



Much has been written about the moral and intellectual decline of academia in recent years. In light of our ongoing exploration of the spiritual challenges facing Orthodox youth on campus, we thought it proper to revisit Rav Aharon Lichtenstein's 1997 essay, "Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict," where he presents a penetrating, wide-ranging analysis of *Torah Umadda*.

In this seminal essay, Rav Lichtenstein himself acknowledges the fact that the "academic scene has changed" in the years since he received his Ph. D. from Harvard. Considering the students and the university atmosphere surrounding them in 2004, does Rav Lichtenstein still believe that all should heed the Rambam's admonition to "accept

truth from whomever it comes?" Does *Torah Umadda* apply in a postmodern world?

To further this important discussion, we are publishing an analysis of Rav Lichtenstein's essay by William Kolbrener, who examines the essay in relation to the contemporary academic scene. At the same time, we offer Rav Lichtenstein's insightful answer, supporting his thesis with keen intellect, refinement and an appreciation of another view.

TORAH UMADDA: *A Voice from the Academy*

By William Kolbrener

Reflecting upon his life as a young man, A.J. Heschel wrote:

In those months in Berlin . . . I felt very much alone with my problems and anxieties. I walked alone in the evenings through

Dr. Kolbrener, a senior lecturer of English literature at Bar-Ilan University, has taught at Columbia University and UCLA. He is the author of Milton's Warring Angels (Cambridge, 1997), and writes widely on the literature, philosophy and history of seventeenth-century England. He has also written on the interpretive methodologies of Chazal and the philosophical works of Rav Soloveitchik.

the magnificent streets. I admired the solidity of the architecture, the overwhelming drive and power of a dynamic civilization. Suddenly, I noticed the sun had gone down; evening had arrived. From what time may one recite the Shema in the evening? I had forgotten God—I had forgotten Sinai—I had forgotten that sunset is my business, that my task is "to restore the world to the kingship of the Lord." So I began to utter the words of the evening prayer . . . And Goethe's famous poem rang in my ear: "O'er all the hilltops is quiet now."¹

Heschel's reflections upon his youth in Berlin reveal a mind striving for synthesis—immersed both in the languages of what we might call, following Matthew Arnold,

Jerusalem and Athens. For as he marvels at the magnificent solidity of Berlin, the inheritance of the culture of Athens, he remembers Jerusalem and the obligation to say Shema in the evening, only then to hear the sound of the culture of Athens in the reverberating echoes of Goethe's famous poem.

Heschel's reminiscences provide an opportunity to consider the question of *Torah Umadda*—that is, the question of the relationship between Torah and secular learning. To be sure, volumes have already been written on the question, and I can promise no novel interpretations of *sugyot*, nor any new historical insights about the manner in which the issue has been treated by the different sages in the Jewish tradition—who have either championed or taken up arms against the cause. My motivation for addressing the subject emerges out of my own experience, first as a graduate student at the English Department at Columbia University, as I struggled to integrate what were, for me, the newly discovered languages of the Jewish tradition within the framework of my secular studies. Later, I would take those struggles further, in the context of *yeshivot* and *kollelim* in Jerusalem (some of the former actively advocate the ideal of *Torah Umadda*), as a lecturer at Columbia University and UCLA in the United States and at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, where I continued to negotiate between the sensibilities and ideals represented in the cities of "Athens" and "Jerusalem." My struggle, then, has not only been personal, but professional. The current essay thus addresses the issue emphatically *not* from the perspective of the *posek* (halachic decisor) or the community leader, but rather from my own perspective—that of a university lecturer.

Most of the recent discussions of the issue, emerging either from within the actual context of the university or the discourses and genres native to it, have ended by advocating—with whatever qualification—the contemporary pursuit of *Torah Umadda*. More serious reservations about such a pursuit have been expressed not so much in the languages of the scholar, but rather in the more straightforward and, for some, less accommodating languages of the *posek*. Responding to this phenomenon in his 1997 article, "Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict," Rav Aharon Lichtenstein expresses a certain frustration with an atmosphere of debate characterized, in his view, by both "knee-jerking rejection" and "apodictic fiat."² For Rav Lichtenstein, whose work represents, in my view, the most circumspect and most elegantly argued on the topic, a more straightforward discussion of *Torah Umadda*, informed by both what he calls "intelligence and conscience," is "not only licit, but mandatory" (251). As he frames it, in the discussion of "a major *hashkafic* issue," there is no alternative to "maximally honest confrontation"; further, he argues that, "whatever our orientation, we can hardly afford Procrustean disdain for pragmatic realities" (221). The present essay aspires to the honesty and atten-

tion to pragmatic issues endorsed by Rav Lichtenstein, with the result, however, of bringing a new perspective to bear on the issue. If much of the opposition to the contemporary practice of *Torah Umadda* seems to be born out of varieties of "knee-jerking rejection," this piece attempts to address some of the issues that Rav Lichtenstein raises, through employing the scholarly languages that he himself employs. Hesitations to wholeheartedly embrace the principle of *Torah Umadda* as a *de jure* norm for contemporary practice does not entail, as is often current in Centrist Orthodox circles, an atavistic (or "Procrustean") set of biases, but may be seen to emerge from the very pragmatic confrontation which Rav Lichtenstein himself espouses.

In his essay, Rav Lichtenstein warns that one cannot possibly judge *Torah Umadda* without first knowing what *madda* itself actually entails. As a means of furthering the argument, he recalls a lecture he delivered, where he ended by posing a "series of rhetorical questions intimating that general literary sources might impart certain spiritual insight more effectively." "Whoever does not know this material," he warned in conclusion, "will find it difficult to answer these questions—and hence, is inclined to dismiss them glibly" (267). Given the accidents of my own training and scholarly background, I may be one of a handful of people who are "left," as Rav Lichtenstein puts it, "to lend a sympathetic ear"—if the prerequisite for such a sympathetic reading means relating to the full range of references which he marshals from both literary and sacred sources (290). (As a matter of my own professional training, I would probably be counted as what Milton called the "fit audience though few" who might follow the full range of secular sources—from F.H. Bradley to C.S. Lewis, from Aeschylus to Tennyson.) In this sense, where my own thoughts about *Torah Umadda* diverge from those of Rav Lichtenstein, they do not emerge I hope, out of glibness or lack of familiarity with the literary traditions which he evokes, but rather out of a strong sense of the disparity between the ideal of *Torah Umadda* and its actual practice in the contemporary university. Rav Lichtenstein argues that those who oppose the contemporary practice of *Torah Umadda* should lend as "careful an ear" to "those who, out of their direct experience, have countenanced secular studies, as to those who have damned them" (267). My own thoughts on *Torah Umadda* also emerge from "direct experience," not only of the traditions of Western literature and philosophy, but also of the contemporary university, both as a researcher and instructor. Having said that, I do not come to "damn" secular studies, and certainly not the abstract ideal of *Torah Umadda*, which has a provenance, but to provide a different voice on the possible promise held out by its contemporary applications—a voice from the academy.³

The present essay can provide nothing like a full elaboration of the details of Rav Lichtenstein's work. Speaking schematically, however, his article views *madda* as having the capacity to perform a dual role—providing, alternative-

ly, a pragmatic “supplement” or, in its more ambitious conception, a spiritual “complement” to the life of the *ben Torah*. To the extent, as he writes, that *madda* “is a recognized source of knowledge about the object and locus of *halakhic* realization, it is an integral element of Torah existence” (232). But further than the pragmatic necessity that *talmidei chachamim* (Torah scholars) and *posekim* consult secular wisdom in determining matters of *pesak* (halachic decisions), *madda* has other more general (yet also pragmatic) applications in dealing with what he calls, “the broader social scene,” and the confrontation between “the normative *halakhic* order” and an “often intractable human reality” (233). In this sense, *madda* becomes a pragmatic means of reaching out to a community that is itself “suffused with secular values and sensibility” (234). Awareness of “the Zeitgeist,” he affirms, “is *a fortiori* essential to other aspects of communal life.” Such an awareness “can be vital toward illuminating both the present scene,” as well as the “ramifications of prospective courses of action” (236). In the modern world, Rav Lichtenstein implies, *madda* becomes a kind of prerequisite for communicating with those outside of the fold. As he explains:

Within a relatively homogenous ghettoized community, Torah leadership sans madda can communicate effectively with its constituents and accurately assess their needs and inclinations. The situation is quite different when a cultural gap—at times, a chasm—divides the shepherd from his flock. In an age, unlike Lycidas’s, in which the sheep may not even realize they are hungry, ministering their needs becomes incomparably more difficult and the impetus to understand their sensibility and language far greater (235).

The mandates of *kiruv*, presumably not only to the unaffiliated, but even the already affiliated and the nominally observant, makes “understanding the secular mind” an important precondition for ministering to the needs of the community (236). But even more than providing the means for addressing the pragmatic needs of the contemporary community, Rav Lichtenstein sees another, more spiritual role for *madda*—that is, as a spiritual “complement.” As he writes, “*bokhmah* can inform and irradiate our spiritual being by rounding out its cardinal Torah component . . . by expanding our spiritual and intellectual horizons through exposure to other areas of potential religious import” (237).

Before moving on to address these latter more ambitious—that is, spiritual—claims for *madda* as a complement, I would like to focus on the very enterprise of understanding what Rav Lichtenstein calls the “Zeitgeist.” By his own lights, pragmatic realities are crucial; in my own view, they are even precedent. There are, I think, two reasons to hesitate at the enterprise of *Torah Umadda* as Rav Lichtenstein conceives of it: 1. The nature of our students (and the contemporary culture in which they find themselves) and 2. More fundamentally, the nature of the univer-

sity and the forms of attention and inquiry that it encourages. My first hesitation emerges from the very text, cited above, which Rav Lichtenstein employs to forward his argument. The simple question emerges: *Lycidas*?? Our age is certainly unlike that of Milton’s poetic shepherd Lycidas (who stood as a figure for a classmate who died at sea), but for whom does the reference to Milton’s great poem provide anything like a meaningful resonance? This may seem like a local, if not a minor, point to make, but it stands out in demonstrating the disparity between Rav Lichtenstein’s conception of the current zeitgeist and the actual facts of the matter. Which is to say, even assuming that understanding the zeitgeist would be an indispensable component of relating to an unregenerate “flock,” does knowledge of Milton do anything to actually lead towards understanding such a worldview? Rav Lichtenstein’s own prose provides an unbelievable range of literary and philosophical reference. But when Rav Lichtenstein asks, “Can anyone read R.W. Chambers’s *Man’s Unconquerable Mind* without feeling both humbled and inspired?” and when he adds the qualification in the accompanying footnote, that the “title, from a Wordsworthian sonnet should not mislead,” for the book “is suffused with a spirit of religious humanism,” one cannot help but think that he is applying the criteria of a previous generation (and the elite of that generation at that) to contemporary circumstances which are very different indeed (242, n. 33). (Is Chambers still on the reading list in the contemporary humanities? Would contemporary students have assumptions about Wordsworth such that they would be surprised to discover that a book named after one of his poems is suffused with “religious humanism”?)

Indeed “Lycidas” seems very foreign to a contemporary sensibility. In my own experience, when addressing a group of students from a Modern Orthodox yeshivah in Jerusalem, I was surprised at the resistance that I had elicited through my comments about *Torah Umadda* (which reflected some of the reservations that I am mentioning here). The casual gathering that it was, I pressed harder to find out what was underlying their strongly stated commitments to the pursuit of secular studies. For one, as it turned out, most of those present had been, at some time or another, *talmidim* (students) of *talmidim* of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Though most of them did, in fact, stand up for the concept, they failed to give the impression that it was anything more than a rallying cry that they had inherited from their teachers. Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky may have been surprised that his *talmidim* at Torah Vodaath were unaware of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*.⁴ These *bachurim* (young men) to whom I was speaking, though championing *Torah Umadda* in the abstract, also failed to have anything more than the most superficial connection with secular studies. In fact, from the resistance that my talk had elicited, I had the impression that they thought that I (or perhaps their *rebbe* who was present) intended to prevent them from reading Tolstoy’s classic. But if any of them had

heard of the book, they certainly did *not* want to read it. I remained confused by the disparity between their enthusiasm for the concept and their indifference to the actual phenomenon until one of the young men confided: “It’s not so much that we are interested in *Torah Umadda*, what we are really interested in is Torah and *entertainment*.” This *talmid* provided, and he did so humorously, the *reduction ad absurdum* of the position (to the discernible relief of his friends), but he revealed that the primary concern of many yeshivah boys (aside from *parnassah*) is not incorporating the classics into the life of the *ben Torah*, but rather accommodating Torah into a contemporary lifestyle—of popular culture, of movies and of MTV. As a colleague once suggested to me, for the current generation (and there are no signs it is getting better), it is not so much a question of *Torah* or *madda*, but rather one of *taivah* (pleasure) or *taivah*. This is to say, young men and women in our communities are not worrying over the problem of synthesizing Torah and the legacies of classical traditions. It’s not Torah and Aeschylus and Sophocles, but, *at best*, Torah and Arnold Schwarzenegger and Tom Cruise (and a *lehavdil* would have to split between the last two and *all* of the former terms). *Torah Umadda*, from this perspective, may be a *madreigah* to which most young people in our community cannot possibly aspire. Further, if knowing the zeitgeist means knowing Schwarzenegger, does it mean that we and our *talmidim*, the leaders of the next generation, should be on line to buy tickets to the next sequel to *Terminator*? For Rambam, knowing *madda* meant having access to the classical texts of Athenian culture. For the current generation, *madda* includes much more: Plato and Aristotle come along in a package that includes Yahoo!, *The Matrix* and MTV. In most cases, it’s the latter set, and not the former, which most compellingly attracts attention.

But it’s not only our young people who have changed—and this provides the second of my hesitations about Rav Lichtenstein’s contemporary advocacy of *madda*—the university itself has changed, and *radically* at that. Rav Lichtenstein himself acknowledges that the “academic scene has changed” (274), though it does not seem to me that he recognizes the full extent of the shift. The scene, in fact, has probably undergone, since Rav Lichtenstein received his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1962, something more like an earthquake.⁵ For the ideals of secular humanism, or what goes under the name of a liberal arts education, have changed fundamentally in the last generation. To provide an instructive model for what informs Rav Lichtenstein’s conception of *madda*, we can turn to the famous Florentine political philosopher, Niccolo Machiavelli, who provides a record of his own encounter with the texts of Latin and Greek antiquity. Writing of his experience, Machiavelli, who was one of the early Renaissance Christian advocates of secular learning, describes himself as entering what he calls “the courts of ancient men” where he is “lovingly received” feeding “on the food which alone is mine, and which I was

born for.” “I am not,” he continues, “ashamed to speak with them and to ask the reasons for their actions, and they courteously answer me.”⁶ Machiavelli’s encounter with classical authors provides the model for a humanism in which education is conceived as a means of a transmission of culture that implies an attitude to antecedent texts and traditions of not only respect, but also reverence. Machiavelli thinks of himself as a visitor in the courts of the ancients where he hopes to elicit answers, and even guidance, from the authors who preceded him.

In the contemporary university, however, this attitude has been replaced by a hermeneutics of suspicion—an interpretative attitude in which the interpreter finds himself not subservient, but rather superior to the texts that he encounters. Machiavelli fashions himself as a student, imbibing the wisdom of the ancients to whom he understands himself to be subservient. In the contemporary university, what were once considered the classics of Western literature and philosophy are now often viewed as mere markers of prejudice, power and oppression. There is no reason to expect that Rav Lichtenstein would keep up with the developments in the contemporary university, but T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis and Matthew Arnold rarely find themselves in the undergraduate curriculum. Certainly those bearers of Christian humanism find very few sympathetic ears within the halls of the contemporary university. Indeed, the former set of critics, who advocate, in different ways, the ethical components of literature and literary criticism have been replaced by a new pantheon of postmodern critics and theorists. Rav Lichtenstein relates to culture as Arnold himself once did, a repository of “sweet reasonableness” (287). Contemporary scholars of Arnold, however, are more likely to look at his concept as a means of furthering bourgeois political and economic agendas.⁷ Such is the hermeneutics of suspicion in which texts are not read for their instruction (certainly not their moral insights), but as a register of the extent to which they diverge from contemporary notions of what might be considered politically acceptable. In this sense, texts of the past are not looked to as means of potential instruction and guidance, but as evidence of how much the cultures of the past fail to live out the ethics and ideals that a current generation has allegedly perfected. This is not then merely a question of a curriculum change, but a major shift in the way in which one relates to texts, traditions and authority.

Another example may elucidate: In teaching a graduate course on Milton at Columbia University, I found that my students were largely surprised—shocked would be a better term—by an approach designed to elicit the actual intentions which informed Milton’s text. The question that their professors had been training them to ask was the following: “What are Milton’s explicit or implicit instructions about race, class and gender?” The question I was foregrounding

(I am not suggesting that the other question should not be asked) was, “What does Milton *mean*?” Even as I write these sentences, I realize that some colleagues of mine within the academy would be frustrated—even dismayed—by my conception of intention, for the French poststructuralist critic, Roland Barthes, already proclaimed many years ago, “the death of the author.”⁸ Rav Lichtenstein’s works all give the sense—whether he is occupied in Torah or *madda*—of a profound engagement with the texts he encounters. In the postmodern academy, the very attitude—call it that of the secular humanist or that of the classicist—has been deemed outmoded, and replaced: The hermeneutics of suspicion reigns. One cannot help but point out the irony that a postmodern multiculturalism, ostensibly representing a commitment to cultural difference, entails nothing like a real openness to different cultures. Rather than actually being receptive to the voice of different cultures, some of the advocates of multiculturalism simply repeat their critical *mantras*—gender, race and class—imposing their own values on texts which they never really encounter. A pedagogy that pretends engagement with difference and with other cultures is narcissistically enclosed and *disengaged*.

Having said all of this against the hermeneutics of suspicion, there may be pitfalls awaiting those who remain committed to *madda* in the current generation, for even the older values of the secular humanist may have their dangers. To be sure, we can find much to value, for example, in relating to Milton’s prose (Rav Lichtenstein and I, again, as a matter of historical accident, have common reference points). We may read with approval the passage which Rav Lichtenstein cites from *Of Education*:

The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest, by possessing our souls of true virtue, which, being united to the heavenly grace of faith, makes up the highest perfection (cited on 250).

Or, we may take solace in Milton’s description of Samson’s blindness, as Rav Lichtenstein himself did when his father lost his sight, as he so movingly records (254). Yet there are other extraordinary passages in Milton as well. Not only, as my students at Bar-Ilan would attest, those which emphasize Milton’s religious humanism, or his capacities for human empathy. Reading *Paradise Lost*, for example, requires focusing attention not only on the humanistic or human elements of his poem, but upon his profound Christian commitment as well. As a result, any reading of *Paradise Lost* that would account for the author’s intention in writing such a poem has to take into account Milton’s continued Christocentric references, and a version of salvation history that is radically antithetical to normative Jewish accounts. The very first lines of the poem affirm that the “ruin of our first parents” will be overcome, finally not only through learning (as per the passage above from *Of Education*), but through the agency of “one greater man.” Miltonic typology—the literary means of assimilating

Judaism under the rubric of Christian figures and Christian history—recurs as a poetic strategy throughout the poem. By the end of a semester-long course on Milton’s work, one of my more religious students confessed to feeling almost suffocated by the necessity of inhabiting a Christian perspective as a means of coming to terms with and understanding the epic voice of Milton’s poem.

Of course, Rav Lichtenstein writes throughout his work of the necessity of evaluating literature from a definite moral and theological standpoint, and further that religious readers “should scrutinize their reading,” especially those “works of imagination” that have “their own explicit ethical and theological standards” (285). For a university instructor, incorporating such a strategy would entail affirming students’ sense of the dissonance between their own beliefs and that of the texts which they encounter. The university, as it is currently conceived, even a religious university, does not always allow students, within the structure of a classroom, to foreground their own “moral and theological” perspectives. Indeed, Rav Lichtenstein may have an over-optimistic sense of both the pedagogy of the contemporary university (even the religious ones) and the attitude—one could say fortitude—of contemporary students. Though potential students may be encouraged by their *rebbeim*, teachers and families to cultivate an ethics of reading, the culture of the university has its own agenda, which carries its own momentum.⁹ Even if a student were to begin his studies with such an outlook, it would be difficult, except for the most gifted, to maintain it. The modern university, informed by nineteenth-century models of social science and comparative literature, encourages an approach that advocates not so much engagement, but rather *disengagement*. Thus, where I may be fully in agreement with Rav Lichtenstein’s assertion that the *madda* of historical science could lead to the understanding of how the “epiphanous Shekhinah” has “forged special ties with His people,” I remain highly skeptical about whether such a pursuit occurs in university history departments (240). Disengagement, whether in the more radical form of post-modernism alluded to earlier or in a more neutral stance of so-called objectivity, remains the standard, if not the norm.

Rav Lichtenstein emphatically and repeatedly asserts throughout his essay that *Torah Umadda* can only be pursued when “it is placed in proper perspective—as subsidiary if not subservient to Torah,” and that “the primacy of Torah is axiomatic” (272). Yet such an anchoring in Torah, at least in my own experience, seems more and more difficult to attain, certainly to sustain, within the context of the university. For the very strategies that are required to spend a semester reading Milton—that is, a degree of disengagement or willingness to compare different traditions—make it difficult to maintain a perspective in which Torah is axiomatic. For only those steeped in Torah can withstand what the literary critic William Empson called “the gang of comparative anthropologists” who come to claim the equal-

ity of various philosophical and theological traditions.¹⁰ Although early in the essay, Rav Lichtenstein argues that knowledge of “different traditions can frequently enhance our understanding of Torah positions,” he also does acknowledge that “the very act of comparison often jades a sense of uniqueness,” leading a “relativistic pluralism” to rear its head.¹¹ Comparative studies, he continues, without the requisite sense of the singularity of Torah, “can be both doctrinally and experientially unsettling” (230, 277-78).

My experience in the university certainly confirms Rav Lichtenstein’s fears. Two representative examples: A religious student informed me that her studies of the Oral Tradition were informed by the principle that she had learned that one cannot understand the utterances of *Chazal* without knowing their contexts. Yet she became so enamored of the historical contextualization of the utterances of *Chazal* that she embraced the disciplines of objectifying historiography, and found herself outside of, and unaddressed by, the tradition which she had once counted herself a part. A graduate student from an American university wrote me that after having immersed himself in Jewish philosophy in yeshivah, he decided to pursue his research in an academic framework. In the process of that research, in the context of a university philosophy department, however, he would find himself questioning the foundations of what he called “Orthodoxy.” For him, like the student who contextualized the Oral Law in an academic context, embracing the perspective and standards of academic disciplines led to finding himself no longer addressed by the tradition, but looking at it, analyzing it from outside. In this sense, the perspective implicit in the contemporary university may serve the regrettable function of turning the *learning* of Torah into its mere *study*. Even when Torah is not on the curriculum, the perspective implicit in academic study can have its impact. For the contemporary university—with its “votaries of objectivity” (the phrase is Rav Lichtenstein’s and not my own)—objectifies all traditions, including, inevitably, the tradition from Sinai (287).¹² Further, it’s not only the loss of “passion,” as Rav Lichtenstein puts it, but the loss of the forms of attention necessary to be addressed by Sinai. One might claim (as a pre-university yeshivah student argued once in his response to some of the arguments formalized here) that the university represents values so foreign to those of Judaism that it should therefore be easy to both identify those values and to resist their influence. But one fails to understand the power of the culture of the university (and probably culture in general) by assuming that the resilience and independence of mind which a young person evidences outside of the context of university studies can be maintained within it. Indeed, the university, probably more than any other contemporary institution, gives the lie to the conception that the culture of liberalism is somehow *neutral*.

Rav Lichtenstein may be, like his mentor, Rav Soloveitchik, a halachic man par excellence, allowing him to practice *Torah Umadda* as a synthesis. Yet, I would argue, the “votaries of objectivity” provide a more threatening opposition to Torah observance than Rav Lichtenstein himself acknowledges. If not only the goal of our tradition, but the prerequisite of it, is hearing the voice from Sinai, then the immersion in *madda* may jeopardize such a relationship by privileging a whole different form of engagement—or rather a form of scholarship based upon disengagement. The appeal of “system” which Rav Lichtenstein finds lacking in the worldview of *Chazal* may be—though assuredly not for him—an appeal for a philosophical system that leads not into the Torah, but rather *outside* of it (229-230). Indeed, Rav Soloveitchik would associate the philosophical perspective with what he calls “the *passive* man of fate,” who, in contrast to the *ish halachah*, pursues philosophical speculation instead of a life of active engagement.¹³

For Rav Lichtenstein, engagement is the given; the risks of *Torah Umadda* a matter of “detail”; and the problems associated with the pursuit of *madda* more than likely “innocuous” (265).¹⁴ I would suggest, however, that what Rav Lichtenstein himself considers to be the basic starting point of *madda*, an unqualified commitment to Torah, remains in today’s world a position that can only be acquired and maintained—with an extraordinary vigilance—and not in one, but in every sector of the observant world. That is to say, I do not demur from Rav Lichtenstein’s evaluation of the intrinsic value of the classics of the Western tradition, but rather the role of the classics—given the institutional frameworks currently available—in the life of the *ben Torah*. This is not, however, meant to legitimize the perspective of those opponents of *Torah Umadda* who, as Rav Lichtenstein describes them, “think it is perfectly legitimate to labor long and engrossing hours in order to eat lamb chops, drive a Volvo, or vacation in St. Moritz, but illicit to devote those hours instead to exploring, with Plato or Goethe, vistas of thought and experience” (270). Indeed, I share Rav Lichtenstein’s disdain for the expedient cynicism that such a perspective entails. Yet we might be wary not only of the expedient rejectionism of *Torah Umadda*, but also its expedient advocacy, where the banner of *Torah Umadda* comes to camouflage concerns about *parmassah*, or, less nobly, concerns about acceptance within a general culture that fashions itself as enlightened and progressive. Such banner wavers (I am certainly not counting Rav Lichtenstein among them) may also be guilty of obfuscation, and as a result, willfully blind themselves to some of the pragmatic difficulties that *Torah Umadda* entails.

The “*kol Torah*” from Sinai, as the *mishnah* in *Avot* recounts (6:2), may always be, as it were, broadcasting. The fact that there are so many other frequencies on the band makes tuning into Sinai all the more problematic. But it’s not just the question of the interference of

other frequencies, whether it be other literary and philosophical traditions, or more likely, in today's world, a contemporary culture of entertainment. That is to say, it's not only the matter of negotiating a quantity of different influences, but mastering and maintaining a qualitative attitude of engagement—of receptivity and openness to the voice of Torah. Internalizing the importance of the precedent commitment of Torah, embodied by *Klal Yisrael* at *Har Sinai* with the affirmation of *na'aseh venishma*, may be, in the current generation, an act of unprecedented—and indeed underestimated—difficulty. *Torah Umadda* may be an ideal, even as Rav Lichtenstein views it, requiring a balance between different realms, too difficult for the current generation to sustain.¹⁵

In the 1950s and early 1960s, Torah found itself, in America, at home in a culture that was hospitable to the ideals of religious humanism; the problem of synthesis may have been a genuine *avodah* for that generation. The chore of the current generation—in a very different climate—may require not synthesis, but rather simply maintaining the forms of attention required to receive and transmit the Torah. Heschel, in the perspective embodied in the piece I cited at the outset, rejects the words of Goethe and the pagan perspective they entailed, choosing instead a relation to Torah and “the word of God.” The question for the current generation is which of the many, many voices now broadcasting will come in most clearly? When the younger generation tunes in—if it does so at all—will it be to Torah?¹⁶

Notes

1. *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York, 1954), 96.
2. Aharon Lichtenstein, “Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict” *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (New Jersey, 1997), 220-292 (further references to this article are cited internally). For further discussions of *Torah Umadda*, see the sources cited by Rav Lichtenstein, p. 220-21, note 10 and p. 224, note 8 and in the same volume: Gerald Blidstein, “Rabbinic Judaism and General Culture: Normative Discussion and Attitudes”; David Berger, “Judaism and General Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Times,” 57-140 and Shnayer Z. Leiman, “Rabbinic Openness to General Culture in the Early Modern Period in Western and Central Europe,” 143-216. See also Yehudah Levi, *Torah Study* (Jerusalem, 2002), esp. pp. 237-274, as well as Rav Lichtenstein's “Tovah Chachmah Am Nachalah,” *Mamlechet Kohanim Vegoy Kadosh* (Jerusalem, 1989), 25-42, and his collection of essays *Leaves of Faith* (New Jersey, 2003).
3. Given that the arguments here are informed, primarily, by my own experiences in the university, I limit the discussion here to *madda* conceived as the humanities—that is the classical literary and philosophical texts of the Western tradition. Rav Lichtenstein himself documents the dispute among *posekim* about whether *madda* itself includes only the sciences or the humanities as well. It should be mentioned that Rav Lichtenstein provides an extremely compelling argument for the more inclusive version of the principle (220, note 1, 230, 236-250). This is to emphasize that my reluctance to advocate *Torah Umadda* emerges not out of a sense of the intrinsic deficiency of *madda*, but rather out of the

social and educational contexts in which *madda* is disseminated.

4. Rabbi Nathan Kamenetsky, *The Making of a Godol* (Jerusalem, 2002), I i, p. 280.
5. Rav Lichtenstein did not, as some suggest, write his doctoral dissertation on Milton, but on his later contemporary, the philosopher Henry More. Rav Lichtenstein's classic *Henry More: The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist* (Cambridge, 1962) remains the authoritative text on the subject.
6. From a letter from Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori dated 10 December 1513 and anthologized in Maynard Mack, ed., *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces* (New York, 1973), 1235.
7. For such a perspective, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, 1991), 60 and 62.
8. See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *The Book History Reader*, eds. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London, 2002), 221-224; see also in the same volume Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” 225-230.
9. For Rav Lichtenstein's own caveats about the study of *madda*, and the precautions and prerequisites necessary for such a course of study, see his *Tovah Chachmah*, 37-39.
10. William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1935), 179.
11. Despite the advocacy of *madda* throughout his essay, there are qualifications throughout: “Admittedly,” he writes, “it is conceivable that even with the best safeguards, the encounter with *madda* may lead some astray. Given mass exposure,” he continues, “it is likely that not all will be able to sustain the tensile balance between respective realms. This, in turn, raises the obvious question as to whether the pursuit of general culture can be justified, regardless how worthwhile.” “By the same token,” he continues, “if we are told that *madda*'s overall enrichment of our collective spiritual life was conditional upon the apostasy of specific individuals, we would certainly forgo its contribution. We should then assert with C.S. Lewis that the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world. At the statistical plane, however, even if one recognizes sadly, that caveats notwithstanding, some will probably lapse, the advocacy of *Torah Umadda* can very well still be sustained, depending, of course, on the overall balance of benefit and loss” (286). The extent of the qualifications seems, in some sense, to overwhelm the force of Rav Lichtenstein's own conclusions.
12. Rav Lichtenstein refers to this phenomenon in *Tovah Chachmah* as “*izilot vekarivot akademit*”—“cold academic clarity” (37).
13. See Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “*Kol Dodi Dofek*: It is the Voice of My Beloved that Knocketh,” *Theological and Halakhic Reflections on the Holocaust*, Bernhard H. Rosenberg, ed. (New Jersey, 1992), 51. For the argument that *The Halakhic Mind* seeks to undermine attitudes of disengagement associated with perspectives in both the sciences and humanities, see my “Towards a Genuine Jewish Philosophy: *Halakhic Mind*'s New Philosophy of Religion,” *Tradition* 30 (1996).
14. Rav Lichtenstein adds that many of the daughters of *gedolim* of the previous generation went to university, apparently with the approval of their fathers. They were not, he adds, “heedless of the moral and religious damages attendant upon exposure to secular culture”; nevertheless, he writes, “they evidently felt they could be overcome” (274). One wonders, however, if such *gedolim* would advocate such a course—given the current configurations of the university.
15. There may be, of course, exceptions to the rule. As

Rav Lichtenstein himself acknowledges (though I think with unnecessary understatement) Rambam is a “special case,” and one can in no way extrapolate success for the ideal on the basis of Rambam's own commitments. The problem, in my view, is not necessarily with individual cases, but with a culture that seems to advocate *Torah Umadda* as an ideal. (Indeed in *Tovah Chachmah*, Rav Lichtenstein suggests that “great souls” are not in need of the “complement” of *chachmah*, but that “most of us” need to avail ourselves of secular wisdom as a means of fully appreciating Torah [33]). Further, even the question of individuals may be simpler to address in theory than in actual practice. Rav Lichtenstein writes of the necessity of establishing a “functional relation

between the depth of one's Torah roots and the range of his cultural branches.” The “linkage between the twin variables of Torah stature and cultural exposure,” he continues, “is obvious: the more sensitive and problematic the material, the greater the caution and selectivity with which it is to be approached” (282). Yet the pragmatic measure of curricular material, and the actual exercise of principles of “selectivity,” from my perspective, may not be so easily conducted within the framework of the university.

16. I am grateful to the following for their responses to early drafts of this piece: Rabbis Emanuel Feldman, Yosef Kamenetsky, Dovid Foster, Mendel Horowitz and Professor Michael Kramer. The perspective represented here, however, does not necessarily reflect their views.

TO SHARPEN UNDERSTANDING

By Aharon Lichtenstein

Dr. Kolbrener's critique of my essay is unquestionably framed within the language and context of what Coventry Patmore denominated “the traditions of civility.” It is learned, urbane, deferential, cogently argued and suffused with sensitivity, intelligence and commitment. If I must tilt swords with an ideological adversary, may it be with the likes of this *ben Torah* ensconced in the halls of academia.

But, must we, and do we, indeed tilt? Dr. Kolbrener appears to have combed my essay quite thoroughly, as he quotes chapter and verse from it, frequently and precisely. For some reason, however, its introductory paragraphs appear to have escaped his scrutiny. Inasmuch, however, as I regard their content as essential to an evaluation of Dr. Kolbrener's rejoinder—which, in principle, they anticipated—I take the liberty of citing them here:

The question of Torah and general culture bears a dual aspect. Its core is clearly ideological. The relation, respectively, of reason and revelation, the optional and the normative, the temporal and the transcendental, secularity and sacrality, diversity

Rav Lichtenstein is rosh hayeshivah of Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel.

and uniformity, and, above all, of man and his Creator—these are obviously the primary components. Philosophy and theology aside, however, we are confronted by a second, no less important, element—practical, and particularly educational, in nature. How well, if at all, can Torah and secular wisdom meld within a single personality or institution; the promise and

Humanistic culture can be of value in molding spiritual personality and moral identity.

risks—the cost-benefit ratio, if you will—of any projected synthesis; determination of priorities and the appointment of energies; the psychological and sociological impact of differing relations to ambient general culture—these are all issues which need to be candidly confronted by the philosophic devotees of symbiotic integration no less than by its detractors.

These two aspects are clearly related and yet, they are both

conceptually distinct and operationally divisible. One may regard the integration of Torah and wisdom as not only legitimate but optimal, and yet hold that, within the context of an overwhelmingly secular modern culture, it is generally best foregone. Contrarily, one may subscribe to the purist ideal of comprehensive singleminded devotion to talmud Torah and yet favor an integrated curriculum as an accommodating concession to the *Zeitgeist*. What is certain is that Torah educationists ignore either aspect at their—and, more importantly, their students’—peril. We must approach the topic rooted in ideology and yet not be entrapped by it; informed and energized by our *Weltanschauung* without being fossilized by it. Whatever our orientation, we can hardly afford Procrustean disdain for pragmatic realities. We are charged to confront the issues responsibly, courageously, and sensitively and, if necessary, differentially.

I believe the gist of this passage cuts to the core of Dr. Kolbrener’s critique of myself—although, possibly, not to that of his own, more general, dilemma. It will be noted that Dr. Kolbrener—himself, as his published writings clearly attest, well-versed in general literature and philosophy—does not reject the view, long cherished as a linchpin of Western educational theory and practice, that humanistic culture can be of value in molding spiritual personality and moral identity. He does not even contend that, whatever may have been the case prior to *Matan Torah*, revelation has rendered the study of *ma’asei yadav shel bassar vedam* irrelevant. He simply argues, in Hamlet’s phrase, that “the times are out of joint.” Modes of contemporary criticism, currently in cultural and political vogue, have debased and defiled the *sancto sanctorum*, “the holy of holies,” of the humanities, eviscerating them of spiritual content and exposing their students to deleterious and dangerous intellectual habits and attitudes. Rather than drawing inspiration and guidance from what Arnold defined as “the best that has been thought and said in the world”; rather than discovering meaning in the Ciceronian tradition of *recta ratio*, the “right reason,” conceived by Richard Hooker, probably the greatest of Elizabethan Anglican divines, as “the general and universal consent of men,” they are trained to debunk and contemn, to trivialize and relativize. Moreover, he charges that young minds, thus habituated and contaminated, may, concurrently, lose their sense of the objective truth and significance, of the majesty and grandeur, of Torah. Finally, he contends that whatever sustenance I may have derived from graduate study at Harvard half a century ago is of no import to the present generation, inasmuch as the *madda* they confront today, as well as the university settings within which they imbibe it, are, in effect, of a wholly different vintage.

These contentions may very well be accurate, in whole or in part; but what have they to do with our presumed logomachy? We agree upon the benefit of read-

ing Thucydides and Milton. We agree that aspects of general culture can serve as a valuable complement to our primary, central and overriding engagement with *talmud Torah*, to which alone we are committed as *chayyenu veorech yameinu*. Further, we jointly subscribe to the proposition that the value is not only instrumentally pragmatic but, rather, when culture is properly taught and interpreted, inherently and substantively, spiritual, as well. For my part, in the spirit of Carlyle, I emphatically hold that the secondary or tertiary power of carping criticism is far from the optimal mode for confronting greatness—of personages, of literary classics, or, a fortiori, of *chachmei hamesorah*. I encourage no one to study

It makes an enormous difference whether a prospective student shies away from classical culture out of admiration tempered by apprehension or out of contemptuous disdain.

literature seriously if that entails emulating Lytton Strachey.

Dr. Kolbrener’s point, however, is that, in his judgment and on the basis of his experience at UCLA, Columbia or even Bar-Ilan, general culture is currently *not* being taught and interpreted properly. I freely concede that, given his age, range and habitat, he is probably better qualified than myself to pass such judgment. My own exposure to the schools of thought we find objectionable—relativistic multiculturalism, postmodernism, the “hermeneutics of suspicion”—is admittedly limited, as is my knowledge of what transpires in manifestly politicized English departments. Hence, it perhaps behooves me—at least, for the sake of argument—to suspend categorical evaluations on this point.

Does Dr. Kolbrener’s claim in any way conflict logically, however, with the position I sought to develop? I return to my introductory distinction.

One may regard the integration of Torah and wisdom as not only legitimate but optimal, and yet hold that, within the context of an overwhelmingly secular modern culture, it is generally best foregone. Contrarily, one may subscribe to the purist ideal of comprehensive singleminded devotion to talmud Torah and yet favor an integrated curriculum as an accommodating concession to the Zeitgeist. What is certain is that Torah educationists ignore either aspect at their—and, more importantly, their students’—peril. We must approach the topic rooted in ide-

ology and yet not be entrapped by it; informed and energized by our Weltanschauung without being fossilized by it.

Unquestionably, at the level of practical implementation, articulation of a position must be twinned to an assessment of the context to which and within which it is to be applied.

Does this concession relegate my argument to the dustbin of anachronism? I trust not. First and foremost, pragmatic though we be, ideology remains powerfully relevant. Hashkafically, it makes an enormous difference whether a prospective student shies away from classical culture out of admiration tempered by apprehension or out of contemptuous disdain.

Secondly, my position remains meaningful at the practical plane as well. Throughout, I sought to emphasize the need for differential resolution and selective application, always with an eye on the *unum necessarium*, *yirat Hashem he ozaro*. Given Dr. Kolbrener’s contentions, that need becomes even more paramount. Nevertheless, the option is not obviated. I remain convinced that the prospect of genuine spiritual benefit is real; and, inter alia, I look to members of my immediate family as exemplars. Any sensitive reader of our Rav Moshe’s *Tzir Vatzon* can see for himself how his foray into literature has equipped him to understand better the saga of *dor hamidbar* and its crises of leadership. Dr. Kolbrener may have tightened the noose but he has not asphyxiated the patient.

Thirdly, even advocates of Dr. Kolbrener’s position can acknowledge the need to keep the home fires burning in hope for better times. My great humanist mentor, Douglas Bush, once jestfully surmised that the whale in *Moby Dick* signified “the spirit of literature tearing and rending Symbolist critics.” Perhaps today he stuffs his ravenous maw with the acolytes of suspicion. We, in the interim can, minimally, “only stand and wait,” yearning for a fresh dawn. Even if winter’s here, might we not, with inspired vision and informed counsel, anticipate the spring?

That hope does not absolve us of present responsibility for prudence and selectivity; and we are admittedly left, in conclusion, with a nagging and even cruel concern: fear lest, in some cases, exposure to general culture and its pursuit may lead, beyond adulteration of Torah commitment, to its abandonment. As I noted toward the conclusion of my essay, given the possibility that, at times, secular learning may lead to skepticism (as opposed to the reverse), it is surely arguable that no level of the qualitative improvement of cultural life may justify coming to terms with such a dire prospect. In light of the assertion of C.S. Lewis, hardly an obscurantist, that the saving of a single soul is of greater importance than the writing of all the epics in the world, and on the basis of cumulative experience, a strong case may certainly be made for cultural insulation.

Yet, before we rush to judgment, we should bear in mind a crucial variable. In assessing benefits and risks, we routinely differentiate between focused dangers and statistical projections. If an armed kidnapper would threaten the definitive execution of a specified abductee unless all *tiyulim* were banned from the Judean desert for a year, we would feel halachically and morally bound to capitulate—

barring, possibly, concern about encouraging future dangerous abductions. However, no such ban is even considered in the face of grim statistics concerning the number of annual fatalities. The principle is analogously operative within the spiritual realm. It is palpably clear that many souls could be saved if *kollelim* were shut down en masse and their members sent out to engage in *kiruv*.

Nevertheless, no such course is ever contemplated. Indeed, Rav Dessler explicitly rejects a much milder suggestion. Recognizing that teacher training courses by *bonei yeshivah* would enhance their ability to disseminate *devar Hashem* and would bring more people into the world of Torah and *mitzvot*—and despite his concern with *kiruv*, as evidenced by his support of *P’eylim*—he nevertheless opposed their participation in such courses as he feared the impact upon the quality of their own learning could be negative.

I do not, of course, equate the dilution of *talmud Torah* with the constriction of literary or philosophic horizons. And perhaps one might challenge any comparison between the danger of loss of the committed with forgoing possible gains among the cur-

Aspects of general culture can serve as a valuable complement to our primary, central and overriding engagement with talmud Torah.

rently uncommitted. Nevertheless, the example is instructive by way of illustrating a readiness to distinguish between focused threat and statistical projection, and of noting the relevance of this distinction to our discussion. Obviously, this factor in no way minimizes the pain when and where tragedy strikes, nor is it intended to relax spiritual vigilance. Moreover, it should be self-evident that its acknowledgment in no way militates for the adoption of a given course. That must await contextual assessment of risks and benefits within *these* parameters. Nevertheless, at the plane of the options for principled public policy, the point is material.

As to the assessment proper, Dr. Kolbrener and I might conceivably differ, either out of divergent factual perception or because the standards vary. Despite our common theoretical ground, the tone and thrust of my essay is indeed different from that of his response. That in no way obviates, however, the element of principled consensus. Hence, I trust that to the extent that it has focused on both similarity and disparity, this exchange may hopefully serve to sharpen understanding of both the broader and the narrower issues. **JA**