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Letter to a Friend

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of the State of Israel (*hakamat Medinat Yisrael*) is of profound religious significance to Jews, and that the State of Israel is different in type and magnitude from other nation-states in the Almighty's eyes – even ones, like the United States, which show Jews unparalleled kindness.

I accept that the establishment of the State of Israel – imperfect as it is – could be the beginning of our redemption, and is an event filled with religious significance that should be noted accordingly. I think that Jews in Israel and in America – particularly religious Jews – should involve themselves in activities of the State of Israel, as the Divine favors Jews being involved in Israel.

(Furthermore, many religious Zionists maintain that there is a religious imperative to fight for the State of Israel in its army, and that it is improper for large numbers of individuals to avoid service to one's country, particularly through the use of exemptions to those who are in yeshiva solely to avoid military service.)

This approach is exemplified in the writings of Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Herzog, the chief rabbi of Israel at the time of its independence in 5708/1948, who states:

"As an introduction, at the minimum we must thank the Creator of the world and His direction over the Jewish people for the prophetic return of Jews to Israel. This matter should not appear insignificant in your eyes when the Divine Providence is visible to us in these miraculous and historical days that we are part of."

(The above quote is from a letter written by Rabbi Herzog, dated 19 Av 5708, and printed in his work *Techuka Leyisrael Al-pe Torah* 3:3. This approach to the State of Israel can be found in the words of many rabbinic scholars of the previous generations besides Rabbi Herzog, including both Rabbis Kook; Rabbi Ben Zion Uziel; Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg; Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik; Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef; Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli and many others.)

The second issue is the relationship between the secular world and Torah, which has two distinct components; one is theoretical and the other is practical. First, I adhere to a philosophy which maintains that there is much of value in the secular world and that it is proper for one to seek out those intellectual pursuits in the secular world that are of worth and to incorporate those consistent with Torah into one's life.

From the profound scientific contributions of Einstein to the musical compositions of Mozart and the literary accomplishments of Shakespeare, *halacha* and *hashkafa* allows – and in my opinion encourages – one to examine the advances of society to determine if they are compatible with Torah; those that are accordant and also worthwhile should be incorporated into the Torah community. This can be found in the Talmudic maxim (Megillah 9b) that "The best of the house of Yefet [secular culture] should reside in the house of Shem [Judaism]."

There is only one truth in the world, and its source is the Almighty. The Torah scholar, the physicist, the musician, and the writer should all be seeking the same truth, and Jews should examine all serious secular scholarship to determine whether truth has been found. Rambam, in the introduction to *Avot* in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, states this simply: "Accept truth from whomever says it." The additional words "even from the least significant of people" is found in the version quoted in Rabbi Jacob Emden, *She'elot Ya'avetz* 1:5.

In Rambam's *Moreh Nevuchim* one can find numerous examples of secular ideas incorporated into Torah, which the Rambam felt were true, and thus are part of Torah. Such an approach can be found in the writings of rabbinic giants of our generation including Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer, Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman, Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik and others.

More practically, I believe that a Torah-based society is incomplete if it is not predicated on the necessity of productive and economically rewarding work by nearly all of its members. It is a manifestation of the ideal for Orthodox Jews to work for a living, and to regularly learn Torah on a part-time basis in a manner consistent with earning a living.

While this should seem almost obvious, we live in a time in which many perceive the ideal to be Orthodox Jews learning Torah in a cloistered yeshiva supported by others. I disagree with this insular approach; while there is a place in our Orthodox society for a small number of gifted married adults who learn Torah full-time while others work for a living

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to support these scholars, the overwhelmingly large percentage of adult, observant Jews should work for a living in a profession or trade.

A college or graduate education is typically a *sinequa-non* for earning a successful livelihood in this country. Thus, I believe that receiving an advanced secular education and involving oneself in the secular community to earn a living – in companionship with ongoing significant Torah study – are both vitally important so as to produce a full, complete and self-supporting Torah community, and a necessary means for allowing the Lord to be fully part of our lives. (See the Talmudic incident recounted in *Berachot* 35b.)

Full-time study of Torah by mature scholars who are supporting themselves through charity should be a rarity, and in cases where individuals seek such alms to support their own Torah study, these scholars should return the community's largess through teaching adults or children or by other forms of communal service.

Indeed, being paid to teach is as dignified a livelihood as a scholar could imagine and it allows one to fulfill one's own financial obligations to the communal organizations that serve such persons or their families. While it is true that other Jewish law scholars do not so harshly condemn those who learn Torah and support themselves through charity as the Rambam does – indeed, some do not condemn it at all – the words of the Rambam are worthy of understanding. Rambam writes (*Talmud Torah* 3:10):

"Anyone who contemplates that maybe he should study Torah [as a lifetime profession] and not work, but rather be supported by charity, has desecrated the name of the Lord, embarrassed Torah, extinguished the light of religion, caused evil to himself, and excluded himself from the world to come."

The importance of a secular education and work is expressed, albeit with different nuances and emphasis, in Israel through the slogan "Torah and work" (*torah ve'avodah*), at Yeshiva University as "Torah and secular studies" (*torah u'maddah*), by the German Jewish community as "Torah with human dignity" (*torah em derech erez*) and by others as "Torah

and wisdom" (*torah u'chachma*).

(See also Rama, *Yoreh Deah* 246:21 and commentaries *ad locum* which note that because of the dire exigencies of the times, some are permitted to support themselves exclusively through Torah, although it is not the ideal. Such an approach is accepted as normative by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein in *Iggrot Moshe*, in many different *teshuvot*.)

The final issue concerns the proper place for, and the power of, rabbinic authority. In my opinion, Torah scholars derive their authority from their knowledge of *halacha* and *hashkafa*, their respect for and from others (*derech erez*), and their ability to grasp the problems that they seek to answer.

The gap between the authority of the rabbi and the lay person is a function of the knowledge and ability of the two, and not the mere fact that one is a rabbi and the other is not. I believe that a rabbi or *posek* earns respect and deference to his authority by demonstrating a comprehension of Torah, its values, and the reality of the world to which Torah is to be applied. These skills allow one (rabbi or lay) to insightfully navigate the complex world we inhabit in a way that our Creator favors; those without these navigational skills should seek the association of one who has them.

However, the Latin maxim *quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus* (literally "sometimes even Homer nods," meaning that even brilliant people sometimes err – and yet remain extraordinary individuals worthy of praise) remains true and even the best of Torah scholars or rabbis can make mistakes; there is no obligation to follow their rulings when they are in error. Indeed, it is prohibited to do so – although one must always be meticulously polite when one indicates disagreement with a scholar. This is precisely what the Jerusalem Talmud means when it states:

"Is it possible that if the Sages tell you about right that it is left or about left that it is right that you should listen to them? Torah says 'to the right or to the left,' meaning that one should follow the Sages' instruction only if they tell you about right that it is right and about left that it is left." – *Yerushalmi Horiyot* 1:1; see also Shach, *Yoreh Deah* 242:31; Ran

commenting on *Avodah Zarah* 7a s.v. *hanishal lachacham*; Hagaot Maymoniut, *Talmud Torah* 5:1-2; and Rosh Meluneil, *Hilchot Talmud Torah* 28.

(This approach is a rejection of some rabbis' conception of *da'as Torah*, which assigns to rabbis a sense of rabbinic infallibility that creates an appearance that rabbinic pronouncements are nearly a manifestation of the Divine. This approach can be found in Sifri, *Mishpatim* 154 which states: "To the right or to the left: even if the Sages tell you that the right hand is the left and the left hand is the right, obey them," which is quoted by Rashi on Deuteronomy 17:11, Ramban in the introduction to his *Hasagot Lesefer Hamitzvot* and in his commentary on Deuteronomy 17:11 and Chinuch, *Mitzvah* 492.

As with all disputes for the sake of Torah, one must realize that *eilu ve'eilu divrei Elokim chaim* – many are the ways of Torah, and truth comes in many forms, all of which are manifestations of the Divine.

I make no claim that these three approaches I have outlined are beyond dispute. Indeed, one can find eminent rabbis – far more learned than I – who disagree with all three approaches. Even within the Orthodox community from which I originate, one will find some who disagree with the details of my explanation, or perhaps even with one of the categories themselves.

Nonetheless, these are the three significant issues concerning which I have noticed that the traditions I inherited from my *rebbeim*, teachers and family – the Torah community which nourished me – differ from the traditions of some others.

In these troubled times in Israel and here, I can only end this letter with a universal Jewish prayer: May we merit a speedy and full salvation by the One Who saves His people.

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