female). The verse "His left hand is under my head, and His right hand caresses me" thus expresses the experience of the People of Israel, who feel embraced by the two arms of the Divine. As interpreted by RYH, the closeness of God and His embrace are experienced by Israel thanks to Israel's simultaneous engagement in two realms of study: Study of Torah (= embrace by God's right arm) and study of general knowledge and wisdom (= embrace by His left arm). In other words: Torah (on the one hand) and the created world (on the other hand) are two complimentary modes by which God reveals Himself to us. The ideal path for us as Jews is, to experience God both via study/understanding of His Torah and via study/understanding of His creation in all its richness and diversity.

Conclusion

Rabbi Yosef Hayyim unequivocally endorses and supports a curriculum for Jewish education in which from the earliest age onward the student devotes hours of study to Torah and to general knowledge in parallel. He does not agree with the view, advocated by some rabbis, that the rationale for engagement in study of general subjects is to enhance the students' future income from work. Similarly, he rejects the view that the rationale for such study is, to enhance understanding of Torah.

Rather, he presents and endorses four valid rationales for study and acquisition of general knowledge:

1. Fulfilling the obligation (mandated by reason) for a person to know and understand the world in which one lives;
2. Realizing the goal that the Jewish People be a "wise and sagacious" people, and (as a result) correctly perceived as such by all humans;
3. Empowering (Jewish) students to facilitate "*tikkun 'olam*, i.e., to advance the well-being of all humankind;
4. Enabling (Jewish) students to experience enhanced closeness and connection to God by study/understanding of His self-revelation via Torah as well as by study/understanding of His self-revelation via Creation in all its richness and diversity.

[1] His views on this issue were expounded in several places in his oeuvre, especially in two sermons delivered c. 1903 relating to the inauguration of a new building for the Baghdad branch of an elementary school affiliated with the Alliance Israelite Universelle. The sermons were first published a year before Rabbi Yosef Hayyim"s death in *Imrei Binah* (Jerusalem 1908) and have since been reprinted several times. The page numbers provided in this article's footnotes follow the 1973 edition, which is relatively accessible (e.g., via *Otzar haHokhma*).

[2] Inter alia, this is the official position of Chabad (see e.g., http://www.chabad.org.il/Magazines/Article.asp?ArticleID=270&CategoryID=373). If local law requires secular studies, only the absolute minimum of hours may be diverted from study of Torah. Many such institutions exist. For the U.S. see e.g., https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/23/nyregion/yeshivas-lawsuit-secular-education.html; for Israel see e.g https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/ex-haredim-sue-israel-for-lack-of-education-1.5380446

[3] RYH attributes this definition to Rambam, but does not provide a reference to a specific source.

[4] *Imrei Binah* p. 249.

[5] Responsa *vaYomer Yitzhaq*, vol. 1 (Livorno 1876), #99. This responsum was composed in 1855.

[6] Responsa *Rav Pe'alim*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem 1903), *Orah Hayyim* #22.

[7] Tractate *Avot* 2:2.

[8] *Imrei Binah*, p. 236.

[9] *Imrei Binah*, p. 247.

[10] *Imrei Binah*, p. 248.

[11] *Imrei Binah*, p. 250.

[12] A perusal of the continuation of Rabbi Yosse's statement in tractate *Hagiga* will enable the reader to appreciate just how creative RYH's interpretation is!

[13] *Imrei Binah*, p. 250.

[14] E.g., *Ketubot* 22a: "What need is there to cite a verse [to ground a norm], if it can be derived from Reason?!"

[15] Rabbi Yosef Hayyim's use of this verse to support Jewish study of natural science and geography is yet another instance of his remarkable independence of mind. For Torah itself ad. loc. offers a different path for Jews to earn the admiration and respect of others: life according to the norms of Torah!

[16] *Imrei Binah*, p. 252.

[17] *Imrei Binah*, p. 251.

[18] *Ya'arot Devash* (Jerusalem 1988), vol. 2, p. 122.

[19] *Imrei Binah*, p. 250-251.

[20] *Imrei Binah*, p. 249.

[21] Rabbi Yosef Hayyim, responsa *Rav Pe'alim*, vol. 1, Jerusalem 1901, section *Sod Yesharim* #17. Rabbi Agassi had thought that the reply was negative, but RYH rejected this opinion and explained at length why the correct answer was in the affirmative.

[22] *Tanzimat* was the term for wide-ranging changes and reforms in the administrative and legal realms of the Ottoman Empire, enacted in the nineteenth century.

[23] *Imrei Binah* p. 229.

[24] *Imrei Binah*, p. 250.

[25] See text above, near note 3.

[26] *Imrei Binah*, p. 249–250.

[27] Rabbi Yosef Hayyim here echoes the religious worldview of Rambam, who writes:

> There is a commandment to love and to be in awe of this Glorious and Awesome God, as it is said: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God" (Deut. 6:5); and it is said: "The Lord thy God thou shalt fear" (Ibid. 6:13). But how may one discover the way to love and fear Him? When a person will contemplate His works and His great and wonderful creatures, and will behold through them His wonderful, matchless and infinite wisdom, he will spontaneously be filled with love, praise and exaltation and become possessed of a great longing to know the Great Name, as David said: "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Ps. 42:2); and when he will consider all these very matters, he will be taken aback in a moment and stricken with fear/awe, and realize that he is an infinitesimal

creature, humble and dark, standing with an insignificant and slight knowledge in the presence of the All Wise, as David said: "When I see Thy heavens, the works of Thy fingers [….] what is man that Thou should pay attention to him?" (*Ibid*. 8:4). (*Mishne Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei haTorah,* 2:1–2)

[28] *Imrei Binah*, p. 236.