A Renaissance Man--At What Price?

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"Some of the most famous and important works of literature contain passages and themes that are immodest in nature. May a God-fearing Jew read these works for the good they contain, or must one forgo reading them entirely?"

That was the question I posed to several rabbis in 2017 for a feature I wanted to publish in *The Jewish Press*. I sought five answers of 100–300 words each. Much to my surprise, though, none of the rabbis I contacted agreed to respond. One said he wasn't a *posek* (halakhic decisor), another said he had no time, and a third didn't want to be quoted. I emailed a few other rabbis, hoping for better luck. Nothing doing.

I was perplexed. In my many years as a writer for *The Jewish Press*, I rarely had encountered a less cooperative group. I also couldn't understand how so many rabbis—whose duty it is to lead the masses—could beg out of answering a question that surely must occur to every educated observant Jew at one point or another in his intellectual development. In Modern Orthodox circles, where dropping literary references is fashionable, the question is particularly important. Who among us, after all, isn't impressed by someone who can quote both Rashi and Rousseau, the Netziv and Nietzsche, the Or HaHayyim and Orwell? But is reading an author like Orwell, in fact, permissible? His brilliant short novel *Animal Farm* is squeaky clean, but his longer, more famous novel *1984* certainly is not. Can a God-fearing Jew read this work nonetheless for the insight it provides on totalitarianism? Can one read *Gulliver's Travels*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Brave New World*, *Atlas Shrugged*? Can one watch classic movies like "The Godfather" or "The Graduate"? Or do the immodest scenes in these works disqualify them from being read or watched by a Torah-observant Jew?

A few months after failing to elicit any responses to my question, I tried again, determined to at least raise the issue in the pages of *The Jewish Press*. After much effort, I finally found five rabbis willing to go on record (Rabbi Marc Angel, Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, was one of them) and I published their answers in *The Jewish Press* in February 2018 (see www.jewishpress.com/sections/books/on-the-bookshelf-23/2018/02/16/). In total, I had posed the question to roughly 15 to 20 rabbis. Thus, for every rabbi who responded, two or three ignored my email or begged out of the project.

I find this response rate unconscionable, and I believe it reflects a dereliction of rabbinic duty. If you encourage—or at least don't actively *discourage*—engagement with general culture, you must provide guidance to the public. Right now, too many observant Jews go about their lives as if *Torah U'madda* or *Torah im Derekh Eretz* sanctions any and all engagement with general knowledge and society. They assume, for example, that they can go to the movies, cavalierly invoking the behavior of this or that famous rabbi who went to the movies in the 1940s. Movies, however, have changed over the last 70 years. Rabbis in the 1940s didn't encounter nudity, profanity, or endless crude jokes at the movie theater. Our generation does.

I occasionally hear observant Jews quoting lines from famous sitcoms like *Seinfeld* or *Friends* and wonder why they aren't embarrassed to effectively admit in public that they watch shows with off-color plots and jokes. I also wonder why Orthodox media outlets occasionally publish articles that implicitly encourage immoral behavior. A few years ago, for example, a Jewish publication celebrated a Modern Orthodox high-school boy who starred in a primetime TV show. I wouldn't object except that this boy had a romantic interest on the show and expressed this interest by violating the laws of intimate physical contact before millions of viewers. Should such a kid be celebrated in an Orthodox publication?

The author of the article handled the young man's violation of halakha by ignoring it. Presto. Problem solved. Another Jewish publication pulled off this same trick a decade ago. It interviewed an Orthodox Hollywood screenwriter at some length—clearly taking pride in the writer's accomplishments—but never once asked him about the moral problems inherent in working as a screenwriter in Hollywood where virtually every script contains inappropriate material. The implicit message these two publications conveyed to readers was that participation and success in general society is a praiseworthy end unto itself. Don't worry about the inconvenient details. We've wished them away for you.

Terence, an esteemed Roman playwright, famously declared, “I am human and consider nothing human alien to me.” But God *wants* some aspects of humanity to be—at least partially—alien to us. Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook argues that certain elements of the human soul should be buried rather than explored in literature. He writes that we each possess a “spade” to fulfill this task, borrowing language from Deuteronomy 23:13, which requires Jewish soldiers in military camp to carry a spade with them with which to bury their human waste (*Olat Re’iyah*, section on *Shir HaShirim*). Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, who enthusiastically promoted a life of *Torah im Derekh Eretz*, actually rejected the full gamut of German cultural expression. He delivered an encomium in 1859 on the centenary of the birth of Friedrich Schiller, a famous German poet (calling him a “messenger of God” for using “the gift of poetry to inspire the human mind with enthusiasm for all that is pure and true and godly”). Yet, he told a friend that had he been in Frankfurt in 1849 on the centenary of the birth of Goethe—another famous German poet—he would have left town so as to avoid honoring a writer many of whose ideas he believed were antithetical to those of the Torah.

Torah im Derekh Eretz and *Torah U’madda* encourage societal engagement and the attainment of knowledge, but not every society is created equal nor is every piece of knowledge kosher. Rav Hirsch notes that our patriarch, Abraham, far from seeking entry into mainstream society and culture, protested strenuously against it. The whole world stood on one side of the spiritual spectrum, and he stood on the other. The Maccabees, too, rejected the prevailing culture of their day, despite its allure. Their brethren embraced Hellenistic values; they were the “enlightened” ones. But Jewish history condemns them, and we celebrate their downfall every Hanukkah.

Rabbis know perfectly well that the Maimonidean model—excellence in both Torah and culture—can’t be realized in every era. Maimonides himself writes that a Jew in a decadent age may be required to escape to a cave or desert and live alone (*Hilkhot De’ot* 6:1). But most rabbis (save those in the most insular communities) are reluctant to publicly voice their reservations in our era of supreme tolerance. For example, many know that Orwell’s *1984* contains inappropriate passages, but they don’t necessarily want to go on record “banning” a book whose very plot revolves around the dangers of censorship. Nor do they wish to recommend desisting from reading other famous works of literature. Their reluctance is understandable but still regrettable. For without direction, the masses will undoubtedly take the path of least resistance. And that path will lead them to read, watch, and listen to practically anything in the name of “culture” and “education.”

I am not arguing that all literature with problematic material should be avoided. As several rabbis argued in response to my query, much might depend on the nature of the work and the person reading it. Is the person mature? Does the book have redeeming value? Perhaps the permissibility of reading such works depends on one’s age, background, gender, and marital status. An 18-year-old yeshiva boy reading *1984* may be affected in a way that a 38-year-old man might not. The nature and frequency of the inappropriate passages may be relevant factors as well.

I personally made a conscious decision a few years ago not to read an international bestseller by Michael Houellebecq called *Submission*. In it, Houellebecq imagines a future in which France, in order to avert a takeover by Marine Le Pen’s far-right party, elects a Muslim president who proceeds to Islamicize French society. The novel’s main character, Francois, leads a spiritually vacuous life and, at the end of the book, seeks escape from his empty existence by converting to Islam. I read a review of the novel and was intrigued. The ending in particular piqued my curiosity. Unfortunately, in an effort to illustrate the vacuousness of Francois’s life, Houellebecq depicts him engaging in highly inappropriate behavior. I tried convincing myself that the book reviews had exaggerated and that the

inappropriate passages were brief. But every subsequent review I read led me to believe the very opposite. Indeed, I learned from a friend that Houellebecq is famous for saturating his novels with inappropriate material. I had no choice. I couldn't read the novel.

I believe I made the right decision in this instance, but I don't know if I've always made the right choice in the past, and I wish I had had the sage advice, in print, of others who had faced this dilemma before me. I attended classes at Yeshiva University for a decade and, during that period, regularly read its student newspapers and other popular Modern Orthodox literature. Surely, in those 10 years, I should have come across several articles addressing this topic. And yet, I don't recall a single one.

I was left to my own devices, as are hundreds of thousands of others who face the question of abstaining from problematic elements of Western culture. So, as matters stand now, everyone just "does their own thing," with most of us pretending the problem doesn't exist. After all, who wants to be out of the cultural loop? Who wants to be the one staying home when everyone goes out to see the latest movie? Who wants to mingle in educated circles without having read the book on everyone's lips?

And yet, at least *some* of us in *some* circumstances in regard to *some* famous works may have to do just that. The prophet Micah tells us to walk modestly with God (Micah 6:8). Modesty means not showing off. It means doing the right thing without fanfare. It means seeking God's approval and caring little about human approval if that approval comes at the expense of truth and morality. It means avoiding rather than seeking the limelight. So I humbly suggest that we learn to take pride in living virtuously even if that means being unable to signal our educational prowess to others.

Exhibiting knowledge is exciting—often effective—but it shouldn't come at the expense of virtue. I don't know exactly where the boundaries lie. Rabbis should help us plot them. But these boundaries do exist, and we may not pretend they don't. We have a mandate to study the Torah. According to many rabbinic greats, we also have a mandate to be productive and educated members of society. But we don't have a mandate to read every book on *The New York Times* bestseller list (or watch every movie that wins Best Picture at the Oscars). We must be selective, opting for virtue, even if that means sometimes forgoing the pleasures of participating in literary discourse and impressing our friends and acquaintances.