

*Note: The translation that follows was prepared by Shaul Seidler-Feller based on the recording of Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein's (1933-2015) remarks made available through YIVO (correcting for moments toward the end of the tape when the audio cuts out of order). Transcriptions of Hebrew/Yiddish terms follow the standards adopted by YIVO, and all bracketed material was added by the translator.*

Earlier, I spoke of the difference between *yeshives* [Talmudic seminaries], on the one hand, and so-called *Wissenschaft des Judentums* [academic Jewish studies], on the other. I wish now, very briefly, to treat the distinctions that exist within the *yeshive* world itself.

To a certain degree, these differences are methodological, concerning, simply, the approach to learning adopted. You know that the Hungarian style – not my style, but the Hungarian style – is to study a great deal of material, although, from a Lithuanian perspective, superficially. If you meet a Hungarian, you will find that he learns one hundred folios of Talmud a year and might already know all of Maimonides [his magnum opus, *Mishne toyre*] by heart. He places much emphasis on *bekies* [breadth], *hoyroe* and *psak* [halakhic decision making], and studying *akhroynim* [post-medieval authorities]. He is one who knows a prodigious amount – a *Sinai*.

Of course, the Lithuanian approach, especially that propounded by the school of Rabbi Chaim Brisker [Soloveitchik; 1853-1918], was different. The emphasis there was on being an *oyker horim* [analytic thinker] – on *svore* [logical reasoning], sharpness, depth. And that difference, naturally, was transposed to America as well. In larger *yeshives* still under the influence of the Lithuanian, and especially the Brisker, tradition, the focus is on learning less material, but with sharpness, *svore*, and precision. Rav Chaim once applied to the Rogatshover [Rabbi Yosef Rosen; 1858-1936], who was an unusually genius-like *boki*, the following verse: “God understands the way to it; He knows its source” [Job 28:23], explaining that the Master of the Universe knows the path to comprehending a topic, while he – meaning, the Rogatshover – knows the topic’s source, where it says so.

The same split was transferred to America, too: Hungarian *yeshives* have their own methodology, while the larger Lithuanian *yeshives*, especially those that serve students who are familiar with, and oriented toward, other disciplines – disciplines that require, to a certain extent, a more critical approach – emphasize *svore* more.

But the distinctions between various *yeshives* are not limited to methodology of study or how one ought to approach a folio of Talmud from a strictly technical-intellectual vantage point. The differences concern, perhaps in the main, their relationship to matters of *makhshove* [Jewish thought] and *hashkofe* [philosophical outlook].

In Europe, there was also a kind of split between different Torah institutions – even within the Lithuanian world. And the same disagreement exists here in America as well, although maybe with one difference: to transfer the same approach to *muser* [Jewish ethics] that they had in Europe to another terra, America, is a difficult task. America is, after all, a different world, and the various techniques that were, perhaps, highly effective in the old country cannot work here in most cases.

So, what do you do? Two distinct approaches were taken. Some held that, nevertheless, we have to see to it that *muser* be implanted here, in the same manner that it was taught back in the old country; these people tried doing so, and it may be that with certain individuals they were successful. I myself am very skeptical that the same form of *muser* that could be effective in Navaredok [one of the prewar centers of *muser* study] can work here. But some continue to try.

However, I believe that the greatest success in transferring to America the principles of the *muser* tradition was achieved by a particular *rosheshive* [dean of a seminary] – actually, he was both a *rosheshive* and a *mashgiekh rukhni* [spiritual advisor] – who understood the modern student, realized that what was effective there cannot work here, and adopted the fundamental categories of *muser* but translated them into a different vocabulary and presented them in the form of *shiurim* [Talmud lectures], not *shmuesn* [informal discourses on *muser*], which had, by a certain measure, a great deal of influence on the students of his *yeshive*, and even on those of other *yeshives* as well. I refer to my own former *rebe* [teacher] and the *rosheshive* of Mesivta Rabbi Chaim Berlin, Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner [1906-1980], who was a great innovator, in this sense, in the fields of *makhshove* and *muser*. His thought is, perhaps, from a certain perspective, the same as that of Rabbi Yisroel Salanter [considered the spiritual father of the *muser* movement; 1810-1883], although expressed in different language.

Thus, these *yeshives* are at variance in their *hashkofe* and approach to the *muser* movement; but the greatest distinction between them is of an entirely different sort: the question of the relationship of the *ben toyre* and *ben yeshive* [devout, devoted Torah student], and of the *yeshive* itself, to modern culture, and especially to American culture. Of course, it is self-understood that, between many facets of the American public square and the *yeshive* world, there gape not just one but many chasms. Still, the issue remains: we nevertheless find ourselves in America, and to go around preaching piously, saying that everything is *treyf* [sinful] and that the *tume* [spiritual pollution] seeps through the walls, is ineffective; one does not extricate oneself thereby. The question, then, is how to relate to the modern, American world.

Some hold that, to a large extent, at the very least as long as one is in *yeshive*, one must isolate, cloister, and sequester himself as much as possible from American *havay* [nonsense], from American culture, and form an independent society, no matter how small – so long as it remains a pure, Torah society. That is the idea behind the Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, and it is for this reason that Rabbi Aharon Kotler [1891-1962] specifically sought to found the Beth Medrash Govoha not in New York or some other metropolis, but rather in a more secluded location. The move of the Beth Medrash Elyon of Mesivta Torah Vodaath from New York to Spring Valley was motivated by the same concerns.

And this approach is manifest in many, many ways. I know I am speaking at YIVO, but I hope you will forgive me when I say that one of the ways in which it is reflected is that in these types of *yeshives*, they are extremely particular about ensuring that *shiurim*, for example, are delivered specifically in Yiddish. Whether or not the students understand the language to begin with, these *yeshives* feel it is better that the students should adapt to the *yeshive* than that the *yeshive* should adapt to the students and the environment – as *treyf* as it is, from this perspective – from which they come.

On the other hand, there is another approach which holds the opposite: one cannot entirely isolate oneself. Rather, one must see to it – *in America, in the middle of the so-called tume* – that Torah be firmly implanted and disseminated. The problem is of a dual nature:

First, how does one most effectively train the *ben toyre* himself? Where can he grow more, not only as a scholar but also as a religious personality? How can one best develop his spiritual strengths so that he becomes a thinker, a person of influence, or simply someone who comprehends spiritual matters on his own? Some believe that when one finds oneself in the midst of a world of *tume*, one must sequester oneself, erecting walls and protective screens on all sides to serve as a barrier. But there are those who feel differently: sometimes, precisely through contact with the *sitre-akhre*, the [demonic] Other Side, can one learn what it looks like and then distance oneself from it. Moreover, precisely by meeting it head-on does one become spiritually emboldened. Otherwise, one remains vulnerable, like a flower in a small corner that has never been tossed by the wind and which knows not how to react – one is overwhelmed.

I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister'd vertue, unexercis'd & unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortall garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary. That vertue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evill, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank vertue, not a pure; her whitenesse is but an excrementall whitenesse. [[Areopagitica](#) (1644), pp. 12-13]

So wrote the English poet John Milton three hundred years ago, and some hold this to be true.

That is one question: how to best train the *ben yeshive* himself.

Second, how can one best prepare him, after he has, so to speak, already been molded, to influence the broader world, which is, to use a turn of phrase, “beyond the river” [I Kings 14:15], on the other side of the study hall walls? To what extent does a *ben toyre* or a Torah institution feel a responsibility to accomplish this task? And how can the *yeshive* most effectively train its students to do so? Here, too, there is something of a disagreement. Some believe that one need not do so, that it is actually wasted effort. Others feel that one should, but what can you do – there is no common language between the Torah and secular worlds, so any attempt to bridge them is doomed. And still others – in particular, this is the emphasis of our *yeshive* [Yeshiva University] and of the *yeshive* in Chicago [Hebrew Theological College] – hold the opposite: that the responsibility is great, and that in order to fulfill this responsibility, one must be careful to see to it that a student well understands the modern, secular world. Certainly, one need not plunge and delve deeply into that world, as today’s Protestants and Catholics maintain – you are familiar with the whole debate surrounding [Harvey Cox’s] *The Secular City* – but one must have some handle on the secular world in order to begin to understand it. This is, perhaps, the main division that exists today within the *yeshive* world.

There is much, I believe, that we can learn from the scholarly world without abandoning our focus. I hope there is also much that the scholarly world can learn from us.