Torah and Worldly Knowledge: Our Judges, Our Leaders, and Us

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And what branch of human wisdom is there that can be ignored in our efforts to arrive at a fuller knowledge of God?[1]

—Hakham Ya'akov Anatoli

It is well-established that laws and regulations have existed in many pre-Torah societies of the ancient world.[2] However, the Ten Statements *(aseret haDibberot)* revealed to the Nation of Yisrael were unique in their acceptance as divinely-sourced categorical imperatives. Prior ancient codes claimed human authorship[3] (not divine) were revealed to kings (not laypeople), and did not contain pre-installed and defined tools of interpretation that allowed for judicious interpretation and enduring relevance.[4]

The Ten Statements were to preside over our land through a subsidiarity system that saw Moshe at the top, with local courts dealing with local matters autonomously. This structure was the innovative brainchild of Yitro, the non-Jewish father-in-law of Moshe. Yitro felt that local problems required local solutions. Until then, Moshe had been judging each case by going to God and seeking revelation.[5]Yitro's recommendation was designed to facilitate the *human* contribution to Covenant with God.

Turnus Rufus once asked Rabbi Akiva, "Which is preferable—the works of God or the works of man?"

Rabbi Akiva brought him wheat kernels and braided loaves, saying, "These are the works of God, and these are the works of man. Are the works of man not preferable to these raw kernels?" [6]

—Midrash Tanhuma

To Be a Judge

The localized courts would represent the evolving body that is the Oral Law, which would allow judges to interpret and innovate law according to the time and place. Since the men tasked with this role will have great responsibilities, there are characteristics required to fill it:

> You shall choose out of the entire nation capable men, God fearers,[7] men of truth, who hate monetary gain…. (*Shemot* 18:21)

Among the esteemed list of requirements to be a judge of Yisrael, there is an expectation that one would have a broad intellectual capacity. Therefore, these judges would require knowledge of the world—knowledge that illuminates, but exists beyond, the pages of the Torah. The acquisition of such knowledge would ultimately impact their level of wisdom, while also allowing them to rule on relevant matters of law:

> Rambam: We appoint only men of wisdom and understanding [to the Sanhedrin], who are exceptional in their knowledge of the Torah and who possess a broad intellectual potential. They should also have some knowledge concerning other intellectual disciplines such as medicine, mathematics, astronomy, astrology, and also the practices of fortune-telling, magic, sorcery, and the hollow teachings of idolatry, so that they will know how to judge them.[8]

> Radak: The wisdom concerning the unity of God [philosophy] as well as external forms of wisdom…astrology and the vanities of idol-worship… the measurement of land and knowledge of solstices and calculations…medicine. No one can be appointed to the Sanhedrin to decide the law unless he knows these disciplines.[9]

From Judges to Leaders

However, this requirement goes beyond the realm of court judges determining law. Hakhamim of every generation have manifested this from the time of Hazal to the Geonim, from the Rishonim to the Aharonim, to today:[10]

> Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook: It is the obligation of the true Sages of our generation to follow in the footsteps of our medieval rabbis to look after our perplexed people and to broaden their knowledge of the intellectual disciplines, according to the newest research. They must show them how all truths must be viewed from the perspective of Torah.[11]

> Hakham Ben Sion Uziel: Our rabbis of all generations did not limit themselves to their four cubits and to the walls of the study hall. Rather, they learned and knew all which transpired in the world of science and justice.[12]

> Rabbi Eliezer Melamed: The Gedolei haDor [great ones of the generation], members of the Sanhedrin, must be proficient in the wisdom found in the world, and someone who is not, cannot be considered a true Gadol (great one), and cannot sit in the Sanhedrin. For even if he is punctilious and immensely knowledgeable, it would be impossible to discuss with him in depth, thoroughly and calmly on any matter… a Gadol baTorah who guides the generation, must understand the processes that drive peoples and society, the economy and science, the weight of international relations, and the system of cultural influences existing in the world.[13]

It is astonishing to notice that in our time these very topics are the same "secular" topics that some people within our nation have simply discarded as heretical and non-Jewish. Much of this confusion, rooted in fear generated by a lack of knowledge in these fields, is due to an unfortunate resistance to distinguish between *facts* and *values*. Our Sages, of blessed memory, had no such issue with making this distinction:

> Rabbi Gerald Blidstein: The Sages had little difficulty in accepting knowledge of the physical world from gentiles; more broadly, we may say that Jews have no advantage when it comes to matters of fact (whether physical or not).[14]

While some may still reject or scoff at such worldly knowledge, many Hakhamim defiantly defended those who studied science, philosophy, or other worldly disciplines:

> Meiri: Foreign learning is no longer foreign material that might be banned; it is part of Jewish culture. There are Jewish tracts on the sciences, and the sciences have been incorporated into non-philosophic works as well. The sciences are necessary …The religious problems raised by philosophic study are inconsiderable in relation to its benefits. Our distinguished specialists in the sciences should be allowed to pursue their work unhindered, and their writings—however troubling—should not be suspected of heresy. To restrict access to the sciences—even from a few people for a short time—would almost certainly be to their detriment and the detriment of our community. [15]

> Hakham Ya'akov Anatoli: It is an emphasis on thought and truth, rather than on words and phrases, that will restore rationality to its rightful place and level the artificial barriers a misguided obscurantism has erected between Hebrew wisdom and the wisdom that flows from other cultures.[16]

> Rabbi Eliezer Berkovitz: Questioning the permissibility of secular studies is one of the unhealthy manifestations of the exilic (*galut*) mentality. It is deeply embarrassing that in our time it is still necessary to discuss the relationship between religious studies and secular studies, with a view to justifying their integration within a wholesome and complete form of Jewish education.[17]

Context and Us

This striving to know about God's world is not something reserved exclusively for our judges and leaders. We as members of the body of Yisrael are equally charged with viewing the Author of the Word (Torah) as the Author of the World, because such an endeavour falls under our legal requirement to *know God:*

> Rambam: The principle of principles and the pillar of the sciences is to **know** that there is a First Being [God].[18]

Although one can never know the essence of God, one can still come to know God through God's ways and expressions (*derakhim*) such as Torah, science, and the other details (*peratim*) of reality that God presents us with.[19]

> Rambam: "And you shall love the Lord your God" (*Devarim* 6:5). What is the path to loving God? Upon one's contemplation of God's works [Torah] and God's great and wonderful creations [the world], discovering in them God's endless and limitless

wisdom, one comes directly to love and to praise, glorify and yearn with a great desire to know God.[20]

It is moving to learn that the level of our *love* for God is based on this very *knowledge* of God!

Rambam: In accordance with one's knowledge will be the love of God. If much knowledge, then much love, and if little knowledge, then little love.[21]

Therefore, our Hakhamim understood that **content** is never just content. What lies above any piece of scientific, philosophical, historical, or other worldly piece of content must be a **contextual** lens through which one can understand, interpret, and respond to it. In a world replete with unorganised content, the context of Yisrael must be to *know God.*

Hakham Yosef Qafih: All those subjects and sciences which, for some reason, people refer to as "secular knowledge," if a person studies them in order to arrive at insight and knowledge of God—behold, they are surely sacred [qadosh].[22]

Hakham Yisrael Moshe Hazan: Once a rabbi has filled his stomach with the meat of Torah, he should stand in the halls of the natural sciences…and if he should do so, surely his eyes would be filled with light, enabling him to understand several deep matters found in the Torah, Talmud, and Midrash.[23]

Abraham Ibn Daud: The purpose of all the sciences is the knowledge of God.[24]

Hakham Ben Sion Uziel: It is impossible to understand Torah—certainly to plumb its depths—without a profound and broad knowledge of all worldly wisdoms and sciences.[25] "Talmud Torah" is a general term referring to the attainment of wisdom; it includes Torah study as well as all the studies and sciences which deepen our understanding.[26]

The Maharal: A person ought to study everything that will enable one to understand the essential nature of the world. One is obligated to do so, for everything is God's work. One should understand it all, and through it recognise one's Creator.[27]

Although many various Jewish figures and communities have sought to embody this approach, [28] itwas one of the key distinctions between Sepharad and Ashkenaz in their formative years.[29] Since then, this tradition has been a unique characteristic of Sephardic communities throughout the generations.[30] It is important to stress that such an endeavor is distinct to that of reformist entities who sought to embrace the world and its knowledge *without the lens of Torah*. One of the foremost leaders of Syrian Jewry, Hakham Yitzhak Dayan (1878–1964), clearly elucidated this subtle yet crucial distinction:

> The first intellectuals in the period of the wise men of Spain (Sepharad) realized and knew well the depth of the light of Judaism and its glorious power. The Torah and rational knowledge walked among them like twin sisters. And there was a true peace among their spiritual tendencies. And therefore in their wisdom and their intelligence they strengthened and sustained the Torah and the tradition and made them intellectually accessible. But the new maskilim of the past generation failed to comprehend this. They did not penetrate the great depth of Judaism. They did not comprehend that the homeland of the nation's soul, which developed and reached perfection over thousands of years, was the spirit of the Bible and the Midrash and the sublime ideas they contain. They did not comprehend that a person who seeks wisdom and perfection in mundane knowledge must all the more fulfill one's natural responsibility to honor the holy tradition as a person honors one's father and mother. And therefore they strayed a great distance and changed their manner.[31]

We can now appreciate how crucial it is for both the leadership and membership of Yisrael to remain sensitive to, and knowledgeable about, the developing world around them. Those who fail to do so are ultimately rejecting God and God's works, in no uncertain terms:

> Behold, injustice! Behold, iniquity!
>
> They do not regard the work of God, neither have they considered the operation of His hands. (Yishayahu 5:7, 5:12)

While some may continue to claim that those who isolate themselves from the world and knowledge of it are somehow at the peak of faithfulness to God, it is only fitting to respond with the pointed words of two Hakhamim from different parts of the world, yet had the same desire to fulfil our objective to "know God":

> Hakham Hoter Ben Shelomo: The person who renders the sciences null and void and is hostile toward those who engage in them…he is of degenerate temperament and hard to cure. The person who is of that disposition is in a worse state than he who receives his knowledge by uncritical faith. For uncritical faith is an obstacle to verification, and it is a matter for the blind. It is like a group of blind people joined together and walking down a road who are being led by one person who can see. If he stumbles, the group stumbles.

[32]

> Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook: It is through “little faith” that people, eager to affirm their ideological stances, battle against all the so-called evils that arise in the world: scientific knowledge, heroism, beauty, and order, claiming that these are outside all that is divine in the world. And it is with a begrudging eye that some, who think they have comprehended the foundations of holiness in a realm that transcends worldly development [Torah] come to detest culture, the sciences, and the political arena—within the Jewish nation and in the world at large. But all of this is a grave error and displays a lack of faith. The “pure view” sees God's appearance in all worldly progress. Both individual and communal, spiritual, and material. Everything is part of God's ongoing creation.[33]

Such unabashed commitment by our Hakhamim propels us to continue striving toward our chief objective to “know God” in every generation.

Notes

[1] Ya’akov Anatoli, *Malmad haTalmidim, Vaet’hanan*, p. 159b.

[2] As Rabbi Moshe Shamah states in *Recalling the Covenant* (p. 360), “Regulations that prescribe respect for the names of the gods, the honouring of parents, and the prohibitions of murder, adultery, stealing and false testimony had long been legislated in Near Eastern society.”

[3] In the epilogue of Hammurabi’s Laws, it states “These are the just decisions which Hammurabi, the able king, has established and thereby has directed the land along the course of truth and the correct way of life.” In contrast, it is not claimed anywhere in the Torah that Moshe is the source of the divine law—he is simply the scribe.

[4] Such interpretation and re-interpretation relating to law can only be made by members of a Sanhedrin or other great court, and doing such things without the due legal process was ultimately the downfall of reformist sects.

[5] *Shemot* 18:16–17.

[6] *Midrash Tanhuma, Tazria* 5:1.

[7] Rambam defines “fear of God” as a state of awe and reverence achieved by a person who marvels at the sheer magnitude of the world and how minute they are in comparison. See *Mishneh Tora, Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah*, 2:2. Indeed, “fear of God” is a far more sophisticated concept than how it is commonly presented today by certain proponents of pop-Torah as promises of dread and terror. According to Rambam (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:6), this is correlated with the level of knowledge that one has about God, “In accordance with one’s knowledge will be the love of God. If much knowledge, then much love, and if little knowledge, then little love.”

[8] *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Sanhedrin*, 2:1.

[9] Radak, *Kovetz Teshuvot HaRambam 3*, p. 5b.

[10] Rabbinic figures throughout the ages have played key roles in representing and transmitting this key feature of the Geonic-Sephardic tradition, such as R. Se’adya Gaon, R. Shemuel HaNagid, Rabbenu Hananel, R. Yehuda HaLevy, R. Ibn Megas, R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, HaRambam, R. Yosef ben Yehuda, R. David Kimhi (Radak), Ralbag, R. Levi ibn Habib, R. Moshe Almosnino, R. Yitzhak Orobio, R. David Nieto, R. Yisrael Moshe Hazan, R. Menashe Sitehon, R. Eliyahu Ben Amozegh, R. Yeshaya Dayan, R. Yitzhak Dayan, R. Matloub Abadi, R. Eliyahu Friei, R. Yosef Qafih, R. Yosef Faur, and many others today.

[11] *LeNebukhei HaDor*, 2:3.

[12] *Sha'arei Uziel*, Introduction, p. 35 and 37.

[13] *In Memory of Rabbi Rabinovitch*, available at: https://revivimen.yhb.org.il/

[14] *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures*, p. 51.

[15] Menahem Meiri’s letter to Abba Mari, in Simeon ben Joseph, *Hoshen Mishpat.* This is also summarised and referenced in Gregg Stern, *Philosophy and Rabbinic Culture*, p. 210.

[16] *Malmad HaTalmidim*, Introduction.

[17] *Essential Essays on Judaism*, p. 236.

[18] *Sefer HaMisvot, Misvat Aseh* 1.

[19] Similarly, you can never know the *essence* of another person, but you can know that person through the expressions and persona they present you with. See Rambam, *Moreh haNebukhim*, Part 1, Chapter 34 for an analysis of this important point.

[20] *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah* 2:1–2.

[21] *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:6.

[22] *Ketavim*, Volume 2, p. 594.

[23] *She'erit HaNahala*, p. 24.

[24] *HaEmunah Ramah*, p. 44.

[25] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p. 405.

[26] *Ibid*., p. 552–553.

[27] *Kitvei Maharal mi-Prague*, Mossad Harav Kook, Volume 2, pp. 119–120.

[28] This holistic approach of Hakhmei Sepharad is similar, but crucially different, to the model of thought commonly known today as *Torah uMadda* (Torah and "secular" knowledge), which attempts to bridge gaps between Torah and worldly knowledge, arguing for their peaceful coexistence. No such distinctions were made by Hakhmei Sepharad, who viewed their study of God's world as a religious obligation. As Rabbi David Berger eloquently states in *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures*, p. 97: "If love of God, clearly a quintessential religious value, was to have any real meaning, it could only

flow from a knowledge of the Creator's handiwork, and this required a pursuit of the sciences."

[29] While Hakhmei Sepharad lived in the sophisticated and highly developed Islamic world of southern Spain, the rabbis of France and Germany lived in a Christendom that had limited access to science and philosophy. This is also highlighted by Hakham Yehuda Ibn Tibbon (1120–1190) in the introduction of his Hebrew translation of *?ovot HaLevavot*: "And in the lands of Edom [Christendom]...they had great Sages in the wisdom of Torah and Talmud since the days of yore; however, they did not engage in other wisdoms because their Torah was their livelihood and because books of other wisdoms were unavailable to them."

[30] …even though it was much harder for many Jews to maintain such broad intellectual studies during the "survive mode" of *Galut*, as predicted by Hakham Shem Tob ibn Falaquera (1225–1290): "It is virtually impossible for a person of the Exile in these times to fulfil the conditions required for intellectual perfection that Maimonides mentioned….All this is difficult for one who is enslaved, who is in distress and oppression, whose life is the life of sorrow." *(Moreh HaMoreh*, p. 135–136). Indeed, I believe this is one of the main reasons why this approach is not currently as widespread as it was. Those familiar with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs will understand and appreciate this reality—and why it is (thankfully) coming back to the mainstream now that Jews are relatively in "thrive mode."

[31] *Minhat Yehudah*, p. 30.

[32] *Siraj al-Uqul*, available in Tzvi Langermann, *Yemenite Midrash*, p. 15.

[33] *Arpelei Torah*, see analysis here: https://www.etzion.org.il/en/essence-holy-and-secular