

Sol Roth is rabbi of Fifth Avenue Synagogue and Samson R. Hirsch Professor of Jewish philosophy at Yeshiva University.

TORAH IM DEREKH ERETZ: AN ANALYSIS

The ideal of *Torah im derekh eretz*, expounded in its modern sense by Rabbi Samson R. Hirsch, expresses a philosophy and an attitude. It has been the subject of extensive debate recently; its meaning is not altogether clear. A logical analysis of its component parts will contribute to its clarification.

Three ideas require explication. The easiest is *derekh eretz*; more difficult is Torah; most important for shedding light on the meaning of the ideal is *im*.

I.

Derekh eretz is an ambiguous concept. One of its meanings is *labor*. The phrase in *Ethics of the Fathers*, *yafeh Torah im derekh eretz*,¹ is taken by the commentators to mean that the study of Torah should be accompanied by labor. A second meaning of this phrase is *acceptable norms of conduct*. Midrash declares that *derekh eretz* preceded Torah by twenty-six generations.² Some commentators explain this phrase to mean that the knowledge of principles of conduct, among which moral precepts are included, antedated by this span of time the giving of Torah. A third meaning of *derekh eretz*—Samson R. Hirsch's interpretation—is *culture*.³

In the course of this essay, we will assign to *derekh eretz* the last of these meanings, taking it as the counterpart of the English word "culture." Of course, the term culture is no less ambiguous. We will, however, in conformity with the way it was understood by Hirsch, regard it as referring to all the achievements of human civilization. It will include science and technology, ethics and politics, the literary, musical, and plastic arts.

II.

To delineate the meaning of "Torah" is a task that is considerably more difficult. The word is used in the Torah community in a variety of ways. First and foremost, "Torah" refers to the scroll normally located in the ark. But the word has a more basic connotation. It should be recalled that rabbinic literature distinguishes between the *ketav*, the script, and the *lashon*, the language of Torah. The script consists of marks; for example, the letters that appear on the parchment. The language includes the meanings of these marks. It should be noticed that the meanings of the marks in the scroll are not found on parchment; they are rather located in the mind of the person who understands the Hebrew language. These meanings are also Torah and, no doubt, in a superior sense. One may argue that such meanings are part of the oral law (which also includes precepts above and beyond anything that may be inferred from the written law); and, since meanings are more significant than script, the oral law is to be regarded as Torah in a sense that gives it priority over the written law. Clearly, the personality who embodies the precepts of Torah in his thought and behavior can also be labeled as Torah and perhaps in a still more superior sense. Hence, the judgment of the Talmud, "How foolish are those people who rise for the Torah and fail to rise for a *gavra rabbah*, a great Torah personality."⁴

The word Torah, however, may refer to other things as well. We speak of a Torah institution, a designation which may be appropriately applied to a yeshiva in which Torah is studied, a synagogue in which Torah scrolls are housed and read, and even a *mikveh* which, while it does not normally contain a Torah, provides the means of fulfilling many of the *mitzvot* of Torah. In fact any object which is used for the purpose of performing a *mitzvah* may be identified as a Torah object. Items such as a *sukkah*, an *etrog*, a *tallit*, a shofar, and so on, come under the rubric of Torah in this sense.

One may expand the meaning of Torah and argue that even objects which are not essential for the purpose of fulfilling a *mitzvah* but simply enhance the beauty of the *mitzvah* might be included in the category of Torah. The Talmud, accordingly, teaches *hitna'eh lefanav b'mitzvot*, "introduce a dimension of beauty in the performance of mitzvot."⁵ One can satisfy the requirements of the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* with an ugly *tallit* as well; the rabbis urged the use of one that is aesthetically attractive. The element of beauty is, accordingly, brought into the realm of Torah.

I believe that this is precisely what Rabbi Abraham I. Kook intended when he said, *hehadash yitkadesh*, "the new must be sanctified."⁶ If a novel object emerges in the course of human

experience, it ought not to be rejected; on the contrary, by being brought into the boundaries of Torah, that is, by being used as a means to perform a *mitzvah* or increase its aesthetic appeal, it becomes a Torah object and achieves a status of sanctity.

III.

The most significant of the ideas that require analysis is that suggested by the word *im*, literally *with*. Several points need to be stressed by way of clarifying the meaning that Hirsch attaches to this word.

In the first place, “with” is to be understood as the suggestion that *derekh erez*—culture—is to be in some sense incorporated into the realm of Torah. It should not be taken to mean that culture and Torah are both legitimate enterprises and that both ought to be pursued irrespective of the fact that they bear no relation to each other. The latter approach may be no less valid—in fact it is expressed in the analogous ideal entitled *Torah u-Madda*—but it is not what Hirsch had in mind.

The one who expressed the *Torah u-Madda* concept in its most striking form is Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. In “The Lonely Man of Faith,” he distinguished between the two aspects of the human personality. He referred to the one as Adam I, to the other as Adam II. The biblical mandate for Adam I is *ve’hivshuhah*, conquer the universe. This is the command that man be active and creative in science and technology, in social, political, and moral affairs, in the pursuit of aesthetic norms and objects of beauty. The mandate for Adam II, on the other hand, is *le-ovedah u-leshomrah*, to serve and to observe. This is the command that man submit to God by way of prayer and observance. The Adam I aspect of man prods him to engage in cultural activities; the Adam II aspect prompts him to involve himself in Torah. The two pursuits are thus essentially independent of each other, though each has divine sanction.

On this view, culture need not be incorporated into the domain of Torah; the two are separate and apart. According to Hirsch, on the other hand, culture, if it is to be legitimate from the Torah standpoint, must be brought into some significant relation to Torah.

The relation of culture to Torah in the Hirschian perspective is twofold. Culture is, first, a means to Torah; and, second, a part of Torah. He writes, “Twenty-six generations did *derekh erez* precede Torah . . . the way is culture, and only then can one reach the tree of life, the Torah. Culture starts the work of educating the generations of mankind and the Torah completes it.”⁷ Hence culture is a means, a

prerequisite, to the acquisition of Torah. But later, in the same passage, we read, "For us Jews, Torah and *derekh erez* are one."

It should be noted, however, that even when Hirsch speaks of culture as a means, it is not necessarily intended to exclude the possibility that it is also a part of Torah. There are two types of means. A ladder is a means to reaching the roof. Once the ladder has been scaled, it can be discarded. Mathematics is a means to progress in the science of physics. Even when progress has been made, mathematics is incorporated in the science and becomes part of it. I suspect that this is the sense in which Hirsch regards culture as both a means to and a part of Torah. Obviously, given the exposition above of the various levels of meaning of Torah, it is not at all difficult to regard culture as a part of Torah as well.

This leads to the third and major point: The fundamental difference between those who espouse the *Torah im derekh erez* ideal, and those who do not, is one of attitude. Primarily, the followers of Hirsch adopt a positive view to human experience in general; they maintain an openness to the achievements of the human mind and to cultural progress. They are willing to take the risk that science and philosophy might be perceived, though erroneously, as antagonistic to religion and erode Jewish commitment. They believe, however, that the risk is minimal; that given the open society in which we live, that risk is, in any case, ever present; and that the integration of culture into Torah is a better expression of Torah's attitude toward human life and experience than the bifurcation that results from its exclusion.

The advocates of the Hirschian ideal also adopt the attitude that Torah is not a closed and an excluding system. On the contrary, it is open and stands ever ready to incorporate novel components into it. These additions may be elaborations of principles already recognized as part of Torah or they may be applications of such principles to new areas of human activity. They may also consist of a variety of cultural achievements which hold promise of enhancing the religious life of the Jew. Those who support the *Torah im derekh erez* ideal resist the notion that the domain of sanctity is complete and that novel arenas of human experience are forever barred admission.

Ultimately, the difference between those who accept and those who reject the Hirschian ideal is that the former adopt a morally monistic and the latter a morally dualistic view of the universe. Moral dualism presupposes antagonism and opposition. A morally dualistic view of man perceives him as consisting of an evil body and a good soul, which are constantly in conflict. A morally dualistic view of the universe regards the material world as hostile to the interests of its spiritual counterpart. It sees the City of God as

engaged in a never ending struggle with the City of Man. Such a perspective inevitably prompts a rejection of that which is judged to be evil and its consignment to a realm that must forever remain removed from that which is sacred and divine. Those who identify with the *Torah im derekh erez* doctrine, on the other hand, insist on the moral unity of the universe.

Samson R. Hirsch was just such a monist. He argued that the human body ought not to be perceived as evil in view of the fact that it was, according to biblical account, fashioned by God Himself.⁸ He insisted that the achievements of Western civilization (as already noted) have a place in the fabric of Torah. He maintained that the fruits of Emancipation, freedom, and equality are coherent with Torah commitments.⁹ He taught that the accumulation of material goods is a blessing and a divine mandate if they are used for the purpose of realizing God's aims on earth.¹⁰

It is clear! *Torah im derekh erez* is a philosophy and a set of attitudes that are consistent with a genuine Torah perspective.

NOTES

1. See Maimonides' Commentary on *Ethics of the Fathers* II, 2.
2. *Genesis Rabbah* 76, 3. The phrase *derekh erez* has the meaning of *acceptable norms of conduct* in many talmudic contexts. See, for example, *Baba Metzia* 87a and *Yoma* 4b.
3. Commentary on *Genesis* III, 24.
4. *Makkot* 22b.
5. *Shabbat* 133b.
6. *Iggerot* I, 214.
7. Commentary on *Genesis* III, 24.
8. *Ibid.*, II, 7.
9. *The Nineteen Letters*, Letter 16.
10. Commentary on *Genesis* I, 28.