

Secular Studies

By Rabbi Dovid Markel

The war of the Greeks against the Jewish People was primarily a spiritual battle of Hellenism vs. Judaism.

The Hellenist Jew of the time wished to partake in Greek culture, while remaining culturally Jewish and retaining the rational parts of Judaism. The Chashmonaim however, fought back, saying that the essence of Judaism is the super-rational connection to G-d.

The Talmud¹ explains that when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oil therein. The concept of purity and impurity is something that is illogical and was therefore something that the Greek mind could not accept.² This act of defilement was therefore expressive of their general attitude towards Torah.

Chassidic thought³ delves deeper and explains, that the Greeks wished to defile the intellect of the Jewish people, which is compared to oil.

Their war was not to destroy the Jewish people per-say. More so, they did not mind that the Jewish people studied Torah as a source of wisdom. What they wished was, as we say in the *Al HaNissim* prayer, "the wicked Greek kingdom rose up against Your people Israel, to make them forget *Your* Torah and compel them to stray from the laws of *Your* will." Their primary objection was that the Torah is from G-d and in its laws that cannot be understood rationally.

It was this secular Greek intellectualism, which was so dangerous to the Jewish spirit that caused the Jews to revolt.

Tanya⁴ explains, that the sciences of the nations defiles an individual to a greater degree than other things:

The uncleanness of the science of the nations is greater than that of profane speech, for the latter informs and defiles only the *middot* which emanate from the element of the holy *ruach* within his divine soul with the contamination of the *kelipat nogah* that is contained in profane speech which is derived from the element of the evil *ruach* of this *kelipah* in his animal soul, as mentioned above; yet he does not defile the [intellectual] faculties of ChaBaD in his soul, for they are but words of foolishness and ignorance, since even fools and ignoramuses can speak that way. Not so in the case of the nations' science whereby he clothes and defiles the intellectual faculties of ChaBaD in his divine soul with the contamination of the *kelipat nogah* contained in those sciences, whither they have fallen through the "shattering of the vessels" out of the so-called

¹ Shabbos 21b.

² Reshimos 125, Mai Chanuka 5701, Mitzvas Ner Chanukah 5747.

³ Torah Ohr, Miketz 41a.

⁴ Ch. 8.

"hinder part" of *Chochmah of Kedushah*, as is known to those familiar with the Esoteric Wisdom.

When a person learns secular studies and secular philosophies, it has a profound effect on the individual, as the person's paradigm with which he views the world is transformed into a secular prism.

This was the miracle of the oil. Although the Jewish people were impure and defiled by Greek Hellenism, they found the essence of G-dliness within themselves which could be defiled, and with it illuminated the rest of their identity.⁵

Notwithstanding the negative effects of secular sciences, Tanya⁶ explains that there are situations in which the study of secular philosophies are laudable:

Unless he employs [these sciences] as a useful instrument, viz., as a means of a more affluent livelihood to be able to serve G-d, or knows how to apply them in the service of G-d and His Torah. This is the reason why Maimonides and Nachmanides, of blessed memory, and their adherents, engaged in them.

While Tanya mentions two instances when it would be permitted to study secular thought, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, in a letter explaining this chapter, enumerates six instances when one is permitted to study secular studies:⁷

- 1) When one's understanding of the world comes directly from the Torah, it is then permissible to deal with worldly thoughts. The Torah is referred to as the blueprint of creation.⁸ Through understanding the blueprint, one can understand the building. This is similar to the way the sage, R. Yehoshua, comprehended the gestation period of a snake from a Biblical verse.⁹
- 2) In a case where one is learning subjects that are directly linked to a specific commandment. An example of such would be the exception granted to the family of Rabbi Gamliel to study Greek studies, due to their dealings with the government.¹⁰ A further example of this would be the study of astronomy when one needs to calculate the Jewish calendar.¹¹ In these situations, it is considered a *mitzvah* to study secular studies.
- 3) If a person is thinking about secular studies in a situation when it is prohibited to study Torah; for example, when one is in the privy.¹² In such a scenario, the thinking of secular studies is a *mitzvah* to a certain degree.

⁵ Reshimos, *ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Likutei Sichos, Vol. 12, Pg. 197-199.

⁸ Breishis Rabba 1:1.

⁹ Talmud, Bechoros 8a.

¹⁰ Talmud, Sota 49b. See Menachos 64b.

¹¹ Rambam, Kiddush HaChodesh 1:7.

¹² Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 85 and commentaries there.

- 4) When studying a secular topic so that one can have the necessary knowledge for a *mitzvah*. E.g. Rav¹³ spent 18 months with a shepherd in order to understand the various types of blemishes to understand the laws of sacrifices.¹⁴
- 5) When studying the necessary knowledge for a livelihood, or using the knowledge itself as a form of livelihood.¹⁵
- 6) In a circumstance where one is studying secular philosophy even when there is nothing lacking per say in his understanding of Torah, since they know that they will use these ideas for Torah or the service of G-d at some later date.¹⁶

It was specifically the sixth reasoning that fueled Rambam's study of medicine and the like, as he knew how to use all that he studied in his service of G-d. Instead of Rambam being negatively affected by his secular studies, on the contrary, the more he studied, the humbler he became:¹⁷

This is as well the difference between the philosophical pursuits of Rambam and Aristotle... [Concerning] Rambam, the more he understood the truth of G-d, became more fearful of Him and smaller in his own eyes. Aristotle, though, the more he studied, the haughtier he became, saying, "Look how great I am that I understood the existence of G-d and his unity with my own mind."

While the study of the secular seems to be precarious from a Judaic perspective, there is a focal difference between the manner in which Rambam studied and the way in which other philosophers did so. Not only was his intention different, but Rambam's studies were based on an axiom of faith. Other non-Jewish philosophers did not come to the truth, as they did not have this prerequisite. This focal difference is aptly explained by the 5th Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom DovBer:¹⁸

The difference between Rambam and Aristotle, was that Rambam placed the point in the middle first and then drew the circle. Aristotle, however, drew the circle and then searched for the point. Therefore, with Rambam, who placed the point first, the circle came out perfectly, as it surrounded the point. Meaning to say, that Rambam first began with the axiom of faith and then made the circle intellectualism. Hence, the circle came out properly—that his intellect was concurrent with the point. However, without the point first, the circle will not come out correctly and for sure the intellect will be corrupt, as there is no point of reference. If a person has the true point, it does not let him stray from the true path and his mind comes to the correct conclusions. Without the point though, his mind can lead him anywhere.

¹³ An Talmudic Amarah.

¹⁴ Talmud, Sanhedrin 5b.

¹⁵ Derech Mitzvosecha 104b.

¹⁶ The Rebbe explains that it is the last reason specifically that explains the reason that Rambam or Ramban studied secular studies.

¹⁷ Derech Mitzvosecha 8b.

¹⁸ Torah's Shalom, Pg. 244.

Just as the only way to make a perfect circle is with a compass which keeps one in line with the point in the middle, the only way to come to true intellect is with faith. A basic prerequisite to the study of Greek philosophy is the faith in the truth of the Torah. Without it, one is bound to stray.

May we indeed be illuminated with the candle of faith, so that it may permeate our entire thought process. With this, like Rambam, instead of being negatively affected by the world around us, we will use it as a catalyst for spiritual growth.