

Relevance of the Torah im Derech Eretz Ideal¹

I.

God's Torah obligates us to the never-ending, unadulterated fulfillment of its precepts (*Devarim* 4:2). It makes allowance for the temporary neutralization of a law (*Yevamos* 90b) if such action helps to secure the strengthening, salvation and survival of God's Torah (such as Eliyahu's sacrifices on Mount Carmel at a time when sacrifices were prohibited outside of the Sanctuary). Cases of this nature are mentioned in the Talmud (*Berachos* 54a, *Yoma* 69a, et al.) under the title of הוראת שעה, referring to measures taken in certain circumstances to strengthen the Law of Torah.

Rav Hirsch's concept of Torah im Derech Eretz — shared by his rabbinical contemporaries and disciples — is too well known to warrant renewed discussion in these pages. He viewed it as the only possible way in which the sons and daughters of our people were to prove and maintain themselves as proud members of the Nation of God, in ideology as well as action, in the midst of a cultural surrounding of an entirely different orientation. The life of the Yehudi in the business world, equipped with all available skills, as well as the life of the academician (as teacher, physician, lawyer, engineer, et al.) were to be elevated to a true Kiddush Hashem. Or should these professions be left to those who are estranged from Torah Judaism?

Rav Hirsch and the proponents of his ideology were fully aware that their approach to Jewish education and professional training would also claim victims. They regretted this deeply, but they saw no other way. They were equally cognizant of the disapproval of their course by rabbinical leaders in other countries. The following is characteristic of Rav Hirsch's thinking: To an inquiry that reached him from one of the countries of Eastern Europe, regarding the nature and acceptability of the Torah im Derech Eretz precept, he replied that the question would have to be decided by the local rabbinical authorities [in the East].

A point to ponder: How many victims may have been claimed by the rejection of the Torah im Derech Eretz ideology?

II.

Certain circles that found it difficult to remain unaware of the greatness of Rav Hirsch maintain that his demand of Torah im Derech Eretz was but a הוראת שעה, essentially prohibited for the Torah-true Jew and only found necessary for the salvation and strengthening of Torah. It is claimed that its validity, as that of every הוראת שעה, is limited to the conditions of life prevailing in the time of Rav Hirsch.

¹ *Mitteilungen*, Vol. 26, August/September 1965

Anyone who has but a fleeting insight into the life and work of Rav Hirsch will realize that his Torah im Derech Eretz formula was never intended by him as a הוראת שעה. He states firmly in a draft of by-laws for his Kehilla: "Our school must be governed by the spirit of Torah im Derech Eretz; *at no time and under no circumstances* may it give up these principles [of Torah im Derech Eretz education]." Or shall we listen to Rav Hirsch in his famed polemical essay against the Breslau Seminary (*Collected Writings*, Vol. V, pp. 287-288): "Ever since we have attempted to make some small contribution with voice and deed and pen within the Jewish community and for the cause of Judaism, it has been our endeavor to demonstrate precisely how intimately Judaism — we mean Judaism in its unabridged totality — is wedded with the spirit of all true science and knowledge. It has been our aim to show that this Judaism, this complete Judaism, תורת ה' תמימה, does not belong to an antiquated past but to the vigorous, pulsating life of the present. In fact, all the future, with the answers that men expect from it to all their social and spiritual problems, belongs to that very Judaism, that whole, complete Judaism . . . And precisely because this is our objective, precisely because we want to see Jewish life and Jewish scholarship understood in the light of true science and knowledge, because . . . we can see the survival and future flowering of Judaism only in terms of an intimate union with the spirit of true science and knowledge in every age, we are the most avowed foes of all spurious science and knowledge and of any attempt, under the misappropriated mask of scientific research, to lay the ax to the very roots of our sacred Jewish heritage . . . For if it were indeed true that there was no alternative, if any attempt at scholarly research *per se* were indeed capable of shaking the very foundations of Judaism as it was given to the House of Israel for its eternal mission, never to be abridged, if we had only a choice between Judaism and science, then we would simply have no other alternative . . . Better a Jew without science than a science without Judaism. *But, thank God, it is not necessary for us to make such a choice . . .*"

Does this Hirschian demand for Torah im Derech Eretz bear the slightest resemblance to a הוראת שעה?

III.

Let us assume for a moment that the Torah im Derech Eretz precept was indeed a הוראת שעה (which it decidedly was not). There is a type of הוראת שעה that remains valid for an indefinite period of time, i.e., if the conditions that brought it about last for many centuries. This is borne out by the following: It is common knowledge that the Torah prohibited the written documentation of the תורה שבעל פה (*Shemos 34:27; Gittin 60b*). Pressing circumstances and the increasing dispersion of our people, which posed a severe threat to the survival of the "Oral Teaching," led to the writing of the Mishna and Talmud, a הוראת שעה. As the conditions that resulted in this emergency measure

continued to prevail throughout the ensuing centuries until our own time, this הוראת שעה became a permanent institution — and thus was born our immense Torah literature.

We ask: Are the conditions that led Rav Hirsch and the rabbinical leaders to the supposed הוראת שעה of Torah im Derech Eretz any less valid in our own time? Are they not rather more acute and far more pressing? Is it any less vital for our contemporary youth to comprehend “Judaism from within,” to imbue themselves with the consciousness of the true meaning of being a Jew and of the lofty nature of their people's God-willed convocation, to which they are to dedicate their lives in loyal devotion? Is it any less important in our time that our youth, *equipped with thorough Torah knowledge*, strengthens its unshakeable determination to have the Divine Will rule over their lives in surroundings poisoned by atheistic and materialistic slogans? To absorb of cultural values only that which is worthwhile and noble and to accept only those scientific theories that fit in the framework of the Divine Science — such Torah im Derech Eretz should be any less needed in our time?

We would have every reason to be grateful to Divine Providence if it were to send us a Rav Hirsch in our confused age in order to guide our sons and daughters with his Torah im Derech Eretz ideology on the only possible road of survival; in order to strengthen them in their fight against the dangers that lurk in the world that surrounds them; in order to demonstrate that, before the Torah im Derech Eretz precept which proclaims the rulership of God's Torah in the life of the Yehudi, all phantom Judaism, masquerading as so-called reform and conservative Judaism, are revealed in their miserable meaninglessness. (This will finally cause Torah-true rabbis and organizations to abstain from their treasonous course of recognizing the types of so-called Judaism as acceptable “movements” within Jewry.) Would that we had a Rav Hirsch and the Torah im Derech Eretz formula to help the *Jewish State* rising on holy soil in our time to achieve *its only possible permanence as a Torah State!* Is it conceivable, against this background, to consider the Torah im Derech Eretz precept a הוראת שעה, designed to satisfy the need of an era *long past*?

IV.

Times may have changed. But the problems have remained essentially the same. We must solve them along the course as it has been charted for us. Are we really certain that our children will remain true to their calling if we create for them an artificial ghetto?

Half-heartedness and compromise are never acceptable, but they are virtually fatal in the area of education. Only an *unwavering, straightforward* course will lead to success. We neither look for nor require the agreement or approval of those who prefer a different course. Their criticism does not touch us. We certainly respect the ideology of other circles, provided their course is also an unmistakably consistent one.

As for us, let us do our best to promote and fulfill the Torah im Derech Eretz ideal in its true spirit, and let us protect it from regrettable misuse and misinterpretation.

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A personal footnote: On the day before he passed away, my father זצ"ל told me, "I am firmly convinced that the way shown by Rav Hirsch זצ"ל will be מקרב הגאולה." A sacred testament.