

"TORAH AND THE WAYS OF THE WORLD"

We read in Chapter III of the Ethics of the Fathers:

אם אין תורה אין דרך ארץ, ואם אין דרך ארץ אין תורה.

"Where there is no Torah, there is no Derekh Eretz, and where there is no Derekh Eretz there is no Torah." Elsewhere in Avot, we read a similar statement about the relation of these two items: אם אין תורה אין דרך ארץ, ואם אין דרך ארץ אין תורה, the combination of Torah and Derekh Eretz is beautiful.

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch gave a classical interpretation to this Mishnah when he said that for us, Derekh Eretz refers to secular learning, to the culture and science of the Western World. Both the sacred studies and the profane studies, the study of Torah and the study of Western culture, must be combined in the Jew, and when they are, that is beautiful.

Of course, that is not what the Tanna originally intended by the words Derekh Eretz. The term itself admits of a variety of interpretations, the most recent of which is manners or courtesy. But the original intention undoubtedly was: occupation, sustenance, earning a livelihood. Yet, Hirsch's interpretation does accord with the spirit of the Mishnah. It tells us that we must somehow combine sacredness and worldliness, our growth in the spiritual world of Judaism together with our engagement in the mundane -- whether financial and economic, or academic and intellectual.

It is, indeed, this ideal which characterizes all of us, and the community that is known as "Modern Orthodox." It is expressed in our communal educational institutions from Day Schools through Yeshiva high schools through Yeshiva University.

But the question we ought to ask is: is this merely an accommodation forced upon us by social and cultural and economic pressures, or is it something deeper than that? Is there an inherent ideal involved?

My response is that Torah and Derekh Eretz is a more fundamental value, and not one dictated solely by vocational interests. I would like to locate the conceptual rationale for this value in an insight of a great Hasidic teacher -- R. Zvi Elimelech Shapiro, the Rebbe of Dinov -- who, although he was unalterably opposed to secular learning and to philosophy in particular, has nevertheless offered us a most illuminating interpretation of the first verse in Kedoshim which constitutes

an appropriate philosophic backdrop and analogy for our own Weltanschauung.

The first verse reads: קדושים אתם כי קדוש יהוה אלהינו
"You shall be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy."
But how, asks the Rabbi, can one compare human holiness to divine holiness? It is difficult enough to understand God commanding us to be good, gracious, or compassionate because He possesses those qualities, summoning us in our stumbling, finite, and fallible ways to imitate His virtues which He possesses absolutely and in perfection. But when it comes to kedushah (sanctity), that is almost impossible, especially when you consider that kedushah represents His differentness, His otherness from us. How can we be like Him, in His differentness from us?

The Rabbi of Dinov answers that holiness is defined in Judaism as the state of being above, separate -- נבדל
יהוה נבדל, to be holy means to be separated. We are commanded to be beyond the physical world, to transcend our material existence.

But, he continues, it is patently impossible for us to live a purely spiritual existence without any involvement in the corporeal world. Had God wanted us to be capable of such complete independence from our material existence, He would have created us with the capacity to live purely spiritual lives. Obviously, God wanted us to engage in mundane activity -- in eating and drinking and reproducing and working -- and at the same time remain above it! When we consider how He created His world, and what He commanded with His words, we learn that He wishes us to engage in worldly acts and yet not be beholden to them, not be enslaved or trapped by them, but remain נבדל, separate and beyond. We must not neglect the worldly sphere, but we must retain the capacity to step back and be beyond, and when we do so, when we so step back, we then return to the world in order to sanctify it and raise it and elevate it!

So, our approach to the world must be characterized by profound ambivalence, by a two-handedness. We must live in a constant tension of being in the world, and yet out of it; related to it and above it; close to it and far away from it. We must be involved, and yet because we are also beyond and liberated from it, our purpose must be to elevate our worldly activities, to transform and dignify and ennoble and sanctify them.

Now, that is a most difficult task. Where and how can we learn the art of living in this ambivalence, in this creative tension, how to perform this sublime balancing act? The answer is: we learn from God! "You shall be holy because I the Lord your God am holy." Judaism teaches that God does not need the world, that in His essence He is infinitely beyond it, Ein-Sof, totally transcendent, and that from this point of view God after the creation is the same as God before the creation. And yet, despite His aloofness and distance, He loves the world, and therefore He has created it and continues to sustain it and be involved in it and express His concern for man. He relates to the world, and yet He is above it. The world is "full of His glory," and yet He is "holy, holy, holy."

So God too lives, as it were, in this tension. And His ambivalent relationship is also for the purpose of elevating and raising and refining and dignifying and sanctifying this world.

"You shall be holy because I the lord your God am holy." Even as I am "your God," involved with you and loving you, yet I remain "holy," so you too must be involved in the material world and yet stand beyond it, coming back to this world in order to transform it and dignify it with holiness.

That is the philosophical background of our Torah - and - Derekh Eretz approach. The Jew must engage in Derekh Eretz -- proficiently, wisely, expertly -- but never be exhausted by his academic discipline, never be enslaved to his business, never have his soul captured by over-involvement in his profession. I pity the man who is so overwhelmed by his work or his business, or the woman so enslaved by her regular household duties, and the both of them by their endless trivial social obligations, that they lose perspective on their lives and therefore forfeit the opportunity for great visions. Torah im Derekh Eretz demands of us that we perform our Derekh Eretz as well as anyone else, and yet recognize that our "home base," our true locus, our ultimate identity -- is that of Torah. We must be involved in Derekh Eretz, and yet retain the distance or "holiness" to recognize that Torah is our home and our essence and our being. We must stand apart from the world in the realm of Torah, which remains for us the highest value bar none. And then we must use Torah to transform the Derekh Eretz and elevate it.

It is a difficult task, this tension between Torah and Derekh Eretz, but it can be done -- even as the tension and ambivalence

toward all of this world can be achieved, as the Torah taught us in "you shall be holy."

The institution that most perfectly represents this philosophy is Yeshiva University. Its ideal of Torah im Derekh Eretz is a form of עבודת ה' בדרך הארץ. It is not merely an accommodation to social and cultural pressures, or a caving in to vocationalism. It is, in itself, a בסיס תאורטי, a Weltanschauung, a fundamental view of life. A young man or woman can begin in Yeshiva University in the ninth grade and go through his doctorate in disciplines as far apart as medicine and philosophy and science, develop expertise in a secular discipline, become wise and learned in Torah, and then learn how to bring the holiness of Torah to this discipline, to the world, to Derekh Eretz. He or she can learn how this combination of Torah and Derekh Eretz can add Jewish grace and morality and sanctity to one's environment, society, community.

Yeshiva University not only provides its students with the opportunity to learn how to do so in their individual lives -- it gives them the raw material, hoping that they will in their own ways learn how to achieve this remarkable synthesis -- but it does so as an institution as well.

Yeshiva University is the greatest Kiddush Hashem in American Jewry.

Wherever I go, I find the influence of Yeshiva University. This past year alone, I have seen how Yeshiva University graduates have exercised leadership -- or, by their very presence, constituted a model of what a young Jew can become -- in Melbourne and Sydney, on the faculty of Southern American universities, as Rabbis of cities in the deep South, as laymen in Los Angeles or synagogue leaders in New England. Yeshiva University is a sanctification of God's Name.

There is place in the Jewish community for all kinds of institutions. But no one so captures the essence and heart of our specific identity as Yeshiva University, which summons us to live a life of Torah together with a life of Derekh Eretz, to elevate ש"ס through the א"ת, to sanctify that which is represented by the "university" through that which is represented by the "yeshiva."

הש"ס והא"ת, Torah and Derekh Eretz are mutually interdependent. Most certainly, it is impossible to conceive of what our community would be like, whether indeed it could ever exist, without this historic combination which is represented in Yeshiva University.

And when it is achieved, and when we are partners to
this great attainment, when we respond to Yeshiva's appeal
for support, then *הנהיגה יפה*, then it
is beautiful.