

A Tool for Effective Communication

Q We live in a town that offers a choice of schools for my children, and the issue of *limudei chol* has arisen more than once, making me wonder what role secular studies should play in the chinuch of our children. What is the Torah viewpoint?

Needless to say, all Torah viewpoints are exclusively those pronounced by *Gedolei Torah*. I can do no more than perhaps shed a bit of light on the matter ... and add the *tefillah* that what I suggest will coincide with the correct Torah viewpoint.

An encounter once took place between the Chiddushei HaRim, *zy"a*, and Sir Moses Montefiore, *z"l*. It occurred at a time when the Chiddushei HaRim was fighting against the Russian government's move to force Polish Jewish youth to study languages, sciences and humanities. (Congress Poland was then under Russian rule.)

In the midst of the controversy, Sir Moses stated that one can derive the importance of having a well-rounded education from the story of Bigsan and

Seresh, as well as from the historical fact that the Jews of long ago must have undertaken so-called "external" studies. Without these, Mordechai could not have spoken Tursis and would not have understood the discourse between Bigsan and Seresh and their conspiracy against Achashverosh.

The Chiddushei HaRim countered that on the contrary, if it had indeed been the norm for Jews to engage in general studies, their linguistic fluency would probably have been widely known and Bigsan and Seresh would almost certainly have been careful not to speak in Mordechai's presence.

Notwithstanding the masterful response of the Chiddushei HaRim, we must contend with the fact that Mordechai did indeed know foreign languages. As a member of the *Sanhedrin*, Mordechai was obligated to become proficient in languages in order to hear testimony directly from witnesses.

A possible interim conclusion for us? If and when there is a decisive need for specific knowledge, then even something that is not ideal may be

studied ... and possibly *must* be studied. There may therefore be situations in which the study of language is obligatory.

Of course, the crux of the matter lies in establishing if that need exists.

Consider, then, that *Klal Yisrael* appears to have arrived at an unsettling crossroads. Never in our history has so much monumental change and volatility been concentrated into such a brief time frame. Masses of our brethren are alienated from Torah, while at the same time the *baal teshuvah* movement continues to transform thousands of Jewish lives by filling them with spiritual content.

Jews in exile become increasingly entrenched in their comfortable Diaspora existence, complete with its warm embrace of many non-Jewish standards and values, despite the sharp rise in anti-Semitism everywhere. (The pathetic irony of unrequited Jewish love directed at the world is lost on the majority of our people.) The enrollment in our yeshivos and Bais Yaakovs

continually rises and the level of learning is steadily elevated, yet at the same time our pursuit of materialism and luxury threatens to engulf us in the all-consuming atmosphere of *olam hazeh*.

A disturbing flux is apparent in the geopolitical arena as well. While the entire Western world is transfixed by the threats of such figures as Ahmadinejad, the comparatively microscopic *chareidi* world is transfixed — and frightened — by the travesties of justice taking place in the United States and the simultaneous threat to Torah life in Eretz Yisrael, also at the hands of its judiciary.

The paradoxes and instability of contemporary Jewish life cannot be ignored.

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Consider too the diversity within the Jewish community, even among the observant. Some have the privilege (unchallenging though it may be at times) of living in an insular environment, wherein it may be possible to avoid meaningful and constant contact with an “alien” world in which Torah is not the exclusive way of life. For those who spend their lives in Bnei Brak, Geulah, Monroe or New Square, an atmosphere of sanctity exists that might preclude pursuit of anything but Torah study.

However, for the majority of our people who contend with a pluralistic and often spiritually hostile world, we cannot pretend that we exist in a protective cocoon. A tempest of cultural intimidation rages all around our beleaguered *machaneh*, and we dare not ignore it.

Nor dare we fail to contend with it — intelligently.

Therefore, one of the most crucial components in the bid to safeguard the religious health of great segments of *Klal Yisrael* is our ability to present Torah ideas cogently to others ... as well as our ability to present honorably before the non-Jews with whom we come in contact.

Consider the dynamic impact of those individuals in the realm of *kiruv rechokim* who turn the minds and hearts of countless Jews back to their heritage. What is the key

to their success (apart from the necessary element of *siyatta diShmaya*)? Their most powerful tool is their power of speech, their striking ability to *communicate*.

Indeed, one of the first things that

A crucial component in our bid to safeguard the religious health of Klal Yisrael is our ability to present Torah ideas cogently to others.

Moshe Rabbeinu did when he began teaching Torah to *Klal Yisroel* was to translate the text into Aramaic, because that was the spoken tongue of the people (see Maharsha, *Megillah* 3a). They could not internalize the Torah unless it was properly communicated, reasoned Moshe. And the vehicle of communication must match the audience if communication is to occur.

We must also remember that our youth are exposed involuntarily to a multifaceted literacy that can entice them intellectually. The press, the media, classical and modern literature — these are but some of the dangers that will challenge the religious integrity of so many of our children. Perhaps if the *olam haTorah* cultivates an atmosphere in which advanced literacy is respected, it will continue to maintain a healthy pull on our children’s heartstrings.

I am unable to suggest that this position legitimizes the pursuit of *limudei chol* in our yeshivos and *chadarim*, but I would say that it does make one irrefutable point — there is value in imparting literary and verbal skills to our children in the language of the land. It does not seem desirable, for instance, that a Jew wearing Chassidic garb should sound like a recent immigrant (unless he is). Neither is it desirable that a young man who spends his days in *kollel* should be incapable of forming a complete sentence in the language of the land. In my estimation, it is wrong that when an articulate *frum* Jew does speak and write properly, he is immediately viewed as being either a *baal teshuvah* or one who has

strayed. And it is inappropriate — not to mention irresponsible — that if and when a young man chooses to enter the more conventional work force and earn *parnassah*, he would lack the basic skills

with which to do so

It is certainly desirable that Torah Jewry maintain a comprehensive press of the highest caliber, and it seems most desirable that our system of *chinuch* be capable of providing the personnel to write for it.

It is not acceptable that our own *talmidim* and *avreichim* lack the linguistic skill to portray the teachings of Torah to their uninitiated brothers and sisters in a convincing and appealing manner. This is perhaps the greatest calling of our age. The *Navi* Amos (8:11) prophesied that there would come a day when people will hunger and thirst — not for food and drink, but for the words of Hashem. Who but ourselves — the *chareidim lidvar Hashem* — are in the right position to satisfy that hunger and to quench that thirst?

Sir Moses Montefiore ostensibly spoke Yiddish, as did even the *maskilim* of a bygone era. Today’s “*maskilim*” — the assimilated Jews around us ... and even perhaps the tiny *maskilim* who might lurk within us — the Torah Jews who subscribe somewhat to the host cultures around us — do not speak our language, be it Yiddish, Hebrew or the language of Torah and *mitzvos*. To respond effectively, then, we plainly place ourselves in a better position by becoming proficient in theirs.

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