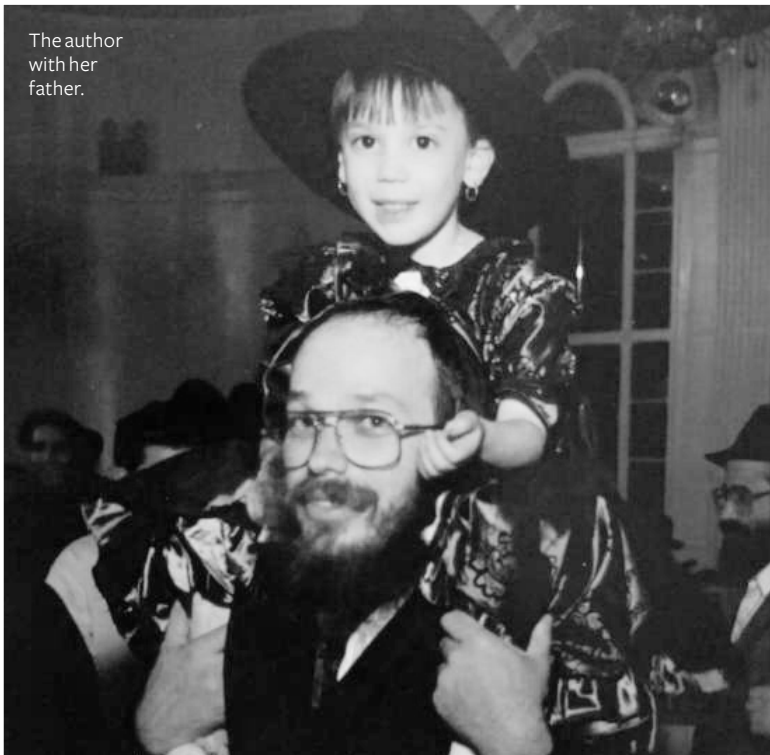


COLLEGE:

APPLYING THE REBBE'S POSITION TO THE REALITIES OF TODAY

PART 2

The author
with her
father.



L'ILUY NISHMAS REB YONAH BEN REB MEIR
In loving memory of my dear father, Rabbi Yonah
Avtzon, whose *emunah* in the Rebbe's words and
commitment to fulfilling the Rebbe's mission never
wavered.

-Mrs. Chanie Wolf

SUMMARY OF PART I



s Yidden, and especially as *chassidim*, our life decisions are directed by the question that lies at the core of our being: “What does Hashem want from me?”

Thus, the question of attending college is not only a matter of what is “wrong” with it; rather, at its essence the issue begs us to confront our purpose in this world and ask ourselves honestly: “Will this choice support or, *chas v’shalom*, detract from my mission in life?”

Although this remains true at every age and stage, it is an even more significant concern before marriage, when one’s values are being formed, and one’s choices will have a lasting impact on the direction of one’s future family.

Secular Studies

THE BATTLE OF PERSPECTIVES

When one thinks of the Rebbe’s concerns with college, it is natural to imagine a non-Jewish co-ed campus and the multiple issues associated with it. Many of these are serious halachic concerns involving conflicts with *emunah* and *tznius*.

But there are also online colleges, and even separate “*frum* colleges.” Do the Rebbe’s reservations apply to those as well?

This article will address the overarching issue with college, in all forms and situations: the matter of secular studies. As the Rebbe says:

“It is known that the [Frierdiker] Rebbe was very displeased with the learning of secular studies, which, as the Alter

Rebbe writes, “defiles the ChaBaD of the soul,” and therefore the [Frierdiker] Rebbe opposed it – for Jewish children in general, and for students of Tomchei Temimim in particular.”

The Rebbe is referring to *Tanya Perek Ches*, where the Alter Rebbe discusses the negative effects of engaging with *klipas nogah*—matters that are permissible but not directly for the sake of Hashem. There he explains that the damage of learning secular studies is greater than that of other forms of *klipas nogah*.

Whenever we indulge in food for pleasure or spend leisure time reading the news, our sensitivity to *kedushah* is dulled, and we become more materialistic and selfish. However, secular studies taint our entire perspective on life.

The ultimate truth is of course that *ein od milvado*—there is no real existence other than

¹ Sichah of Chukas-Balak 5715.



Hashem. This is the reality we will experience when Moshiach will come, and is the essence of Chassidus, which was given to us to help us realize Hashem's Oneness in our world and bring about the *Geulah*.

The journey toward *Geulah* is extremely challenging, for everything in our material world proclaims the very opposite of this truth. The world of falsehood declares, as Pharaoh did, "*Li yeori v'Ani asisani, I made myself.*" The laws of nature seem to control the weather, medicine seems to determine health, and a college degree apparently guarantees financial security. We must battle these perceptions on a daily basis by studying Chassidus and connecting to the true reality, in which Hashem holds the key to rain, Hashem is the "Healer of all flesh," and Hashem determines one's *parnassah* on Rosh Hashanah.

The study of secular subjects, which focuses on the world and life from a purely material and natural perspective, makes this *avodah* all the more difficult. Not only does one see and experience the concealment of *Elokus* inherent in nature, but one becomes **intellectually convinced** that nature is a real existence. Secular perspectives come to replace Torah perspectives, *l'havdil*, and one's entire outlook becomes a worldly one.

When a person who is influenced by a worldly perception is faced with a challenge in *emunah* or *bitachon*, his or her defenses are down.

The mind is naturally the home of the *nefesh Elohis*. Despite emotional temptation or physical hardship, a Yid who is connected to the Torah knows what is true and right, and has the power to let his mind rule his heart. But what happens when the mind itself has become aligned with the enemy?

WHEN CHINUCH IS TAINTED BY SECULARISM

This, the Rebbe writes, is one of the serious dangers of college:

"One of the serious dangers that are

inherent in college education has to do with its influence on the thought process of the college student. The college student becomes trained to think in secular terms and categories. In all courses (except theology) G-d is banished from the classroom.

"This often leads to the tendency of leaving G-d out of the Torah study as well.

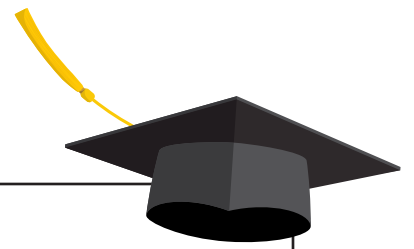
He may still admire

the wisdom of the Torah, and may still derive pleasure from its study, but he will not be able to recapture the sense of awe and holiness with which he had once approached G-d's Torah.

"Hence if he had picked up some apparent discrepancies between secular science and the Torah, he is inclined to solve the difficulty by simply taking the words of the Torah or of Chazal out of their meaning in order to harmonize them with the college textbooks, or even those used in high schools or public

The laws of nature seem to control the weather, medicine seems to determine health, and a college degree apparently guarantees financial security.





schools. Unfortunately, this tendency has made inroads even among talmidei kollelim, who sit and study Torah at great personal “sacrifice,” yet whose hashkafah was contaminated by the secular hashkafah of the college.”²

Practically, this *timtum hamoach vehalev*—dulling of the mind and heart, as the Rebbe says about secular studies—expresses itself as a dulled sensitivity to *ruchnius* and a skewed sense of priorities.

As the Rebbe once said:

“A woman came in to see me—a frum woman with a sheitel and her husband with a beard—and her son goes to high school. I asked her what their plans are for when he finishes high school. She answered that he will go to college—after all, he has to be a ‘mentsch.’

“I asked her: ‘And what would it hurt if he would be a gaon, fluent in Shas and Poskim?’

“She answered [here the Rebbe smiled]: ‘Indeed, he will be a gaon, but he won’t be a mentsch; he won’t know when Shakespeare and the like were born.’”³

An early childhood teacher who has been schooled in modern educational philosophy will likely prioritize academic and practical skills over a holy *chinuch* (“But you don’t understand, the quality of the Jewish books can’t compare to literary classics!”). A parent or teacher who has been influenced by secular studies will find it more important that a child be able to

identify the stages of butterfly metamorphosis than identify the *keilim* of the Beis Hamikdash. Correct grammar will take priority over fluency in *maamarei Chazal*.⁴

Even the Torah that they do teach the children will be defined in terms of emotional, cognitive, motor and sensory development, rather than by Torah’s goal, as described by the Rebbe: “*To reveal in the children the nefesh Elohis within them, such that this recognition permeates their entire being, and all of their actions, speech and even thought are permeated with kedushah.*”⁵

When considering what path to take in life, one influenced by secularism is more likely to think in terms of comfort, interest and material gain than about the *shlichus* for which his or her *neshamah* was sent to this world. (“Go into *chinuch*? For no pay? When I can do so many other, more prestigious and better-paying jobs?”) Facing challenges in parenting, a mother will naturally be more inclined to consult secular parenting books than a *mashpia* who is well versed in the perspectives of Torah and Chassidus (“What does Torah know about dealing with children’s emotions?”).

In instructions regarding the absorption of immigrants in Eretz Yisroel, the Rebbe said that having them attend university in Eretz Yisroel was extremely dangerous for various reasons, including:

“1. It creates a huge gap separating the students from their parents and the chachamim...”

“2. It ingrains in the students the perspective that the true wisdom is found by the goyim, and Yidden must strive to be like them and

² From a letter written in the Rebbe’s name to the editor of the *Jewish Press*. Thanks to Rabbi Michael Seligson for providing us with a copy of the letter.

³ From remarks of 5 Adar II 5727 - Sichos Kodosh 5727 page 493.

⁴ Even if there is nothing wrong with the practical skill or concept one teaches the child, the question is what the parent or teacher prioritizes and is more passionate about, a matter of values that the child absorbs.

⁵ *Toras Menachem* 5745 Vol. 4, pg. 2301.



stop being “batlanim,” and whoever is more goyish – he is the one who is wiser and more complete...

“And the fact that they don’t say all of this openly, rather through indirect implications... greatly increases the danger. Especially since amongst those implying all of this are those who in their personal lives keep Torah and mitzvos, and distort Torah to prove their points...”⁶

Impressed by the seeming “sophistication” of secular wisdom, one may *chas v’shalom* come to view Torah’s perspectives as simplistic and old-fashioned. The holiness of Torah and the recognition that it is the only and ultimate truth can *R”l* be forgotten. The Rebbe’s perspectives, which should be one’s absolute guide to life, are at risk of becoming “nice ideas.”

The above examples are neither theoretical nor extreme. They are very real, and they are happening all around us—and possibly to ourselves as well.

For those in their formative years, and especially before marriage, this concern of tainting one’s outlook should be even more worrisome.

Divergent Views

CONFLICTING TEACHINGS

Beyond the problem with secular studies, which are *klipas nogah*, college courses may involve the risk of a much more serious matter—studies that actually contradict Torah.

The Rambam writes in *Hilchos Avodah Zarah*:⁷

“We are warned *not to consider any thought which will cause us to uproot one of the fundamentals of the Torah.* We should not

turn our minds to these matters, think about them, or be drawn after the thoughts of our hearts..

“The Torah has warned about this matter, saying,⁸ “Do not stray after your hearts and eyes, which have led you to immorality” - i.e., each one of you should not follow his limited powers of understanding and think that he has comprehended the truth. Our Sages [interpreted this warning]: “After your hearts,” this refers to heresy; “after your eyes,” this refers to immorality.”

Based on this, the Alter Rebbe writes in *Hilchos Talmud Torah*:⁹

“[Even a scholar] may not [read] the texts of *minim*, i.e. the works of the gentile philosophers who deny [G-d’s] providence and [His gift of] prophecy. It is utterly forbidden to read them or peruse them, even sporadically, even to derive from them an ethical concept or [inspiration toward] the fear of Heaven... With regard to such texts, our Sages declared¹⁰ that “he who reads extraneous books has no share in the World to Come.”

What are these ideas and texts that contradict the fundamentals of Torah?

Firstly, there are many theories and principles that negate *emunah* in Hashem. These include—but are not limited to—the study of other religions, philosophy, and certain scientific theories such as those regarding the age of the universe and evolution. More innocuous subjects, like history and sociology, may also include ideas negating the fact that the world is created and led by Hashem.

Then there are concepts that conflict with specific Torah values and beliefs. These can be found within various subjects such as psychology,

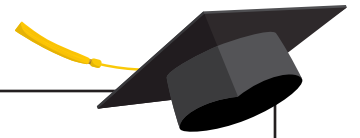
6 From a handwritten answer of the Rebbe regarding the absorption of immigrants to Eretz Yisroel, printed in *Kfar Chabad Magazine* Issue 783 in the column “*Mibeis HaMalchus*.” Ibid footnote 7

7 Sefer HaMada, *Hilchos Avodah Zara*, 2:3.

8 Bamidbar 15:39.

9 Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh Deiah*, *Hilchos Talmud Torah* 3:7.

10 Sanhedrin 10:1.



sociology, literature and history, just to mention a few. One example would be the normalization and promotion of immoral behavior.

Practically speaking, a student attending university, no matter in which field, will inevitably be exposed to many such topics. These non-Torah-compatible ideas may be found in a wide variety of courses and it is difficult if not impossible to avoid learning them, even if one were to be aware that they are problematic, which many students are not.

In addition to the halachic issues involved, studying topics that are incompatible with Yiddishkeit poses a great danger to one's *emunah*. As the Rebbe explained:

“Learning does not mean the study of facts. It means exposing oneself to certain circles and activities that stand against the values and beliefs of the believer. It is like taking a person from

hot surroundings and sending him into cold water; “shock treatment,” multiple times a day. How long can one endure this?”¹¹

What is perhaps of greater concern is that this problem exists even in the “*frum* colleges.” Despite the best of intentions on the part of the administration of any institution, the details of what is actually taught are ultimately in the hands of the instructor. Even if the teacher is *frum*, that

is unfortunately still not a guarantee that his *hashkafos* are entirely in line with Torah, or that she is aware of all potential conflicts between Torah and the material being taught.

Case in point:

A *frum* history teacher in a “*frum* college” taught Christian views as part of a course. When a student protested, the teacher defended her decision by bringing a “proof” from Torah:

The Ohr HaChayim asks why the wise idea to set up a system of courts needed to come from Yisro, a foreigner, rather than from amongst Bnei

Yisroel. He explains that Hashem’s connection to the Yidden is not based on their intelligence; after all, there are wise non-Jews as well. Rather, Hashem chose us purely out of a love for us that supersedes intellect.

However, the history teacher saw in this Ohr Hachayim a proof that we should pursue the intellect of the wise *goyim*!

In the Rebbe’s own words:

*“The fact that they don’t say all of this [that secular scholars are wiser] openly, rather through indirect implications... **greatly increases the danger.** Especially since amongst those implying all of this are those who in their personal lives keep Torah and mitzvos, and **distort Torah to prove their points...**”¹²*

Impressed by the seeming “sophistication” of secular wisdom, one may chas v’shalom come to view Torah’s perspectives as simplistic and old-fashioned.

11 From a *yechidus* of 5715, published in Kfar Chabad Magazine Vol. 511 p. 22

12 From a handwritten answer of the Rebbe regarding the absorption of immigrants to Eretz Yisroel, printed in the *Kfar Chabad Magazine* Issue 783 in the column “Mibeis HaMalchus.”



SUBTLE DIFFERENCES

On a subtler level, there are many ideas taught in a variety of college subjects that are at odds with Torah's perspectives. This doesn't mean they are absolutely wrong; rather, it depends on how they are applied. But as with many areas of *kedushah*, truth lies in subtlety. If one does not have a strong Torah background and clarity in Yiddishe values, one can be led astray by contemporary theories, and be led to believe that they are compatible with Torah.

Some examples:

Educational Theories:

Many modern educational theories focus on taking the child's lead and are almost exclusively about love.

The Rebbe expressed his opinion about the Montessori model of education, that although many of its techniques can be implemented, a school should not be based on its theories.¹³ This is because the underlying premise of Montessori runs against the essential Torah value of instilling *kabalas ol* within children.

Similar issues present themselves with educational philosophies such as "Love and Logic," guiding children to come to positive behaviors on their own, rather than laying down rules. Modern-day secular wisdom teaches that the teacher should not be the absolute authority in the classroom. Is that in line with the Torah view of teachers? Should young students really be addressed as "friends"?

Some of these ideas could perhaps be applied in the context of a framework of *kabalas ol* and *kibud horim umorim*, but in their original form they are problematic.

Psychology:

Many mainstream psychological theories

conflict with the makeup of a Yid's psyche and personality, as laid out in Chassidus. Classic psychological models view a person as a more sophisticated animal, and they guide a person accordingly. Thus, the Rebbe often expressed concern with visiting psychologists who could influence the patient negatively. These fundamental differences of perspective affect one's approach to topics such as self-esteem, motivation, and depression, amongst many others.

For example:

Contemporary secular wisdom approaches marriage from a self-centered perspective of two individuals who each want to achieve happiness, and the challenge is to satisfy each party's wants. In the Torah perspective, they are two halves of a *neshamah* reuniting by giving to each other and bringing Hashem into their relationship. These fundamental attitudes will have significant repercussions on the practical advice a therapist will offer.

Liberalism:

Contemporary secular wisdom promotes liberal philosophies on everything from gender roles to ethical issues. Truth is portrayed as relative; morality is seen from the perspective of personal choice; and one is to be open-minded about the many "different right ways" of doing things. It is obvious that these ideas stand in direct contrast to belief in the absolute truth of Torah.

Similarly, the liberal perspectives popular in academia today emphasize compassion and understanding for all, including those who commit evil. Regarding this type of misguided sympathy that serves to encourage terrorist or criminal behavior, our

¹³ Answer of the Rebbe to Mrs. Reba Sharfstein of Cincinnati, online at Chabad.org/1418738.

Sages taught¹⁴, “One who is compassionate to the cruel will ultimately be cruel to the compassionate.”

These are only a few examples of the potential areas of conflict, and there are many more. Are the teachers in the “*frum* colleges” well-versed in these issues? Do they understand which theories of psychology are compatible with Torah and which are not? Are they careful to filter and adapt the educational theories, approaching them from a Torah perspective?

The reality is that many teachers in the “*frum* colleges” are at best unaware of the conflicts, and at worst are promoting ideas that they know are considered problematic.

When a person is exposed to new ideas that conflict with what he has been taught based on Torah, it creates a sense of confusion and cognitive dissonance. Even worse, one begins to convince oneself that the secular or self-centered values are actually Torah. The teacher who is enamored with the Montessori method of education may enthusiastically explain how this is the application of *chanoch lenaar al pi darko*, and how the trends of treating children as equals and referring to them as “friends” fit with *ve’ahavta lereiacha kamocho*. The student, whose mind has been influenced by all of these ideas, can come to believe that his pursuit of a degree is a holy endeavor, for it is a Torah obligation to make a *keili* for *parnassah*, or moreover, that this will enable her to go on *shlichus* one day...

CAREERS VS. TRADES

In contrast to the Rebbe’s opposition to college, the Rebbe encouraged the opening of trade schools “for those who cannot learn *limudei kodesh* all day long,” and they should therefore train for a vocation.¹⁵

Though an extensive exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of this article, the apparent

difference between the two is this:

In the case of college, one studies secular subjects of an intellectual nature, which contain both direct and indirect assaults on the Torah way of thinking. For a vocation, however, one trains for a practical trade which does not involve theories, ideas or perspectives.

Practical occupations that involve hands-on work, as well as business, technology and finance, do not involve the risks inherent in secular studies.

One who is exploring job options should discuss with a Rav or *mashpia* whether they should give priority to these trades instead of careers that require a degree. ❧

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To read Part I of this three-part series, which was published in the Shvat 5779 N’shei Chabad Newsletter, please visit nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives/college, or email collegebooklet@gmail.com.

¹⁴ Koheles Rabba 7:16.

¹⁵ See index of *Igros Kodesh* for the extensive correspondence from the Rebbe to the administration of Kfar Chabad on this topic.