

# חִקְרָה Hakirah

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**“Are Our Children Too Worldly?”**

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## *Are Our Children Too Worldly?*

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A number of years ago at a convention<sup>1</sup> I was asked to be part of a panel that addressed the question, “Are our children too worldly?” My colleagues on the panel saw things differently than I did, and, after the panel discussion a lively debate ensued. I felt that in some significant ways “our children were not worldly enough.” I felt this to be the case then, and I feel it is so today, though to a greater degree. And I feel that the trend has not reached its end. I sense that we are on a path that is at an increasingly faster pace narrowing the world of our youth. Allow me to share my sentiments and rationale with the reader. This paper represents mostly what I said then, hopefully improved with some additional insights.

### **The Question**

First we must define what, exactly, is meant by “too worldly.” I think the question speaks of that which in Yiddish used to be described as “*er hot tzu offene oigen*” (i.e., his eyes are too open), implying that somebody was too involved with, and too knowledgeable about, the world outside the parameters of the *bais hamidrash* or of the Jewish community.

This was usually seen as a negative thing, and did, in fact, on numerous occasions, entice young people away from Torah and from *Yiddishkeit*. The community of Jews who remained true to Torah had to respond to it. More often than not, that response involved some attempt to close those *tzu offene oigen*, to build protective walls and to decrease involvement with the outside world. In this way, it was hoped, one could protect oneself and one’s children from being

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<sup>1</sup> West Coast Conference of Agudath Israel of America, Palm Springs California, Winter 1991.

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ensnared by the attractions of the material and generally secular world.

But does this really work? Is it really doable? If it worked in the *shtetl*, will it necessarily work in the cosmopolitan and open societies in which *frum* Jews find themselves today? Does our time and place require the same response we gave in the European *shtetl*, and perhaps to an even greater extreme? Or does our situation perhaps call for a different response, albeit with the same end goals?

### **The Scope of the Problem**

Before attempting to answer this question, let us take a brief look at the problem.

There are no “hard and fast” statistics on how many children are lost to *Yiddishkeit* each year. Thank G-d most of our youth continue “on the *derech*.” We should not, however, become complacent. One survey study done in Brooklyn in 1999 by Yohanan Danziger<sup>2</sup> of the Metropolitan New York Coordinating Council concluded that about 6.6% of our youth exhibit “full-blown” at-risk behaviors, while another 6.6% – 8.9% were “developing” at risk behaviors; the expected rate of drop-outs was estimated to be somewhere between 13.2% and 15.5%. That same year, Agudath Israel’s *Jewish Observer* published a Special Issue entitled “*Children on the Fringe...and Beyond*” (*Kislev* 5760/November 1999). It struck a nerve in the community and became the best-selling issue in the history of the publication. It had to be reprinted to meet the demand for copies. That year, Nefesh, an organization of Orthodox mental-health workers, held a sell-out conference where “children at risk” was everybody’s concern.

It is important to point out, however, that the above statistics refer only to those of our young people who exhibit antisocial behavior. It does not address the problem of youths who are quietly lost to *Yiddishkeit* without exhibiting antisocial, delinquent behaviors. Perhaps more importantly, reports from people working in the field

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<sup>2</sup> Danziger, Yohanan, *Report to the City of New York Department of Youth and Community Development on the Incidence of At-risk Youth in the Orthodox Jewish Community of Brooklyn, New York*, N.Y. The Metropolitan Coordinating Council on Jewish Poverty, 1999.

indicate that the trend is growing exponentially. Furthermore, there is an especially worrisome growth in girls at risk, where the numbers used to be negligible. And as Faranak Margolese<sup>3</sup> in her “*Off the Derech*” so very rightly points out, “There are those who have left with their hearts, whom we do not see. They continue to observe, but their observance is hollow, with no soul, no heart, no real belief at its core.” Unfortunately, some of these walk the walk and talk the talk, get married, and then let their spouses know that they don’t really believe anything, but would be willing to keep up a facade (somewhat illogically) “for the sake of the kids.” Although there are no real statistics, there is ample anecdotal evidence that this has broken many homes.

### **Some Responses**

To be sure, some circles in our community have already decided the question of how to deal with the *‘tzu offene oigen.’* They have very successfully mounted a campaign to increasingly isolate our youth from the world at large. Children, both in our *Yeshivos* and *Bais Yaakovs*, are taught that the world out there is “dark, ominous, antagonistic to Torah values of ethics and morality, and generally void of values” (which it may be). The often unspoken (and equally often, spoken) message that comes along with this is the notion that the world not directly attached to Torah has nothing of value to teach us, nothing from which we can benefit. Thus the student comes to denigrate the natural sciences, the humanities (including Jewish history), not to mention the arts. The student/child comes to feel that s/he has no need to know anything outside the “*daled amos*” of his/her yeshiva/seminary and community. S/he has no need for geography, for a clear appreciation of the language s/he speaks (though “she” usually speaks a somewhat more standard dialect of English), or for knowledge of world events. In short, everything is basically “*shtus*” (nonsense), and one should not waste one’s time on it.

I should also point out that I am not talking about one or another isolated segment of our community. To different degrees the

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<sup>3</sup> Margolese, Faranak, *Off the Derech, How to Respond to the Challenge*, Devora Publishing, Jerusalem-New York, 2005.

problem of “children at risk” or “children alienated from, or just cold and indifferent to, *Yiddishkeit*” exists about equally in every segment of the *frum* community, from the very *chassidic*, through the *yeshivish*, to the Modern Orthodox. I don't really see any fundamental differences between the fences built by Torah Vodaath, Chaim Berlin, and the Mir and the fences built by Satmar, Skver, Bobov, and Gur, certainly not in the past 10-15 years. My experience is that even the more “Modern Orthodox” have similar, though lower, fences, accompanied by similar problems and conflicts. Thus each group at its level ought to look at what it is doing.

### **A Need to Review the Situation**

The fact that some have already decided this question, even if they have yet to clearly (and honestly) articulate it, is all the more reason for the question to be thought about and discussed. I have no fantasies of settling the issues raised by these questions. Many statements made at various times by different people in different places and under different circumstances make it impossible to define a clear and always valid response to the issues involved with living in a secular world. There probably is no response which is valid across all times and situations. Our responses to living in a secular society need to be situation-specific. What we may be able to hopefully do, and probably need to do, is to at least define some parameters which need to be taken into account by anybody contemplating a response.

The issue of exposure to the secular became the crux of a series of questions which I, along with a small group of *mechanchim*/educators, were privileged to put to *Reb* Yaakov Kaminetzky, *זצ"ל*. I would like to share with you his response and then take the liberty to try and elaborate on, and extrapolate from, his words.

### ***Reb* Yaakov – “*Kluger, Nit Frummer*”**

We had put a number of practical questions about teaching to *Reb* Yaakov. To cite just two examples: whether and how to teach a) evolution, and b) the history of the Roman Catholic Church and Greek mythology. *Reb* Yaakov answered each of these questions with specific suggestions and advice (e. g., evolution should be taught by the *menahel* or some other knowledgeable Torah personality, not the

regular science teacher. History of the Church was to be taught, including its role in atrocities against the Jewish people and its other excesses against reason, morality and ethics. Greek mythology should be taught to demonstrate the ridiculously foolish beliefs held by these properly extinct cultures. Pages in books should not be skipped, pasted together, or blacked out, as this only increases students' curiosity about the subject). He then turned to us and said, in Yiddish, as follows:

I'll tell you. I'm often asked here in Monsey and especially regarding girls, "How much should we or can we shut them off to protect them from the culture at large?" I always tell them, "You can't! Unless, that is, you live in Squaretown." Now especially; I understand they have their own hospital and their own cemetery, one can be born there, live ones life there, and be buried there. To those who can do that, *'Tavo aleibem brachah'* (may they be blessed). Most of us, however, do not live in Squaretown and cannot live in Squaretown. So what will you do? Not tell a young boy about evolution and then wait until at age 16 or 17 he reads in the *New York Times*, which he 'knows' prints only 'verified facts,' that the bones of a person 2 or 3 million years old were found!?? And the *Times* will print this without any mention of detracting opinions or controversy. What will this young man do? He'll be completely lost! This would not happen if he had been taught at an earlier time in school by his *rabbei'im* and teachers that there are people who believe such and such, what their mistaken beliefs are based on, where their error is, what it is we believe about such events, and how we believers deal with these issues.

*Reb Yaakov* then continued,

You know, when I was a boy growing up, I had a friend. He was always a little more than I was, and did more than I did. He was a year older: I was 10 and he was 11. He wore long *payos*, I didn't. He wore a *gartel*, and I didn't. Last summer when I was in *Eretz Yisrael*, I met him again. He was living in K'far Saba and I paid him a visit. While talking to him I found out that things had changed and that, unfortunately, he was now turning on the lights on Shabbos. He turned to me and he asked, 'Yankel, what's

happened to us? “*Ich bin doch altz geven frummer*” (Wasn’t I always *frumer* than you?!!), to which I replied [and here *Reb Yaakov* smiled and there was a glint in his eyes], “*Ye, ye du bist takke altz geven frummer, ich bin obber alz geven kluger.*” “Yes, yes you were always *frummer* but I was always *kluger* (wiser).”

What did *Reb Yaakov* mean to tell us when he spoke of teaching children about the world, and about being “*kluger*” (wiser)?

It is superfluous to point out that he most clearly was not talking about exposing children to those aspects of the general culture which are clearly prohibited by the *Shulchan Aruch* (*assur al pi Shulchan Aruch*). These are very clearly defined by the *Bais Yosef* on the *Tur* (*Yoreh Deah* 178:1) in discussing our relation to general non-Jewish culture and practice. He discusses these issues under the rubric of, “*bechukoseihem lo seileichu*” (you shall not walk in their ways), and says,

פירש לנו הסמ"ג ששני דרכי האמורי יש: א' משום ניהוש ויש  
אחד משום חוקות העובדי כוכבים. וענין השני אשר יש לאסור  
משום חוקות העובדי כוכבים לפי הנלע"ד הוא דבר אשר  
שייך בו פריצות דרך הצניעות והענוה ונהגו בו העובדי  
כוכבים ג"ז אסור.

The SMA”G explained that there are two categories of “pagan ways”: one is “sorcery” and the other is “ways of idol worshippers.” The second category, “ways of the idol worshippers,” is also prohibited and in my humble opinion, pertains to that which entails a breach of the ways of modesty and humility.<sup>4</sup>

These issues should require no elaboration here. That which is *assur*, prohibited, is just that. There is no acceptable notion of ‘a

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<sup>4</sup> See also the words of the מחבר and the רמ"א in שולחן ערוך יורה דעה סימן in קע"ח ס"ק א where the רמ"א writes that those things which the Gentiles do which has practical benefit, reason, and rationale are not included in the prohibition of לא תלכו בחוקותיהם. And so, too, in ספרא פרשת אחרי מות פרשת ח

little exposure' or an 'immunization process' to that which is outside of the limits of *tznius* and is prohibited by *halachah*. There is no value of being "open minded" and accepting of that which the Torah tells us to abhor. I mention these here only because many of us have unfortunately accepted many facets of the general culture, such as some forms of entertainment, which are clearly *assur*, as benign and innocent—as the cultural norm. Unfortunately, as I once heard it aptly put, some of us have become "so open minded that our brains are falling out."

No, this is not what *Reb Yaakov* was talking about. And I don't believe this is an area I need elaborate on any further. The only question that needs to be asked in this area is how to decrease the attraction of these pernicious influences to our children. Does simply forbidding things work, or does it merely increase curiosity? To what extent, where, when, and how should walls be built?

So again we ask, what *did Reb Yaakov* mean? To my understanding, and in the context of our discussion, it was clear that *Reb Yaakov* was talking about two kinds of knowledge to which he felt our *talmidim* should be exposed.

1. A knowledge and understanding of ideas that are widely accepted in the general culture, where a lack of understanding of which, can potentially harm our children and of which our children will perforce become aware.
2. A knowledge and understanding of those aspects of the general culture which are not only benign, but perhaps also important for our growth; language, history, science, social mores, etc.

Regarding the ideas that define the *zeitgeist* we live in, *Reb Yaakov* felt children need to be taught this knowledge in the spirit of "דע מה שתשיב"—know what to answer. These ideas are in the air we breathe, and it seems that in line with the writings of the Maharal<sup>5</sup> the Mabit,<sup>6</sup> and the Yaavetz<sup>7</sup> (though he didn't mention them), *Reb Yaakov* felt children need to be immunized to protect them from

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<sup>5</sup> מהר"ל ספר דרך חיים - פרק ב משנה יד.

<sup>6</sup> ספר בית אלקים (המב"ט) - שער היסודות - פרק הראשון.

<sup>7</sup> פירוש היעב"ץ לאבות - פרק ב משנה טז.

misunderstanding. I will cite here the words of the Yaavetz, which most clearly state the point.

ואצלי דקדק באומרו: ודע מה ולא אמר ודע להשיב. כי אין ראוי להתוכח עמו. ולזה אמר ודע מה שתשיב את האפיקורוס לא שתשיב אם לא שתצטרך להשיב לקדש את ה' ברבים, אלא שתדע אתה לעצמך שיהיה לבך חזק באמונתך ותשקוד על דלתי התורה יום יום.

I have noted that the Mishnah states: “Know **what** (you would answer a heretic,)” rather than “know [so that you] **will** answer (a heretic,)” for it is not proper to engage in debate with him. That is why it states “Know **what** you would answer a heretic,” i.e., not that you **should** answer—unless you need to publicly glorify Hashem’s name. Rather, you should know for yourself, so that your faith is strong in your heart, and you continue to strive daily at the gateway of Torah.

Thus the Yaavetz is saying (as do the Maharal and the Mabit) that it is important to be aware of ideas that the heretics have and to know for oneself what a Torah response to those ideas would be.

The general knowledge to which *Reb* Yaakov also alluded, and the desirability of this knowledge, will become clearer in our comments below.

## Question

There are those who would build protective walls or *fences* around our children so that they do not come in contact with or come to know the general culture at all. Is this desirable? Does it work? Can it work?

Specifically, these are the issues I would like to address:

1. How strong and impermeable are these fences?
2. What happens when we build these fences?
  - a. How are we affecting our children’s approach to Torah?
  - b. What are we fencing out?
3. What tools are we using to build these fences?
4. And perhaps most importantly, whom are we fencing out?

## 1. How strong and impermeable are these fences?

Regarding the building of walls to protect our children, *Reb* Yaakov was clearly telling us that in situations in which the walls are not impregnable (i.e., outside of “Squaretown”), the walls can sometimes do more harm than good. Children not protected against the winds which blow from the outside cannot withstand them when those winds come through the cracks in the walls, or when the door opens.

The venerable Satmar *Rav*, *Rebbe* Yoel Teitelbaum, זצ”ל, is quoted as having said:

“*Az men lozt iber Williamsburg kimt men obn kein America.*”  
[“When you leave Williamsburg you arrive in America.”]

To some extent this may have been true when the *Rebbe* was alive, and with his charismatic personality provided the community with a powerful magnetic force, attracting people towards himself and the Torah life he represented, and repelling their interest in those aspects of the secular environment that did get through to the community. I don’t believe anybody can honestly say that it is still true today.

There is a story I was privileged to hear from *Rav* Mordechai Gifter, זצ”ל, the Telzer *Rosh Yeshiva*, about his uncles, the two great *Roshei Yeshiva* of Telz, *Rav* Elye Meir Bloch, זצ”ל, and *Rav* Motel Katz, זצ”ל. In a conversation that took place after they had been in the United States for a few years, one of them had remarked that, *baruch Hashem*, America and its culture had not affected him. Upon hearing this, the other exclaimed, “Amazing! See to what degree it’s affected you—you’re no longer even aware of its influence!”

The influence of the general culture is practically inescapable, and is, in fact, consciously almost indiscernible. If it is difficult to discern by the trained and alert mind, it is impossible for the overprotected and therefore unprepared mind.

Then there are those things that you cannot fence out. There is a cute little story I heard in the *chassidische shtiebel* in which I grew up. It’s a simple story but it carries much truth.

It seems there was this *parush* (ascetic) who decided that he would bring his newborn son up to be a perfect *tzaddik*. Thus, immediately after the child’s *bris*, he isolated him in a room and allowed only his mother to care for him. No

other females were to come close to him. When the child turned three and had his first haircut, new rules were made. Henceforth no female, including his mother, would be allowed to enter the child's room. Only his father and a *rebbe* would enter so as to teach him Torah. This regimen of pure Torah learning was carried on for 15 years. Even for his *bar mitzvah*, only a select group of ten men were allowed in to see him, to hear his *drashab* and to wish him *mazal tov*. When our young man turned 18, it became necessary to look for a *shidduch*. But before this could be done, he would go visit the *rav* of the town to obtain *semichah*, rabbinical ordination. There was really no choice. He had to leave his protected premises and go see the *rav*. So, the father accompanied his son to the *rav's* house. As *hashgachah* would have it, on the way, they passed a group of young ladies. "Tatte, father, what are those?" the young man asked. "Katchkes [geese]," his father replied, and they continued on their way. A few minutes later, the young man spoke up again, "Tatte?" he asked. "Yes?" replied his father. "Buy me a *katchke*," said the son.

We need to recognize that some things simply cannot be fenced out. Some things are inherently us. To do so, we would have to fence ourselves out of where we are—a logical impossibility. Yet some attempt this.

The fences are in any case not impermeable, and building them higher and thicker will not help.

Gerry Albarelli is a non-Jew who taught "English" (i.e. secular studies) at the Satmar *cheder* in Williamsburg for five years and wrote a book about his experiences.<sup>8</sup> In the book, Albarelli talks about his relationship with Mendy, the fifteen-year-old brother of a boy he had undertaken to tutor at home. Mendy would come home from *yeshivah*, often join in the tutorial sessions meant for his younger brother, and always insist on walking the teacher to the subway. Albarelli relates:

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<sup>8</sup> Albarelli, Gerry, *Teacha! Stories from a Yeshiva*, Glad Day Books, 2000 (P.O. Box 112, Thetford, Vt. 05074)

Then there are the questions that Mendy asks, walking me to the subway, week after week. He asks these questions as though everything depended on the answers:

“How they know the weather?”

“What means geology?”

“Who was Con Edison?”

“Thomas,” I say, “Thomas Edison.”

“No,” he insists, politely embarrassed by my ignorance.

“Con, Con Edison.”

We’re standing across from the elevated train.

“Teacher,” he says, one day, “why is it we know from the Torah that the earth is five thousand years old but the museum have bones that are a million years?”

“Oh. That’s a good question,” I say. “You should think about that question for a long time.” (Page 80)

If such questions come to children while they are in closed and protected communities,<sup>9</sup> surely they will come to them when, as they must, they will one day step outside those communities. The reality is that you cannot forever keep children fenced in, and if so, you must provide them with the means to protect themselves in the future.

According to *Rav* Samson Raphael Hirsch, זצ”ל, they pay the price. In reading the *passuk*, חנוך לנער על פי דרכו גם כי יזקין לא יסור ממנו (Educate a child in accordance with his ways, even when he grows older he will not stray from it.), *Rav* Hirsch explains that when we educate a child we must choose an approach which takes into cognizance the “*gam kei yatzkin*”; the life and the world the child will live in after he leaves our

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<sup>9</sup> I cite this incident because it has been published and is already out there. I (and other psychologists, social workers, and educators) have been privy to many such incidents and many more dangerous ones in which children in the most protected and sheltered environments could not be kept from meeting up with society’s greatest ills. I cannot write about them in detail because of confidentiality issues. But they are there. Communities faced with these breaches in their walls usually respond by rededicating themselves even more zealously to building still higher and thicker walls. It does not work. They need to begin thinking about other measures that might work better. Perhaps they should be looking at educational measures.

home and tutelage. We must prepare him for dealing with this larger world. Having made this point he continues:

Finally, it would be most perverse and criminal of us to seek to instill into our children a contempt, based on ignorance and untruth, for everything that is not specifically Jewish, for all other human arts and sciences, in the belief that by inculcating our children with such a negative attitude we could safeguard them from contacts with the scholarly and scientific endeavors of the rest of mankind. It is true, of course, that the results of secular research and study will not always coincide with the truths of Judaism, for the simple reason that they do not proceed from the axiomatic premises of Jewish truth. But the reality is that our children will move in circles influenced and shaped by these results. Your children will come within the radius of this secular human wisdom, whether it be in the lecture halls of academia or in the pages of literature. And if they discover that our own Sages, whose teachings embody the truth, have taught us **שנתן מחכמתו** **לבשר ודם**, that it is G-d Who has given of His own wisdom to mortals, they will come to overrate secular studies in the same measure in which they have been taught to despise them.

You will then see that your simple-minded calculations were just as criminal as they were perverse. Criminal, because they enlisted the help of untruth supposedly in order to protect the truth, and because you have thus departed from the path upon which your own Sages have preceded you and beckoned you to follow them. Perverse, because by so doing you have achieved precisely the opposite of what you wanted to accomplish. For now your child, suspecting you of either deceit or lamentable ignorance, will transfer the blame and the disgrace that should rightly be placed only upon you and your conduct to all the Jewish wisdom and knowledge, all the Jewish education and training which he received under your guidance. Your child will consequently begin to doubt all of Judaism which (so, at least, it must seem to him from your behavior) can exist only in the night and darkness of ignorance and which must close its eyes and the minds of its adherents to the light of all knowledge if it is not to perish.

## 2. What happens when we build those fences?

### a. How do we affect our youth in their relation to Torah?

Fences built in an open society are rarely successful at keeping the general culture out. And, as *Rav* Hirsch points out, they can actually backfire. To the extent that the fence does succeed at keeping the world out, it creates a whole different and new array of problems. Unfortunately, a mind closed by our fences becomes a mind that chooses to stay closed. It becomes indifferent even to those things which we feel ought to pique his interest. It is difficult to selectively close off a child's mind and curiosity. We end up stifling his curiosity completely. Thus we end up with children not knowing and not caring to know even that which they need to know and should know.

When I was involved in the founding and establishment of the Jewish Center for Special Education (CHUSH), I went to see the Klausenburger *Rebbe*, *רבי*. At the end of a long conversation regarding details and *halachah* of running a school for Special Children, the *Rebbe*, *רבי*, turned to me and said:

“I'm afraid that after all our talking we've neglected the main thing, the *ikar*. You must teach your children what it means to be a Jew.”

I was flabbergasted and somewhat taken aback. “*Rebbe*, I said that's the only purpose for setting up this school in the first place! That's why we have only a *frum* staff, and teach Learning Disabled children a Torah curriculum!?”

The *Rebbe* answered:

“You don't understand what I mean. You and your teachers spend most of your time thinking about how to teach a child to read one more letter, one more line in the *siddur*, prayer book. You want him to learn one more verse in *Chumash*, or one more segment of *Gemara*. All this is very good. But, unless you make a conscious effort, you may be missing the point. Your children may grow up and never learn what it means to be a Jew, what a Jew believes, or what he prays and hopes for. I think you should teach these children the 13 *Ikrim*—*Principles of Faith*—of the

Rambam. I would furthermore put up a big sign in the school reading: *Da es Elokei avicha v'avdeihu!*"

I was puzzled. "But they don't even teach that in the regular *Yeshivos*?"

"You're perfectly right," the *Rebbe* answered. "However, the regular *yeshiva bachur*, as he grows older, will learn in the *bais hamidrash*, study hall. One day he will go to the bookshelf to get a Rambam on *Hilchos G'zeilah V'aveidah* so as to better understand a piece of *Gemara* he is learning. The *Ribbono shel Olam*, the Master of the universe, will help him and by mistake he will pick up the wrong volume of the Rambam. Back at his seat he will discover that he has the first volume in his hand, the *Sefer Hamada*. Being a little lazy to immediately get up and return to the bookshelf to look for the volume he originally sought, he will stay in his seat and begin to browse through the volume in front of him. Turning the pages he will find it interesting, spend some time reading it and thus gain at least a passing acquaintance with the foundations of our faith (*Yesodos HaEmuna*). The regular *yeshivos* can rely on this error occurring. *Your* children may never be *zocheh* to make this error (they may never learn independently in a *Bais Hamidrash*); thus you must take responsibility for teaching them what it means to be a Jew."

I must confess that in today's atmosphere of not needing to know, I wonder whether the *talmid* who mistakenly picked up the *Sefer Hamada* would bother to read it! Being somewhat unfamiliar in content to what he's used to learning, he'll simply close it and return it to the shelf.<sup>10</sup>

When we tell a child that he has no need to know about the world because it is all irrelevant to his Torah learning, the unexpressed converse message is, that Torah is, *chas veshalom*, G-d

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<sup>10</sup> Many young people today have become accustomed to seeking and sticking to a comfortable certainty which they do not want to disturb. I have had the experience of students being upset upon hearing דברי ה"ל that were new to them and which seemed to contradict or nuance some long held and cherished attitude that they held.

forbid, irrelevant to life. When Torah is not taught in a way in which it answers the basic questions of life, Torah in effect becomes irrelevant to life.

At a recent Torah Umesorah convention, *Reb* Reuven Feinstein, *sblita*, told an anecdote that took place in a *yeshivah* years ago. The incident troubled him to no end. It seems a *bachur* (*yeshivah* student) had borrowed a small tape recorder from a friend, and while he played around with it, i.e., swung it by its handle, it became detached from the handle and flew into a wall where it was smashed by the impact. When his friend asked him to pay for the tape recorder, the borrower retorted that it was an accident and he was therefore not liable. *Reb* Reuven was troubled by the *bachur's* retort, because the *yeshivah* was then learning *Perek HaMafkid*, the chapter in Gemara that speaks of the liabilities of a borrower (amongst others), and it is clearly stated that a borrower is liable even for a totally unexpected accidental damage to the object he borrows. Why did the *bachur* fail to apply this clear principle to his own situation? *Reb* Reuven asked his father, *Reb* Moshe, *אָזײַז*, how this could happen, and *Reb* Moshe answered that the boys had probably had their first exposure to Gemara in *Masechtah Brachos* (rather than *Nezikin*), which speaks of the various time constraints on saying *Kriat Shema* and *Tefilah* (*Shemoneh Esrei*), and that since these time strictures are often not strictly adhered to in the *shuls*, they had come to look at what the Gemara says as “theory” that need not necessarily be taken seriously in its application to life. (When *Reb* Reuven subsequently investigated, he found it to indeed be so.)

Fully accepting the validity of *Reb* Moshe’s reasoning and point, I would have to add that it’s not that the *bachurim* had actually made the connection between the Gemara and their situation, but had just not taken it seriously. I’m afraid the connection was never made in the first place. The reason for the failure in the connection may be that they had learned that Torah study and daily practice are not strictly connected. I believe, however, there is another reason—that when the material was taught in the first place it was allowed to remain purely theoretical. I’m afraid the *Rebbe* never once said, “Therefore *bachurim*, before you borrow someone’s bike, roller skates,

or car, think twice. Remember that you would be liable even for any accidental damages to the borrowed object.” People have a tendency to compartmentalize knowledge. If the connection between Torah and life is not explicitly made, the connection is as good as severed.<sup>11</sup> Torah must be taught as “*chukei chaim*,” as a guide to our everyday life, connected to that life. When a *bachur* doesn’t hear his *Rebbe* connecting Torah to life, he learns from the omission that Torah has no connection to life (*chas veshalom*).

The student also learns the equally dangerous converse of the above, namely, that life has no connection to Torah. The *sefer* שיה חידושי הרי"ם cites a remark made by the

בשם החי' הרי"ם ז"ל מגור שאמר בצחות כי בהיות מעשה  
בושתי בא אחד לביהמ"ד ושאלו אותו "מה נשמע חדשות  
בשוק?" וסיפר להם המאורע בחצר המלך עם הפסק שיצא על  
ושתי. והשיב השומע בזה"ל "האק מיר נישט אין קאפ אריין מיט  
דיינע שטותים!"

It was repeated that the Chiddushei Harim, זצ"ל, of Gur once remarked jokingly that when the story with Vashti occurred, someone came to *shul* and was asked, “What’s new in town?” When he told them about what happened in the king’s courtyard and the punishment decreed upon Vashti, his listener responded, “Stop tormenting me with your nonsense.”

This remark captures the essence of our point and illustrates the dangerous ripple effect; the feeling that life is divorced from Torah, and forgetting that everything that happens has relevance to us, to *Klal Yisrael*. The Chiddushei Harim continues:

אבל אח"כ כשנעשה הנס ע"י מרדכי ואסתר עם מפלות המן אז  
נתברר מראש למפרע, אז עס האט זיך אללעס גישלייפט. והיה

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<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Nosson Dovid Rabinowich’s observation that teachers in our schools fail to connect the *Chumash* to its geography is another example of how we tend to separate Torah from life, and how unreal and lifeless we thus make it. See his article in *Hakirah*, Volume 1, Fall 2004, pages 25–37.

שייכות אחד מתחילה ועד סוף והיה רפואה קודם למכה וכן יהיה לעתיד במהרה בימינו אמן.

But afterwards, when the miracle occurred through Mordechai and Esther, and Haman had his downfall, it became clear that all events were a single tapestry. It was all linked—from the beginning to the end, and it became obvious that the remedy preceded the malady. So too will it be in the future. May it happen speedily in our days. Amen.

A well know sociologist, Peter Berger,<sup>12</sup> in his analysis of how people in society construct reality, writes that people have basic beliefs about how real life works. They may at times take a “break from real life”; they may go to church on Sunday, listen to their ministers talk about the “Golden Rule” and virtues such as honesty and kindness—but they do not allow these concepts to change their true beliefs about “reality.” Inevitably they return to the “real world” on Monday morning to conduct business with no regard to what they heard and thought about on the weekend. In his words:

For instance, as a businessman I know that it pays to be inconsiderate of others. I may laugh at a joke in which this maxim leads to failure. I may be moved by an actor or a preacher extolling the virtues of consideration, and I may concede in a philosophical mood that all social relations should be governed by the Golden Rule. Having laughed, having been moved, and having philosophized, I return to the “serious” world of business, once more recognize the logic of my maxims, and act accordingly (page 44).

Is this what we want for our youth? This negative message becomes even more insidious when we fail to give students any rationale for Torah and *mitzvos*, when we teach them that Torah needs no rationale, it just is. In a “bottom line” sense that is true, i.e., we do follow the Torah’s *mitzvos* even where we have no rationale, however, when we make this the whole of the message we are

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<sup>12</sup> Berger, Peter and Luckman, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 1967, Anchor Books, Doubleday, Garden City, New York.

needlessly creating inner conflicts in the best of our youth. The author of the *Sefer HaChinuch* went to great lengths to find and to present a rationale for *mitzvos*. When it happened that for one *mitzvah* he could not readily come up with a rationale, he felt he had to construct one. Even though he had given rationales for all the other 612 *mitzvos*, he felt he could not afford to leave one *mitzvah* without a rationale, lest the youth of his day reject Torah as having no purpose or reason. Thus he writes:

ספר החינוך - מצוה קיז שלא להקריב שאור או דבש: שרשי מצוה זו נעלמים מאד למצוא אפילו רמז קטן מהן, ואולם מפני שכבר הודעתי בפתח דברי שכוונתי באלו הטעמים שאני כותב להרגיל הנערים ולהטעים להם בתחילת בואם לשמוע דברי ספר, כי יש לדברי התורה טעמים ותועלות, ויקבלום על דרך ההרגל שלהם וכפי חולשת שכלם, ואל יהיו להם המצוות בתחילה כדברי הספר החתום פן יבעטו בהם מתוך כך בנערותם ויניחום לעולם וילכו בהבל, על כן אכתוב בהם כל אשר יעלה כתחילת המחשבה, ואל יתפוש עלי תופש בשום דבר אחרי ידע הכוונה.

*Sefer HaChinuch*: Commandment 117, “Not to sacrifice sourdough or honey on the altar.” The rationale of this *mitzvah* are very much obscure and it is hard to find even a small hint. However, I already mentioned in my introduction that my purpose in writing these reasons is to habituate the youth and make it palatable for them when they first come to hear the words of the Book; that the words of the Torah have reason and purpose and thus they will accept them naturally and in accordance to their developing mind. Let not the *mitzvos* appear to them initially as a sealed book lest they rebel against them in their youth, leave them forever and pursue vanity. Therefore, I will write (for this law) what comes to mind and may the critic not challenge me now that my motivation is known.

When students are made to feel that asking rational questions about the reasons for Torah and *mitzvos* is somehow wrong; that trying to understand the *ratzon Hashem*, (the will of G-d) the *taamei hamitzvos*, is at best unimportant and irrelevant, then for many naturally and properly inquisitive minds, minds that have become

used to reason, the world of Torah, if not Torah itself, becomes confining and suspect.

While our children are brought up to feel that understanding the rationale for Torah and *mitzvos* is unimportant, they are taught that understanding our history is not only unimportant, but even bordering on the dangerous. They have little (or stifled) curiosity for understanding how the present structure of the Jewish communities came to be, how the world of the *Yeshivos* evolved, or how *minbagim* developed. They have no knowledge of the controversies and compromises of yore, or the debates that shaped our present world. They thus have no appreciation of what to stay away from and why.

I remember one חול המועד פסח when I was home in Montreal, and busied myself reading (I believe, Max Dimont's) *History of the Jews*. Like any good Montrealer I also attended a professional hockey game. In the middle of the game, surrounded by screaming fans, it came to me that this was not that much different from the Roman and Greek arenas described in the history book I was reading. I remembered the war between the פרושים and the מתיוונים and felt the strangeness and awkwardness of my being there. In the crowd of the totally and emotionally involved fans, I felt out of place.

No, I didn't leave the game. But at least I felt uncomfortable. At least I was conscious of being out of place, and of the historical origins and meaning attached to such events. This I gained from a historical perspective. No amount of *shmuessen* or exhortations could give me the feeling I had then. It was history that taught me and underscored for me the "otherness" of such events and milieus. Our youngsters who are brought up without a sense of history, and are drawn to such events, have no sense of why their *rabbei'im* look askance at their participation. Thus they dismiss their *rabbei'im* as being "unthinking, or ignorant know-nothings."

In today's attitude to *chinuch*, we actually try to protect our children from any historical knowledge, and shun even those history books written by bona-fide observant writers, such as Rabbi Berel Wein, because they mention figures that were controversial in Jewish history. "Better not to know," we say. When we take a totally a-historical perspective towards *Yiddishkeit*, then *Nach* and Jewish history become irrelevant, and our children lose out. The *Be'er Heitev*

in *Shulchan Aruch* (או"ח סימן ש"ז ס"ק י"ח) remarks about certain *sefarim* (שבט יהודה, ספר יוסיפין, ספר יוחסין, דברי הימים של ר"י הכהן) dealing with Jewish history,

שמהם ילמדו דברי מוסר ויראה.

Because from them they will learn Ethics and the fear of G-d.

Similarly, the Chazon Ish writes in ספר אמונה ובטחון פרק א, ס"ח:

דברי הימים וקורות עולם הם מאלפים הרבה את החכם בדרכו ועל תולדות העבר ייסד אדני חכמתו.

The knowledge of history and world events to a great extent train the wise man in his progress and it is on the happenings of the past that he will establish the pillars of his wisdom.

Unfortunately, our exaggerated fear of knowledge and independent thought causes many of our children to lose out in their appreciation, respect, and love of Torah.

### **b. In their relation to the world: What are we fencing out?**

When we build fences to keep out that which might be dangerous, we end up fencing out also what our children should know of worldly knowledge and culture. Dare I call it, the *derech erez shekadmah leTorah*?

Our understanding of Torah is often enhanced and enriched when it is informed by our real life experiences. Many of us have had the good fortune of having experienced something that gave rise to a new insight and understanding of a *maamar Chazal*. The Rashbam, at the beginning of *Parashas Vayeshev*, relates that he spoke to his grandfather Rashi, who admitted that if he had the time he would write a new commentary on the *Tanach* according to the "לפי הפשטות המתחדשים בכל יום" (explanations that are renewed daily). Is this not what he means? Such insights are however available only

to those who see life through the eyes of Torah and Torah through the eyes of life. This experience is denied to those who are taught that Torah and life are not bridgeable.

Thus, for example, our children have no knowledge or appreciation of science, although the Maharal, for one, tells us clearly that we have an obligation to know science. Science, he says, is not the “*chochmah Yevanis*,” Hellenistic wisdom, which *Chazal* prohibited. Natural science is the wisdom of Hashem, of the world he created. It is up to us to know that world, and in its mysteries see the hand of Hashem. My son came home from *yeshivah* and told me that one of the boys in his *yeshivah* said that actually the “sun revolves around earth and anybody who believes differently is an *apikorus*.” Can a *heimishe* “flat earth society” be far behind?

Often, our children lack the basic mathematics and knowledge of basic anatomy or botany to properly comprehend the *mishnayos* and *gemara* they are learning. Is this not a loss that is to be bemoaned?

Most of our children do not speak and write English clearly. I was recently helping a *rebbe* in a day school with his teaching of *Gemara*. As we reviewed his worksheets, I pointed out to him that in one place where he had phrased a question, “How does the *Gemara* prove that...” the *Gemara* actually didn’t prove it, rather the *Gemara* inferred it. As we went down the worksheet, I found the need to make a number of such corrections. I turned to the *rebbe* and apologetically remarked that although I knew this vocabulary was somewhat specialized for children, still, if he taught one or two terms a week, his students would learn the logical terminology and soon be able to speak about and understand the *Gemara* more precisely and clearly. The *rebbe* turned to me and said, “I’ll tell you the truth, I don’t really know this vocabulary myself.”

We are told by the Noda BiYehudah (דרושי הצל"ח, דרוש ל"ט) and his son *Rebbe* Shmuel (in his Introduction to the *sefer* ציון), as well as by *Rebbe* Akiva Eiger,<sup>13</sup> to be careful to learn the language of

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<sup>13</sup> I do not have the source for this. *Rebbe* Mordechai Gifter, זצ"ל, showed me a letter written by *Reb* Akiva Eiger to one of his sons in which he encourages him to learn the language of his country clearly and well. I do not remember where the letter is published, and could not ask *Rav* Gifter, זצ"ל, later.

the country we live in well and clearly, as clear language is a prerequisite to clear thinking. If the *rebbe* was lacking in the language of logic, he was also perforce lacking in logic itself.

*Mor Uktziah* in *Shulchan Aruch* (או"ח סימן ש"ז סעיף ט"ז) cites as one reason why we should know some (secular) history that we should not look like boors in the eyes of the Gentiles amongst whom we live. It requires little imagination to apply this principle to the language of the land. It requires even less imagination to generalize this not looking like boors in the eyes of Gentiles to not looking like fools in the eyes of our fellow Jews, especially those who have not been privy to a *yeshivah* education, and whose children we wish to attract to a *yeshivah* education. I have heard these people complain bitterly about the simple errors in spelling and usage which their child's *rebbe* has made on worksheets and tests, and not only in English but in *lashon kodesh* as well.

But in addition to not giving them basic knowledge and skills that they should know, we fail to give them basic knowledge and skills to protect them from what they shouldn't know. It is virtually impossible to defend oneself against a danger one is unaware of. This being the truth, we ought to be careful of the fences we build. We should realize that when we build a fence that's not completely impregnable, we also fence out some things which we need for self-defense.

The *sefer* תלמוד תורה of *Rav* Yehudah Levy of Jerusalem cites the *sefer* גידולי טהרה תשובה ז' לומדי who bemoans the fact that the לומדי תורה in his country (Germany) knew nothing of basic science and language. He writes that had they taken the trouble to gain just some basic knowledge in science and language they could have better protected their communities from those who came to destroy Torah Judaism and to lead their communities astray. (The author lived in Germany during the battles with the reformers.)

יפה היה להם לשלוח יד בקצת ידיעות. ואלו עשו כן לא עלה  
בינינו הפורץ רגלי שועלים המחבלים כל חלקה טובה.

It would have been better for them to have attained a little (worldly) knowledge. Had they done so, the great divide would not have come upon us—the feet of the foxes that trample all that is good.

It would seem that our efforts to close the “*tzu offene oigen*” of our youth have been only half successful. Unfortunately we are reaping the wrong half. Many of our youth today have little understanding of the global context, the nature, and the values that drive secular thinking and of the worlds of business, politics, interpersonal relations, culture, and the like. This knowledge would be helpful to them in navigating that world. Yet many of them are unfortunately, quite familiar with the crassest forms of entertainment and enticements of that world, and that, in a most naïve and simplistic fashion.<sup>14</sup> When we fence out the non-Jewish world completely, we fail to give our children some of the basic knowledge, values, and criteria used in general society to discern between what is refined and what is crass, between what is esthetically pleasing and what is just flashy, and between what is acceptable and what is abhorrent. In their ignorance, and in the throes of their passions, our “unprotected” youth, once they have dared to open the gates that have kept them penned inside our world (and have earned the appellation “Children at Risk”), make a mad dash for the lowest forms of culture and entertainment in the secular world, and in their ignorant minds rationalize, justify, and validate their behaviors by telling themselves that they are doing what is done and approved of by all those “smart, intelligent *goyim* who, by dint of their intelligence and wisdom, make things happen, invent things, and run the world.” Little do they realize that the *goyim* whose technological prowess they’ve come to admire wouldn’t want to be caught dead in the cheap and crass environment that some of our disenchanting youth habituate. Our youth think that once they have freed themselves from the strictures of their own world, they have entered a world free of strictures of even basic human ethics, or at least of pretensions to them. And why shouldn’t they think so? Have we not taught them that the whole world is decadent? Is it not only natural that when finding themselves wanting to join and engage with that larger world, they should seek out the decadent? Our children should be made aware of the existence of “low” and “high” culture in the world “out there.” They should be made aware that there are normative rules of propriety, of *derech erez*, that no upstanding Gentile would violate. And they should be given enough self-respect to, at the very least,

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<sup>14</sup> I owe this insight and formulation to my brother Dr. Berl Fried.

want to keep from sinking lower than the normative values of the general society.

#### **4 & 5. What tools are we using to build our fences, and whom are we fencing out?**

In addition to the dangers associated with whether fences work or not and what we end up fencing out without intending to, there is danger involved in the methods used to build these fences.

*Rebbe* Klonymous Kalmis Shapiro, the *Piaceneser Rebbe*, *אצ"ל*, *Hasbem Yinkom Damo* (also known as the *Rebbe* of the Warsaw Ghetto), in his *sefer Chovas HaTalmidim* points out that in these times the universal reality is that children seek independence at an earlier age than in the past. Thus, when we make a practice of forbidding things to our children, we end up turning them into our enemies. We set up a scenario wherein we are seen by our children as their enemy. We do this in order to “protect” them, but we succeed only in inviting rebellion. In his own words:

שבשביל זה על כל מדריך מלמד ומחנך מביט הנער כעל עריץ זר, שבא למשול עליו ביד חזקה ולשלול ממנו שלטון עצמותו דעתו ורצונו ומין התגרות אף שנאה מתעוררת בקרב הנער פנימה אל מלמדיו ואביו, עד שאינו נותן לב לשמוע את דבריהם ואיך לקלטם בלבו, רק איך להתפטר מהם ולצאת מן ידיהם.

Because of this our youth view every guide, teacher, or educator as if they were a foreign despot who seeks only to control him by force and to deny him independence, knowledge, and will. And (in response) a kind of defiance, even abhorrence, is awakened within the child toward his teachers and his father to the point that he pays no heed to their words nor internalizes them in his heart. Rather, he thinks only of how to be rid of them and become independent.

When parents and educators put up fences, and the fences don't work well enough, they often take to patrolling those fences. They spy on their children, following them around. Many of our educators are reduced to patrolling pizza parlors and other venues that they have declared as off limits to their students, or still worse,

they appoint students to spy on each other. This demeans us all—parents, teachers, and children. Fences such as these, fences that are too confining, built by methods and tools which are intrusive and insulting, often result in our becoming implausible; mistrusted, if not actually hated, by the very youth we wish to bring or keep close to Torah. Either way, it results in at least some of our youth being alienated from Judaism.

Those of us involved either in working with young people in therapy for any number of reasons (marriage problems or drugs, to name just two), or in *kiruv* work, find that increasingly we seem to be meeting up with young people who have grown up *frum*, but now find it difficult to continue in their belief and practice of *Yiddishkeit*. Most continue to do so and to dress in a way which conforms to the community's standards, because this is the only community they know. Not-so-deep inside, though, they simply don't believe, and refuse to conform to the most basic dictates of Torah and *mitzvos*. In cases where this disturbs their spouses, serious marriage problems occur. In counseling, though, we quickly discover that we are dealing with a miserable individual who has lost his or her moral bearings, who feels lost and alienated from their own people while not being able to come to terms with their way of life. These young people are often very angry and defiant, and also derisive of their parents, teachers, and schools. They are very cynical and bitter, especially about *rabbanim* and *roshei yeshivah*. When you ask them why—or even when you don't ask, but they sense that you might listen—they unload on you. They remember teachers who would not answer their questions regarding faith, questions that tormented them as children and as young adolescents—and worse yet, ridiculed them for having asked the questions.

A student of mine (who did not suffer the extreme angst of those mentioned above, but remained a good *talmid* in *yeshivah*) related that as a child he once asked his *rebbe* a question. The *rebbe* answered that he was too young for the answer. He should wait until he's older and then ask. A few years later he did just that. He asked the question of a different *rebbe*. His *rebbe's* response? "By your age you should already know that!" He received no answer. He had missed the elusive "window of opportunity."

Our students remember teachers and *rabbei'im* who slapped them down and told them that “such questions should not be asked!” Some teachers said this in a matter-of-fact tone, others more harshly. Mostly, they made the questioner feel there was something wrong with him or her for even thinking of such a question. There is an unwritten but whispered rule amongst Bais Yaakov girls that, “If you have some really serious questions, whatever you do, don’t ask your teacher, not unless you don’t care what it does to your *shidduch* chances!” This attitude towards thinking and questioning drives away some of our brightest and most honest young people. It also flies in the face of *Rishonim* like the Mabit (שער היסודות פרק ) ספר בית אלוקים, שער היסודות פרק ) (ראשון who insist that it is imperative that we learn to think and to question and to chase down answers on our own.

שאינן ראוי לאדם במה שהוא אדם להתרשל מלחקור על כל דבר  
כל מה ששיגיג יד שכלו, דרך משל אם יסופר לאדם דבר מחודש  
ויאמין, כי יסופר לו מפי איש הגון ונאמן, יחשב לו לעצלה  
והתרשלות אם יוכל הוא בעצמו לראות ולידע הדבר ההוא ולא  
ישתדל על זה.

It is not fitting for a person, a human being, to neglect to research anything that is within his ability to grasp. For example: A person is told a novel phenomenon, and he believes it because it was told to him by a good and trustworthy person. If he has the ability to comprehend and know that phenomenon and he makes no effort to do so on his own, it is considered as slovenly laziness.

I don’t think I need to elaborate on the dangers of such an anti-intellectual atmosphere in our society and in our schools.

Young people who find that...

- (a) The Torah’s message, as taught by their teachers, does not speak to the questions which bother them and the message is not made relevant to help them understand the world in which they live.
- and (b) That the members and representatives of the Torah world seem ignorant of the world we live in, and in their ignorance implausibly dismiss the whole world as

- then *shtus*, nonsense.
- (c) Reach out to the secular culture and, not having been taught to think, to discern, they quickly gravitate to the cheapest aspects of that secular culture.

*Chazal* tell us (מדרש רבה איכה פרשה ב פסקה יג):

אם יאמר לך אדם יש חכמה בגוים תאמן הדא הוא דכתיב (עובדיה א') והאבדתי חכמים מאדום ותבונה מהר עשו. יש תורה בגוים אל תאמן דכתיב (איכה ב:ט) מלכה ושריה בגוים אין תורה.

If a person should tell you, “There is wisdom amongst the nations,” believe it! This is what is meant when in Ovadiah it states: *And I will make vanish wisdom from Edom and understanding from Mount Se’ir* [implying there is wisdom and understanding to destroy]. But should he tell you, “There is Torah amongst the nations,” do not believe it! As [in Eichah] it states: *Her king and her ministers amongst the nations there is no Torah*.<sup>15</sup>

To my understanding, חכמה בגוים, “the wisdom of the Gentiles,” refers to scientific data and scientific (and perhaps technological) findings. These we may and should accept. After all, findings are findings, and facts are facts! Scientific data (or facts) are then interpreted, explained, and combined into theories. Theories are not value free and do not spring out of a vacuum. The theories that a person creates are his way of understanding and making sense of new data and novel facts, usually in a way that is consonant with what he already believes. A person’s theories will thus be based on, will strive to remain consistent with, and will reflect his broader world-view. Being that the world-view of the Torah Jew often stands in contradistinction to that of most secular scientists, we must be wary of their theories. Thus we are warned אל תאמין תורה בגויים. Do not accept the תורות, the teachings or theories of the Gentiles. That is, do

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<sup>15</sup> The *midrashic* interpretation is based on a literal translation of the verse. A more common translation would be “her king and her officers are among the nations, there is no Torah” (ArtScroll).

not use their theories as a guide for thinking about life without first evaluating them in the light of the words of *Chazal*. At times we must reinterpret the findings and derive implications from them, i.e. create our own theories in consonance with the words of *Chazal*.

This is what *Chazal* tell us. Unfortunately, today it has become almost the norm to teach our children that אין חכמה בגוים—there is no wisdom amongst the Gentiles at all. When children discover this to be blatantly untrue, they reject all we have taught them and end up seeking תורה בגוים, their very theory of life, amongst the גוים.

## 5. What needs to be done?

A. We must teach our children a *Toras Chaim*, a Torah which informs life and which is informed by life. Children need to understand, to see, and to feel that Torah is a good and rational guide to life. As *Reb Yaakov* implied, it is the *kluger*, the intelligent person's guide to life. It is to be learned, questioned, grappled with, and finally comprehended, together with the complex web of other information available to us and our life's experiences. The child needs to gain the delightful awe that comes with recognizing the wisdom that Torah offers us as it informs life. As we say in our *tefilos*, ותלמדם חוקי חיים, it is only when we teach a תורת חיים that we can hope to achieve the לעשות שלם רצונך בלבב שלם, to have our children adopt Torah and adhere to it fullheartedly.

B. We must transmit Torah in a way that emphasizes the joy of life. *Rebbe Moshe Feinstein* writes in a responsum (שו"ת אגרות משה חלק יו"ד) (ג' סימן עא) that the reason many people in America who, in the early years of the twentieth century, sacrificed greatly in order to keep from desecrating the *Shabbos*, did not merit to see their children grow up as *shomrei Shabbos* was because though they conveyed to their children the required sacrifice of *Shabbos*, they failed to convey the joy and peace of mind that it brings. Torah learning and *mitzvos* that are not joyful cannot be transmitted to the next generation.

C. As the *Chovas HaTalmidim* writes, we must elevate our youth, not subjugate them. We must speak to their souls. We must remind them of the lofty potential they have, and of their responsibility to fulfill it.

We must encourage them to take pride in their heritage, and to strive to reach that potential, to truly self-actualize.

D. It is my experience that Jewish history can serve as a tremendous catalyst for appreciating our heritage and for understanding it. A familiarity with our history also provides us with an understanding and with greater respect for the wisdom that guided the implementation of many of the strictures, i.e. “protective measures,” that our leaders have over the centuries seen fit to implement in order to assure our survival as a people. As a famous philosopher said, “Given a why, man can make do with almost any how.” Our young people need the “why” of some of the strictures they now see as confining. Given a reason, they will see them as “liberating.”

E. It is well known that when Aish HaTorah runs a “Discovery Weekend” consisting of a series of lectures designed to explain עקרונות אמונה (the foundations of our faith), and to show how they are rational and logical, they are mobbed by FFB’s (*Frum From Birth*) who also seek to come and be convinced. I remember one such weekend when Aish HaTorah, which had organized the weekend for those not yet committed to a Torah way of life (i.e. the non-committed or irreligious), had to deny registration to the “*frum* folk” to allow places for the “*frei* audience.” We should be running such weekends or courses for our young. There should be a venue where they can confront the basic questions of faith and reason and how to deal with the world. One need not accept everything in the “Aish package” to agree that, at the very least, it offers food for thought and an atmosphere in which questions are encouraged.

## **Summation**

I began this article with a conversation with *Reb* Yaakov Kaminetsky זצ״ל; allow me to end it with another. This one was had by my *Rebbe*, *Reb* Dovid Kalman Drebin, זצ״ל, and *Tibadel LeChayim* his *rebbeztzin*, who lives in Toronto *ad meah v’esrim*. At the time, they had come to ask *Reb* Yaakov a number of questions regarding strictures that people were trying to introduce to the Bais Yaakov school where the *rebbeztzin* was the principal. The *rebbeztzin* saw these strictures as a novel form of possibly unnecessary excessiveness and sought *Reb* Yaakov’s opinion on them.

In answering them, *Reb Yaakov* referred to the *halachah* which says that in forming a group for the *korban Pesach* it is required that at least one member of the group have been born Jewish. In other words, a number of individual *geirim* (converts) cannot constitute themselves as a group for the purpose of eating the *Korban Pesach*. *Reb Yaakov* explained that the reason for this is to protect the group from adopting strictures which will result in their transgressing major *halachos*. Thus he said, for example, an overly zealous *ger-tzedek* may decide that he feels unsure and is unhappy with the *frumkeit* (piety) of the *Kohen* who was assigned to *shecht* (ritually slaughter) his *korban*, lamb, and he would therefore rather not eat the *korban*. Thus, his *chumrah*, stricture, will result in a tremendous transgression, one that carries the punishment of *koresh*. For this reason it is important that the group have at least one born Jew in it, so as to “keep the things in perspective.” *Reb Yaakov* then turned to *Rav Drebin* and his *rebbezain*, and said:

We live in a generation of converts (*ab dor fun geirim*). You both come from a long line of committed and learned Jewish families. You are seeking a “normal *Yiddishkeit*.” I’m sorry, but I can’t help you. You’re simply “out of style.”

The *ערבי נהל*, the work of a *chassidic rebbe* and *posek* (known in *Shulchan Aruch* as the *לבושי שרד*), after discussing asceticism as an erroneous philosophy of men who thought that the only way to achieve spiritual fulfillment is by separating themselves completely from normal human life, living in caves in the desert, and eating grass etc., continues as follows:

ועוד היום יש טעות זה אצל ההמונים בראותם איש סכל אשר אין יודע לעשות רע וגם אינו יודע מעניני העולם מאומה ובשגעון ושטות ינהג סוברים שהוא הקדוש ובראותם איש חכם מתנהג בדרך התורה מבלי נטות ימין ושמאל אשר כל דרכיה דרכי נועם אינו חשוב בעיניהם כ"כ כי חושבים שהתורה צייתה ח"ו להיות שוטה שלא לידע מעניני העולם מאומה וזה קרוב לשטותם וסכלתם של הפילסופיה הנ"ל.

And to this very day, this error exists amongst the masses, (who) when they see a foolish person who doesn't know

enough to do bad and also doesn't know anything about worldly matters and who behaves in foolish and crazy ways, they consider him to be the holy one. But (on the other hand) when they see a wise man conducting himself in the ways of the Torah, without deviating to the right or to the left, all of whose ways (the Torah's) are pleasant (i.e. moderate), he is not as highly regarded in their eyes because they think that the Torah, God-forbid, commanded us to be idiots, not to know anything about worldly matters. And this (line of reasoning) is close to the idiocy and foolishness of the aforementioned philosophy.

The *passuk* in Koheles (1:18) states:

כִּי בָרַב הַחִמָּה רַב כָּעֵס וַיִּוְסִיף דַּעַת יוֹסִיף מְאֹד:

For with much wisdom comes much grief and he who increases knowledge increases pain.

Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Kotzk remarked “*krenken zol men, ober a ba'al das zol men zeyn*” – “Suffer, but seek wisdom.”

I would echo this sentiment here. Openness, questioning, and wisdom may oftentimes cause pain, but these are growth pains. Without them our youth will not grow. They will at best stagnate, at worst wither and die spiritually. ❧