

Prof. Shalom Carmy, born in Brooklyn, studied at Yeshiva College and RIETS under Rabbi Lichtenstein and the Rav. Completing RIETS in 1974 he began his teaching career at Yeshiva and at Drisha Institute for Women.

He is presently executive editor of Tradition and teaches Bible and philosophy in both Yeshiva and Stern College. This article was written for Commentator in 1982 and titled "Why I Read Philosophy, etc.". It discusses the importance of the study of Liberal Arts in the curriculum of the thinking religious individual.



WHY I READ PHILOSOPHY, HISTORY, LITERATURE, ETC.

by Shalom Carmy

1) Man was created by G-d in His image. Man's destiny in this world is the service of G-d: "Beloved is man, for he was created in the image." (Avot 3).

2) Man is catastrophically alienated from G-d. He doesn't understand his nature and destiny. He has tarnished the image of G-d. "What man fails to comprehend is not the world around him, but the world within him . . . Let me add that man fails to recognize himself because he is man. As man, he was cursed by the Almighty, condemned to misuse his freedom and to lose his own self" (*Maran haRav Soloveichik (shlit'a*, writing in *Tradition* 17:2, Spring 1978, p.62).

These two theses are the necessary basis for any true grasp of the human condition: the astonishing glory which G-d intended for man, on the one hand, and for the stinking morass in which he is inextricably mired, on the other hand. Man, as thinking spirit, must strive to understand G-d's Torah and G-d's creation while liberating himself from the falsity and viciousness which sicken his existence.

What constitutes the unique glory of man? Biologists dispute whether it is man's relatively large brain or his upright posture to which he owes his advantage over creation. However that might be, the Torah tells us, according to Onkelos, that G-d infused in man that living spirit which made him a *nefesh chayya* — a speaking being. In other words, *language* is the basis of man's special destiny.

The power of speech is prior to thought; through imaginative thought, man creates new worlds and achieves new insights into the world that confronts him. Language enables him to categorize the universe: the Torah speaks of Adam determining the names of the animals. Gifted with language, he is capable of intellectual creativity: he can reflect upon his experience of the world and thus make it new. This creativity is expressed in all areas of life: in exploring the

Torah as surely as the external world, the social world, the world of psyche. To expand the range of our language and the amplitude of our thought is to deepen our knowledge and participation in the world that G-d has presented to us, the worlds of Halacha and Aggada.

The so-called humanities are a vital part of the record of our life within language. Philosophy explores the modes of consciousness of our experience. History removes us from the realm of immediate sensation so that we come to reflect upon where we, and our culture, come from, and where we are going. Imaginative writing (fiction, poetry, etc.), standing in relation to the primary world of experience without being of it, offers us new perspectives, both linguistically and psychologically, from which to grasp our experience.

In a word, then, our ability to engage in the intellectual activities characteristic of the humanities enhances our understanding of the human world. If, as R. Hutter *z"l* has maintained, "any amplification of our understanding and penetration in depth in any event of world history in general or Jewish history in particular (from a Torah viewpoint) — is nothing but *knowing the ways of G-d*. And obviously there is no greater approach to *Avinu she-ba-Shamayim* than this . . ." (*Pahad Yitzhak: Letters #54*), then the liberal arts provide a vital service to those who seek after G-d.

II

Thus far we have addressed man's aspiration to fulfill his glorious destiny of knowing G-d. What of the more urgent task of liberating oneself from bondage to the radical evil of man? How can man make his way among the mine-fields of contradictory impulses. Let me quote the Rav again: "Man is indeed a liar, because he is involved in an unresolvable contradiction, in an insoluble dialectic, because he is caught like Abraham's ram in a thicket of antinomies and dichotomies Man, confused, kneels in prayer, petitioning G-d, who has burdened him with this dialectic, to guide him and to enlighten him. The Halacha is concerned with this dilemma and tries to help man in such critical moments. The Halacha, of course, did not discover the synthesis, since the latter *does not exist*" (Ibid. p.26; my italics - S.C.)

No; there is no solution to the existential dilemma of man. The Halacha may offer guidance, but ultimately man is alone before G-d. All we know is that man is alienated from G-d, and must return to G-d, by finding himself.

To return to G-d, to do *tsuva*, man must create himself anew—he must become a personality capable of appropriating what G-d has offered him at Sinai. "To create oneself"—this phrase brings us back to the idea of creativity. (Readers of the Rav's *Ish haHalacha* will no doubt remember that he regards the Torah concept of *tsuva* as part of the same philosophical framework in which he places the intellectual creativity of halachic man.) So we are back with man's unique ability, through imaginative language, to examine his past failures and complexities and those of the culture in which he is willfully implicated, to discover who he may become and what his true needs are, what the world is and what place he can make for himself in it.

In this light, studying the humanities contributes not only to the intellectual-religious goal of approaching G-d by knowing the human reality that is so crucial a part of His work, but also to the agonized self-understanding that is necessary for him to create his present and future as a *baal tsuva*: "know thyself" is a moral-religious imperative. What is self-knowledge? Certainly not less than a grasp of human nature and history, the ways of human thought and philosophy, and, not least, an awareness of human freedom and man's capacity *qua nefesh chayya* (in Onkelos's sense) to imagine and create new beginnings and new worlds.

III

This has been, perforce, an inadequate discussion, deficient in nuance and complexity. It would take several fortinies to cover some of the issues we have raised. Yet I can't end without mentioning two objections to my approach:

1) Some would say that it isn't necessary for us, in order to become *baalei tsuva*, to engage in a fundamental work of self-knowledge drawing upon all our resources as students of Torah and

observers of Western culture. Perhaps, if we try very very hard to please G-d all questions about ourselves and our society will recede into irrelevance. Can't we become, by sheer will power and good will, completely detached from Western civilization and its ambiguous heritage; can't we awake, citizens of a new world, fresh as Adam on the day of creation? The dream is powerful: as the Rav told us a moment ago, the clash of opposing values in man is indeed a staggering one. As much, however, as we should like to escape conflict and self-examination, it simply will not work. We are willy nilly part of an all-too-human culture, though as religious individuals we are surely in rebellion against many of its values; and we are not nearly so angel perfect that we can afford not to question ourselves, and question hard. As R. Yehiel Weinberg *z"l* argued, regarding a Yeshiva world far more sheltered than any we can easily imagine, one need only recognize the moral failings of many great and sincerely dedicated Torah scholars to realize the importance of a full self-searching for lesser men. More poetically, and addressing a situation somewhat closer to our own, R. Aharon Lichtenstein *shlita* has written: "The *Apikoros*, whom according to the *Mishnah*, we should be able to answer, need not be a free-thinker nor an idolator. There is an *Apikoros* within, a serpent potentially lurking within the finest of Edens, and we must be ready to reply to *his* proffer of the bitter-sweet apple. But we must first read a treatise on serpentine psychology." (Geshet, Vol. I p.9)

2) That the second objection can be heard from supposedly *frum* people is perhaps the strongest argument in favor of my response to the first. One sometimes hears the claim that it's OK to learn about the human being from "secular" sources, but only the biology and psychology (to the extent that the latter is experimental). These are "science" and offer "hard" data about man, while literature, philosophy, etc. do not reach such "hard, verifiable" conclusions, but seem to be rooted in human consciousness and subjectivity. "Facts" yes, "understanding" no.

It is difficult to imagine such opinions being held by those who claim to accept the account of man which is fundamental to the Torah view. Surely we may learn a great deal from the sciences—he who wishes to understand the human condition ought not to be alienated

from the achievements of the biological sciences, and can even benefit from an awareness of the thinking current in mathematics and physics. Ultimately, however, man's uniqueness and his spiritual value derive from the *nefesh chaya*, man's free will and creativity: "not the world around him, but the world within him." Because of man's uniqueness and subjectivity, stresses Kierkegaard, "the book of life, unlike the book of math, has no answers in the back." How much of the modern assault on the dignity of man and the service of his Creator is nothing more than the revenge of the deterministic spirit against man's uniqueness and creativity, the uncritical scientist's impatience with the phenomenology of human inwardness and freedom? It is philosophy and poetry, properly employed, from which the Torah individual may derive the linguistic and conceptual tools with which to define a Torah perspective upon the theoretical framework of the sciences.

One last point: Not everyone will profit religiously from the study of the liberal arts. *Hazal* have compared the *Talmid Hacham* who lacks *daat* to a carcass (*nevela*) to the detriment of the former; the correctness of their judgment is more painfully brought home to us than we often care to admit. Why should it be different, I'havdil with regard to the humanities? In Lichtenberg's phrase: one cannot expect a saint to peer out of a mirror when a monkey is looking in. The vicious and self-deceiving can still, whatever they read, remain vicious and self-deceiving. Only we believe that, with the study of Torah and with greater awareness of one's human condition, they will find it a little harder. . .

