

The RYS Daily 7/21/06 Torah and Secular Knowledge

The following is from The Mussar Movement, Volume 1, Part 1 pages 300 - 303.

Since he aspired to bring about a spiritual revolution in all sections of Jewry, R. Israel considered it necessary to arm himself with scientific knowledge as well. Hence, during his sojourn in Germany, he turned to the study of these subjects. A grandson, Emil Benjamin, author of the biography, R. Israel Lipkin Salant, related that R. Israel did acquire a background in several sciences, and several times asked this grandson to "help him by obtaining the science and humanities' books he needed." Among these, an especially important role was accorded to Kant's philosophical works. When in Berlin, R. Israel would be the guest of Dr. Sternheim, who possessed a well-stocked library with a fair proportion of scientific works. R. Israel would spend day after day poring over the volumes. His residence at the Sternheim home attracted attention, and as a result, R. Israel gained the reputation of a great scholar both among Jews and non-Jews. Whenever he would walk in the street, people would pause to greet him and to glance at the bright face of the "Russian philosopher", as they called him, who was always deeply engrossed in thought and who exuded holiness in all his movements and behavior. Intellectuals, too, their curiosity piqued, would strike up a conversation with him on philosophical and ethical points of interest. All were visibly impressed with his solid logic and his capacity for the profoundest thinking.

Apparently, Medicine and Jurisprudence, as well, came within the purview of his interests. Writing from Memel to Rabbi Dr. Ehrmann in Berlin, in 1873, R. Israel made this request: "I have heard that antiquities are very cheap in Berlin. Now I am interested in acquiring several books on logic which deal with the subject in detail. Perhaps also diverse and detailed information on, for instance, Jurisprudence, etc., etc., Medicine, etc.,"

These disciplines afforded him the means to clarify certain points of Halachah or of human psychology, which to him were the main purpose in human life. His letter therefore continued in this vein: "Although I possess an extremely limited knowledge of German, yet by a cursory review of various authors and perhaps diverse subjects, I

will find it easier to attain what I seek, to discard one view and to adopt another necessary for me in the study of the wisdom of our Talmud." Here, presumably he was following the example set by the Vilna Gaon, who had asserted that the knowledge of other disciplines was essential for a proper understanding of Torah, and "to the extent that one is deficient in his knowledge of other sciences, he will lack a hundred measures in the science of Torah, for Torah and science go hand in hand." [4]

R. Israel would spend days on end in libraries, searching among scientific source-books in order to determine a single point of Halachah. Or else, he would travel long distances to submit the problem to some specialist in the field and obtain the requisite information. Once he needed to clarify some technical point in anatomy or gynecology, so as to deal with an Halachic issue affecting women. He put the problem to the physicians in Memel, but was not able to elicit the relevant information from them. But he would not leave the matter there. He travelled tens of miles away to the town of Gargzdai to consult the local doctor, Judah Aaronson, who had once been a Yeshivah student.

He made a regular practice of reading the Russian and German press, to keep up to date with current affairs, and to be able to adapt his tactics to any given situation.

He was by no means averse to employing all manner of scientific techniques in order to spread the knowledge of the wisdom of the Jews among Jews and gentiles alike.

[4] In his introduction to his Hebrew translation of Euclid's geometry,

R. Baruch of Shklov gives this as the view of his rabbi, the Vilna Gaon. He relates that the Gaon instructed him to translate as much scientific literature as possible into Hebrew "so that many can browse, and knowledge increase."