

Secular and Sinaitic Wisdom

A Historical Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

It is brought down in the Midrash that HaShem looked into the Torah in order to construct the universe.¹ One would be remiss, then, to ignore the interplay between the map and the landscape. Still, the appropriate amount of secular wisdom in the life of a Torah-observant Jew has been a contentious topic throughout Jewish History. While Judaism certainly calls on *b'nei Yisrael* to engage with the real, material world, it naturally places a premium on Torah study. The difficulty becomes determining to what extent a Torah-observant Jew should grapple with secular wisdom, especially as the perquisites for mastery of secular subjects continues to require more education in the modern age. An analysis of the past can, however, shed light on the present. For this reason, my paper will examine the permissibility of secular study for a Torah-observant Jew through a historical lens. Beginning with the Talmudic Rabbis and concluding with modern interpretations, I will argue that secular wisdom has positively influenced Torah study while examining arguments both for and against its study in general.²

It is necessary, first, to address the definitional issues. Secular wisdom is a dynamic term with varying implications throughout history. Recognizing that for many ancient Greeks and Romans the topics of philosophy and science were largely synonymous and that in modern times the two have diverged into entirely separate fields, I employ a rather broad definition of secular wisdom. This definition allows for the natural sciences, philosophy, and generally anything not explicitly Torah. The use of secular wisdom for more modern descriptions, therefore, will still allow for the inclusion of both philosophy and natural science, but the latter will prove to be more relevant for our purposes.

GREEK WISDOM AND TORAH

For many reasons, the Talmud initially appears to forbid the study of Greek wisdom.³ One is expected to devote himself to Torah, and therefore, his primary focus ought to exclude the secular. The Gemarah explains this plainly:

Ben Dama the son of R. Ishmael's sister asked R. Ishmael: Is a man like myself who has mastered the whole Torah allowed to study Greek wisdom? R. Ishmael applied the verse in Joshua (1:8) to him: 'Thou *shalt meditate therein* (i.e. in the Torah) *day and night*,' go and find a time when it is neither day nor night and study Greek wisdom" (*Menachos 99b*)

From this passage alone, the ban on secular wisdom is readily apparent, as such a time does not exist. It would be improper for a Jew to neglect his Torah study, especially in favor of secular pursuits. Firmer, moreover, are the prohibitions in *Masechta Sotah*.

¹ Midrash Rabbah, Sefer Bereishis 1:1.

² By no means do I intend to engage in extensive Talmudic explication – being both limited by time, resource, and ability. I do, however, find it absolutely necessary to contextualize this question both historically and halakhically.

³ Naturally, “secular wisdom” in the Hellenistic times

We read an apparently direct prohibition in a Mishna⁴ that no man should teach his son Greek.⁵ In this Mishna the verbiage of the injunction escalates; it cursers the transgressor. “They said Cursed be a man who rears pigs and cursed be the man who teaches his son Greek wisdom.”⁶ Here, the ban is more direct, pointed less not on the neglect of Torah but rather on the negativity of Greek wisdom.

Like anything in the Talmud, these statements are far from absolute declarations. A fundamentalist interpretation of these passages will leave the reader unsure, confused, or misled. For instance, the Talmud actively permits the study of secular wisdom for one’s work.⁷ One would be permitted, therefore, to study Greek wisdom if it helped sustain his livelihood. Saul Lieberman takes another approach. He clarifies the rabbinical tradition that follows these statements and concludes that only the *teaching* of Greek wisdom to *children* was *assur* in some cases.⁸ A third way of examining the prohibition on secular wisdom challenges the premise that secular wisdom necessarily absents one from Torah study.⁹ This method can examine the study and influence of secular wisdom as a necessary supplement to Torah study. With nearly two thousand years of history as the guide, we will see that not only has this method been adopted, it has been absolutely necessary.¹⁰

Although knowledge of secular wisdom was limited to and spurned by many, it still had a meaningful impact on Jewish law. With the exception of a few unique rabbis, most middle-class men had a thin grasp on Greek wisdom.¹¹ Still, the interplay between natural science and *halakha* is palpable. In one case, the *Mishnah* rules: “If a man touches the flesh of a mouse which is half flesh and half earth he becomes unclean; but if he touches the earth he remains clean.”¹² Plinius, the famed Roman naturalist and philosopher, reports on this exact mouse as well:

Quippe detegente eo musculi reperiuntur inchoato opere genitalis aquae terreamque, iam parte corporis viventes novissima effigie etiamnun terrena.
(Nat. hist. IX. 84,179)

“For, when it recedes, little mice are found in the work of the generating water and land, just beginning: now, in part of the body they are living, while the newest part is still of earth”

The scientific and *halakhic* verdicts are in accord. The knowledge of such a mouse does not necessarily prove that the rabbis learned of it from Plinius, in fact, it

⁴ *Sotah*, end

⁵ See *Tosfos Bava Kamma* 82b. But from the Talmud Yerushalmi it is clear that at the time of Quietus the ban included the language as well as Greek Wisdom. The Talmud Bavli never forbids Greek language, only Greek Wisdom (Lieberman 1950, 101 n.8).

⁶ *Sotah*, 49b

⁷ Lieberman 1950, 101; see also *Bava Kammah*, 82-83

⁸ See Lieberman 1950, 100-114

⁹ See *Sifre Deut.* 34, ed. Finkelstein 61 and Lieberman in *Kiryath Sefer* XIV, p.333

¹⁰ I would like to present a brief disclosure. This paper does not purport any specific stream, brand, or philosophy of Judaism. It does, however, work under the assumption that a Jew is bound by the Torah and its laws. In no way do I contend that one should omit Torah study or compromise Torah observance as a condition, prerequisite, or result of secular study.

¹¹ Lieberman 1942, 1-2

¹² *Chulin*, 126b

likely came from Egyptian sources.¹³ What we can glean from it, however, is that secular knowledge informed how some legal rulings were understood. The scientific status – as the ancients understood it – of the mouse clearly agrees with the *halakha*, and it is dubious the agreement of ancient naturalist and rabbis is merely coincidence. Another relevant ruling that is most readily understood in the context of the natural sciences comes down in the *Tosefta*.¹⁴ Here, a seemingly arbitrary ruling about caring for cattle is clarified by Aristotle.¹⁵ The influence of Hellenistic science was informative for the Jews and provided an important precedent for the consolation of secular wisdom for *halakha*.

Jewish law also benefitted from proverbial and judicial wisdom of the Greeks. A striking example of this occurs in *Masechta Rosh Hashanah*, in which R. Eleazer says:

פָּרָא בְּסִילִיּוֹס אֲוִנוֹמוֹס אֲוֶגְרָפוֹס בְּנוֹהֵג שְׁבַע עוֹלָם מֶלֶךְ בָּשָׂר וְדָם חָר מִקִּימִים רָצָה נֶאֱחָרִים מִקִּימָה
אוֹתָהּ אֲבָל אֵלָּא כּוֹזֵר נִזְרָה רָצָה כְּקִירָה מִקִּיִּים וְכוּי וְתַחֲיִלָּה

“παρὰ βασιλέως ὁ νόμος ἄγραφος – “on the king law is not binding.”

Ordinarily a human king issues a decree and if he chooses he obeys it, otherwise others obey it, but when the Holy One blessed be He issues a decree He is the first to obey it.” (*Rosh Hashanah*, 1.3 57a)

The Greek phrase is quoted nearly verbatim and its use helps elucidate the message extant in the passage. Notice that the Greek words only refer to the unbound, Greek kings. The Jewish king, HaShem, is the first to obey his own laws. He is just and described in Hebrew.¹⁶ The mimetic syntax is poignant as the language represents the meaning. More proverbs also borrowed from the Greeks, including one concerning debt settlement which illuminates Greek influence. The following phrases are so ostensibly parallel that they warrant no analysis: מִמֶּרִי רִשׁוּתֶךָ פֶּאֶרִי אִפְרַע – “From the owner of your loan take payment even in bran”¹⁷ – and ἀπὸ κακοῦ δανειστοῦ κἂν σακκίον ἀχύρου – “From a bad creditor take even a small bag of bran.”¹⁸ Even secular legal terms made their way into the Jewish law of oaths.¹⁹ Lieberman notes that the Greek phrase χαρίζεσθαι βία, when properly understood as a Greek legal phrase, resolves puzzling linguistic discrepancies.²⁰ Greek phrases and concepts infiltrated Jewish texts and language and uncover the interplay between the two cultures. In some cases this was welcomed, in other cases rebuffed, but as Jews graduated into the post-Second Temple diaspora, this interchange produced an abiding paradigm.

MAIMONIDES AND SECULAR WISDOM

Rather famously and controversially, Maimonides applied secular knowledge to his Torah study. To Maimonides, the study of secular knowledge was an obligation. The

¹³ Lieberman 1950, 184

¹⁴ *Baba Mezi'a III, end, 379₂*. For a more in-depth analysis, see Lieberman 1950, 184-187

¹⁵ *De anim. Hist. VIII. 7 (9). 1, 595b*

¹⁶ For more examples see Lieberman 1942, 39-43

¹⁷ *Bava Kama, 46b*

¹⁸ Lieberman 1942, 156

¹⁹ *Nedarim III.3, 38a*

²⁰ Lieberman 1942, 44

first precept he states in the *Mishneh Torah* is “to know that there is a God.”²¹ As *Frudenthal* notes, the obligation is to know, not believe. This is further elucidated in the *Guide for the Perplexed*. Maimonides interprets “comprehending the Universe and by testing the divine wisdom displayed there in” as fulfilling the commandment “Thou shalt love the L-rd thy G-d.”²² Because of these conceptions, he believed that the Torah ought to be interpreted in accord with valid science. So, when there was a discrepancy between text and science, he deemed it proper to interpret the text figuratively.²³

Maimonides’ praise of secular knowledge spanned beyond the natural sciences. He notably designated Aristotle, “Chief of the Philosophers,”²⁴ and engaged profoundly with the Greek philosopher’s texts. What is interesting, moreover, is Maimonides’ use of secular wisdom in his study of the divine. The most important example of this is Maimonides’ employment of Aristotelian premises²⁵ in establishing the existence of a deity.²⁶ He argues, naturally, that one must exist, and utilizes Aristotelian knowledge as an aid. And even when follows by rejecting one of the premises, he qualifies statement, lest Aristotle seem too fallible:

“My purpose in [Chapter 15] is to make it clear that Aristotle possesses no demonstration for the world being eternal, as he understands this. Moreover, he is not mistaken with regard to this... Aristotle cannot be supposed to have believed that these statements were demonstrations, for it was Aristotle who taught mankind the methods, the rules, and the conditions of demonstrations.”

The employment of Aristotle was multifarious and extended beyond conceptions of a deity. His work was crucial to Maimonides’ philosophy of empirical knowledge²⁷ as well as his views on self-discipline and asceticism.²⁸ To equate the philosophies of Aristotle and Maimonides would be categorically incorrect; however, it is apparent that

²¹ *Book of Knowledge, 1.1*; See Maimonides 1947a, p.34a (from *Frudenthal* 2005,148)

²² (*Studies in Education Haifa*, Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23392646>)

²³ “Know that our shunning the affirmation of the eternity of the world is not due to a text figuring in the Torah according to which the world has been produced in time [i.e., created]. For the texts indicating that the world has been produced in time are not more numerous than those indicating that the deity is a body. Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done when denying His corporeality. Perhaps this would even be much easier to do: we should be very well able to give a figurative interpretation of those texts and to affirm as true the eternity of the world, just as we have given a figurative interpretation of those other texts and have denied that He, may He be exalted, is a body.” Content and Translation from: *Frudenthal* 2005, 158.

²⁴ *Guide of the Perplexed* I, 5 (See Pines 1963)

²⁵ Pines claims, “No example prior to Maimonides of a list of twenty-five or twenty-six “premises” seems to be known.”

²⁶ *Guide of the Perplexed* II, intro. “Of the twenty-five premises that I have put before you in the form of a preface, some become manifest with very little reflection and are demonstrative premises and first intelligibles or notions approaching the latter... Other require a number of demonstrations and premises leading up them... With regard to some of them, this has been done in the Book of “Akroasis” ... [or] in the Book of “Metaphysics.” (See Pines 1963) For More on Aristotle’s impact of Maimonides’ conception of a deity, see *Frudenthal* 2005, 140ff

²⁷ *Frudenthal* 2005, 151

²⁸ Seeskin 2012, 116-124

Aristotle's philosophy helped Maimonides construct a logical and tangible foundation for his approach to Torah.

Maimonides' engagement with secular wisdom extended to Islamic scholars as well. Among other scholars, Alfarabi, whose work on logic and political philosophy were most relevant, piqued Maimonides' interest. In the *Guide for the Perplexed* alone, Maimonides alludes to Alfarabi on topics concerning logic, the *kalam*, the eternity of the world, intellect, and divine providence.²⁹

Though many go unmentioned in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, Alfarabi's political writings heavily influenced Maimonides' conceptions of prophecy.³⁰ Alfarabi and Maimonides' statements on the overflow of active intellect can help establish the convergence of their philosophies. Alfarabi posits the following:

“Not every man is equipped by natural disposition to receive the first intelligibles, because individual human beings are made by nature with unequal powers and different preparations...” (PR, N1 35)³¹

Maimonides offers similar thoughts, remarking that a divine overflow of intellect is “through which there is a difference of rank between our intellects” (*Guide*, II.37). Again parallels arise as Maimonides remarks that one's ability to grasp this overflow is contingent upon the “natural disposition” of one's imaginative faculties (*Guide*, II.36). Maimonides' conception of prophecy insists that man's varying ability to discern divine overflow fosters different levels of prophetic ability. This theory relies heavily on a theory of human intellection (*Guide*, II.45), a central idea of Islamic philosophy.³² Many even today would view Maimonides' engagement with secular texts excessive, yet given the codification of his philosophy; perhaps, his approach can be instructive for modern scholars.

SECULAR AND JEWISH WISDOM IN THE MODERN WORLD

It is most fitting to begin a study of modern secular wisdom and Judaism with the Vilna Gaon. At the same time, the Gaon's endorsement of secular study is rather unclear. Some, such as Rabbi Barukh of Shklov and Rabbi Abraham Simchah of Amcislav, claimed that he staunchly advocated for the translation of secular books and scientific texts into Hebrew.³³ Yet, these proponents were often biased and wished to justify the *Haskalah*³⁴ movement in his name.³⁵ What we do have, however, is the Gaon's own contact with secular knowledge. His texts *Sefer Dikduk Eliyahu*, a grammar book; *Sefer Ayil Meshullah*, a geometry book; *Sefer Tsurat Haarets*, a geography book; and an unpublished work on astronomy demonstrate his interest in the secular subjects. And, even if one is to accept Rabbi Barukh of Shklov at his word, in those very words, the Vilna Gaon still supports primacy of the Torah, just with liberal secular *supplement*. Thus, the Vilna Gaon, for whatever he believed, was an important figure for following generations.

²⁹ Ivry 2005, 61

³⁰ Pines 1963, lxxxvi

³¹ Alfarabi, On Political Science, Jurisprudence and Theology

³² Pessin 2014, 6.5

³³ Etkes 2002, 52-53

³⁴ Jewish response to the “Enlightenment”

³⁵ Etkes 2002, 37-73

While assertions about the Vilna Gaon provided fodder for the *Haskhala* movement, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch sought to formalize the relationship between Torah and secular wisdom.³⁶ His response was *Torah im Derech Eretz*, a term derived from Pirkei Avos.³⁷ As previously shown, secular knowledge among Torah Jews was nothing new, but new historical and social forces—the Industrial Revolution and rise of Capitalism most prominently, increased the requisite schooling for comprehending secular subjects.³⁸ Hirsch, however, did not view this as a burden, but rather an opportunity. He considered the increase in secular wisdom an opportunity to learn more of the significance of the Jewish man's role in nature and history.³⁹

While alive, Hirsch remarked on the misinterpretation of his ideas, words that were ignored thereafter. He believed neither in assimilation nor the subordination of Torah to Secular culture and wisdom. But even those who agree with him on this premise still diverge on their understanding of *Torah im Derech Eretz* and his philosophy.⁴⁰ For the purpose of this paper, we will examine three streams of thought: *Torah Umadda*, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (The Rebbe). Our goal is not to validate any specific branch, but rather to examine the way modern Jews examine the issue of secular wisdom and Judaism.

The concept of *Torah Umadda*, popularized by Yeshiva University, takes a rather open view concerning the permissibility of secular knowledge. Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, former Chancellor of Yeshiva University, explains *Torah Umadda* as an attempt “to expand the area of religious interest to include all of creation and to bring all of humanity's cultural creativity and cognitive achievements within the perimeters of Torah.”⁴¹ Rabbi Mordechai Willig affirms Rabbi Hirsch's positive view on secular study. He purports that secular study is acceptable insofar as one does not neglect his Torah study and in some cases the study these matters even constitutes a *mitzvah*.⁴² Rabbi

³⁶ Hirsch says, “To the extent that a person is lacking in knowledge of secular subjects, he will lack one hundred fold in the wisdom the Torah. For the Torah and secular knowledge are bound together” Etkes 2002, 54-55

³⁷ “Rabban Gamliel, the son of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, says: Admirable is the study of Torah together with an occupation, for the exertion of them both makes sin forgotten. All Torah study that does not have labor accompanying it will in the end cease and will bring in its wake sin. All who are involved with the community should involve themselves with them for the sake of heaven. For then, the merit of the forefathers aids them, as their righteousness endures forever. Nevertheless, as for you I [God] will bestow upon you as a great reward as if you had accomplished it [on your own].” (Pirkei Avos 2:2)

³⁸ Breuer 1970, 26-27

³⁹ “In 1832, Hirsch wrote to an acquaintance who had been a fellow-student of his in the Yeshiva of Rabbi Jacob Ettlinger, and who had later, like himself, studied for a short time at a university. Hirsch stressed that the friend should not regard his university studies as a burden forced upon him by the needs of the time. “These studies should be a source of spiritual enlightenment for you, through which your own wisdom will be united with the wisdom that has come down to you as the heritage of the congregation of Jacob” (Breuer 1970, 28-29)

⁴⁰ “There have been many errors with regard to the understanding of the slogan *Torah-im-Derekh-Eretz*. Some maintain that this slogan stands for an integration of Torah culture with European culture . . . There are others who say that slogan has mainly educational implications, requiring secular studies as either a temporary expedient or a permanent provision . . . Others, again, insist upon explaining this slogan as calling for the professions last but not least the academic professions, the doctor's degree- entailing the establishment of a relationship between the Torah and the sciences with a view to reaching a compromise.” via (Breuer 1970, 9)

⁴¹ Lamm 1990, 12

⁴² Willig 1989, 96

Lamm concurs unambiguously, clearly denying a “coequality” of Torah and secular study.⁴³ And this is important, he argues, because while he scorns coequality, he applauds coexistence:

“Torah, faith, religious learning on one side and Madda, science, worldly knowledge on the other, together offer us a more over-arching and truer vision than either one set alone. Each set gives one view of the Creator as well as of His creation, and the other a different perspective that may not agree at all with the first ... Each alone is true, but only partially true; both together present the possibility of a larger truth”⁴⁴

For some, *Torah Umadda* extends beyond science alone. Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein believed many subjects enhanced one’s Torah learning.⁴⁵ A PhD in English Literature, Rabbi Lichtenstein celebrated the positive influence of literary study. He argued that humanities have significant implications and compel man to grapple with his relationship with HaShem. Drama, for example, gives its reader a unique double vision; whereby, he can explore creator and created: Clytemnestra and Aeschylus or Hamlet and Shakespeare.⁴⁶ Through this, he gains profound insight into man’s struggle with the human condition from afar. History, even more so, tasks its reader with the comprehension of the human condition. Lichtenstein contends that, by cataloguing the events of man, history serves a valuable purpose.

“It helps us to study *sefer teldot Adam* (“the book of the generations of Adam”), and, as well to contemplate the ways of Providence, in fulfillment of the mandate *זָכוֹר יָמוֹת עוֹלָם בֵּינוּ שָׁנוֹת נֶדָר-דֹּר*; שָׁאַל, וְיַגִּדְךָ זִקְנֶיךָ וְיֹאמְרוּ לָךְ, ‘Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask thy father, and he will declare unto thee, thine elders and they will tell thee’ (Devarim 32:7)”⁴⁷

Attempting to prescribe a standard balance between Torah and Secular studies in the *Torah Umadda* model is an onerous – and perhaps impossible – task. Rabbi Lamm comments that its very unwillingness to do so produces a constructive pluralism, which allows for the Orthodox scientist, businessman, and doctors.⁴⁸ Rabbi Lichtenstein, meanwhile, goes so far as to call attempts to fix a balance “ridiculous,” appealing to the individualism of students.⁴⁹ Perhaps then, the best option to find a balance would be to extrapolate from Yeshiva University’s curricular offerings.

⁴³ “*Torah Umadda* does not imply the coequality of the two poles. Torah remains the unchallenged and preeminent center of our lives, our community, our value system. But centrality is not the same as exclusivity. It does not imply the rejection of all other forms or sources of knowledge, such that non-sacred learning constitutes a transgression.” Lamm 1986, 304

⁴⁴ Lamm 1990, 236

⁴⁵ “Consider simply the aid we derive by elucidation or comparison, from linguistics in Amos, history in Melakhim, agronomy in Zera’im, physiology in Niddah, chemistry in Hometz u-Matzah, philosophy in Yesodei Ha-Torah, psychology in Avodah Zarah, political theory in Sanhedrin, torts in Bava Batra – one could continue almost indefinitely” Lichtenstein 2003, 93

⁴⁶ Lichtenstein 2003, 113

⁴⁷ Lichtenstein 2003, 114

⁴⁸ Lamm 1990, 237

⁴⁹ Lichtenstein 2003, 100

Running counter to the views of *Torah Umadda* is Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's rejection of secular wisdom. Rabbi Feinstein prides himself on his devotion to Torah alone and sees little need in secular wisdom, especially for general knowledge.

“My entire world view stems only from knowledge of Torah without any mixture of outside ideas (yediots hitsoniyyot), whose judgment is truth whether it is strict or lenient. Arguments derived from foreign outlooks or false opinions of the heart are nothing . . .”⁵⁰

Such an ideology is manifest in light of some of his rulings. Rabbi Feinstein stressed the importance of studying Torah earlier in the day than secular subjects so as to instill a hierarchy of study. In fact, the inclusion of secular studies in his curriculum at all was merely a legal concession. Meanwhile, he prohibited texts that denied that G-d created the world along with the study of ancient Greek and Roman religion.⁵¹ Rabbi Feinstein clearly ranked Torah study as his only necessity and was eager to forgo the study of secular subjects.

Even with this aversion to the secular, Rabbi Feinstein's status as a *halakhist* required a deep understanding of many ancillary issues. His rulings on complex medical issues provide instructive cases. When Rabbi Feinstein ruled on the status of a brain dead patient, he not only commented extensively on the Harvard Criteria – a legal litmus at the time – but also conducted his own research into the issue both medically and halakhically.⁵² His most famous feat, however, was the case with Dr. C Everett Koop and the *Siamese Twins*.⁵³ Here again, presented with a complex medical issue, Rabbi Feinstein learned the intricacies well, consulting with numerous doctors and medical texts.⁵⁴ It would be improper, however, to consider Rabbi Feinstein a proponent of secular wisdom on the basis of these case studies. He learned secular knowledge insofar as it was necessary to make a legal decision, but he was hardly reading Shakespeare and Aeschylus.

The Rebbe's position was not as absolute as *Torah Umadda* and Rabbi Feinstein. Schneerson notably spent time at the University of Berlin, but felt that his experience ought not be universal. These views, however, dealt more with negative impact of secular culture in colleges and less of the wisdom itself.⁵⁵ For his *shluchim*, he also prohibited secular study, fearing a failure to fulfill one's mission, the negative message that it would send to congregants, and the negative impacts it would have on the *shaliach's* G-dly soul.⁵⁶

College notwithstanding, the Rebbe regarded secular knowledge highly and considered “secular studies” a misnomer. He believed that this sort of knowledge could

⁵⁰ (Even he- Ezer, 2:11) via Angel 1988, 42

⁵¹ Angel 1988, 43

⁵² Tendler 1996, 35-36; Interview with Rabbi Moshe Tendler (http://www.hods.org/halachic-issues/videos/video_rmshetendler/rabbimoshetendler_6/)

⁵³ See Tendler 1996, 126-133

⁵⁴ Tendler 1996, 126-128

⁵⁵ Miller 2014, 224

⁵⁶ http://www.sie.org/templates/sie/article_cdo/aid/2382284/jewish/Letter-No-755-Reasons-Not-to-Attend-College.htm

be used for a holy purpose. Mathematics, for example, could help one understand the laws of *eiruv* or Jewish dates.⁵⁷ And when used in this manner, the Rebbe regarded secular books as sacred texts:

“There are some,” the Rebbe once told a university professor, “who have two sets of bookshelves: one for *seforim*, sacred texts, and another for secular books. That is a wrong approach. If a person conceives of secular wisdom as being unrelated to the Torah, he does not understand the Torah. And neither does he truly understand the secular subject he is studying.”⁵⁸

Per the Rebbe’s philosophy, however, how one uses the text ultimately determined its status. The Alter Rebbe relates that secular wisdom makes one’s soul impure, unless used as a means of comprehending Torah.⁵⁹ The Rebbe reinforced this view and suggested that with science one has the capacity to do immeasurable good or bad.⁶⁰ Secular study was appropriate for one’s *parnassa* or supplementation of Torah study. Still, if one is to accept this verdict, he must still consider how intensely he will pursue secular studies.

CONCLUSION

Throughout history, secular wisdom has both intentionally and inadvertently influenced Jewish theology. Though contested, many of the *gedolim* have utilized secular sources in their work. As mastery of secular wisdom in the modern has required more devotion, many have *poskened* on permissibility of one’s attention to such pursuits. These various rulings generate real implications for both quotidian life and modern *halakhic* rulings. Perhaps, from these various perspectives an important lesson can be surmised.

It is indisputably the duty of a Jew to study Torah and sanctify the name of *HaShem*. While true, *b’nei yisrael* was never meant to be a nation comprised solely of rabbis. In this lies some common ground. When one makes his *parnassah*, he should do so in a way that sanctifies the name of *HaShem*. He should pursue those professions that can shed light on Torah and fulfill its commandments. Then he can create a symbiosis between the Torah and Secular and leverage secular pursuits to both sanctify and understand Torah.

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⁵⁷ http://www.sie.org/templates/sie/article_cdo/aid/2553827/jewish/13th-Day-of-Tammuz-5742-1982.htm

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