



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת חקת תשס"ח • Parshas Chukas 5768

DYING TO LEARN

Although some deranged and bloodthirsty cultures around the world glorify suicide, the Torah considers it deplorable. One who takes his own life (*r"l*) has committed a grievous sin, to the extent that mourning is not conducted for his sake (See Rashi to Bereishis 9:5; *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 345:1 and *Shach* there #1).

It should come as somewhat of a surprise, then, that *Chazal* choose to characterize the necessary methods for successful Torah study in just such a manner.

STARK DESCRIPTION

When introducing the type of contamination known as *tumas ohel* ('tent defilement') – whereby a corpse causes impurity to anyone under the same roof – the Torah in this week's *parshah* states:

זאת התורה אדם כי ימות בִּתְהוֹמָהּ...

"This is the Torah (law): When a man dies in a tent..." (*Bamidbar, 19:14*).

Although the *posuk* proceeds to discuss the laws of *tumah*, *Chazal* perceive in these words a reference to Torah study itself:

אין דבְּרֵי תוֹרָה מִתְקַיְמִים אֶלָּא בְּמִי שְׂמִמִּית עַצְמוֹ
עֲלֵיהֶם שְׁנֵאָמַר, "זאת התורה אדם כי ימות בִּתְהוֹמָהּ."

"True success in learning Torah can only be achieved by one who 'kills himself' over it, as the verse says: 'This is the (way to achieve in) Torah: When a man dies in the tent (of Torah; a reference to the study hall)...'" (*Gittin 57b*).

Superficially, one can understand this teaching of *Chazal* to be emphasizing the need for real exertion when studying Torah (which, of course, is true in and of itself, and is stated by *Chazal* in many other places). However, if that is all *Chazal* meant to impart here, their choice of expression seems somewhat out of place. Couldn't they have found some other way to encourage

effort in Torah study other than by invoking a seemingly extreme and morbid image?

Obviously, the intent of *Chazal* goes much deeper than that. The only question is, what exactly are they trying to convey with such a stark description?

To clarify this enigmatic statement of *Chazal*, the Chafetz Chaim (*Shmiras Halashon, Sha'ar Hatorah, ch. 4, final footnote*) relates an inspiring story concerning an individual who, later in life, took the step of devoting himself to full-time learning:

BORN AGAIN

A certain extremely wealthy businessman began contemplating his spiritual future. Recognizing the need to develop his spiritual energies, he came to a monumental decision: from now on, he would detach himself from his affluent, material lifestyle, and totally immerse himself in the 'tents of Torah'.

His family members were not particularly thrilled with his decision, to say the least. They much preferred that he stay on his prior course of amassing an ever-increasing fortune. Why should they be deprived of the good life because he wanted to enjoy the company of Abaye and Rava?

Their protests, however, were in vain. The former tycoon remained steadfast in his newfound pursuit of blissful diligence in Torah study.

His good friends were impressed with his fortitude. "How were you able to withstand all of the pressure from your family and business associates?" they asked him. And so, he revealed to them his secret strategy, revealing the secret of *Chazal's* cryptic statement as well.

"I closed my eyes, and tried to picture what things would be like in the end, if I had not changed course. I imagined that I *died*, and beheld the ensuing scene:

"My soul was brought before the Throne of Divine Justice, where I stood in judgment before the King of

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נפטר כ"ג טבת תשס"ח

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of ה'הייב בן וועלורועל ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no
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Kings, who proceeded to review before me the events of my life.

“I granted you much life and time in this world. How did you choose to spend this time?” He asked me.

“Well, ummmm...I spent a lot of time building up my business. Business kept booming, making me busier and busier...,” I tried to answer.

“And what about Torah, My son...did you utilize your time on earth to learn My Torah?”

“Well, ummm, like I said...I was very busy...you know, managing all those investments, and...and...”

“As I stood there stammering, I already knew what the verdict would be. I had not lived up to my potential as far as Torah was concerned, and had devoted all of my energies to material gain, which was of no help to me there.

“Nevertheless, when the ‘Guilty’ verdict was announced, I was seized with terror and anguish.

“Wait!!!” I cried out. ‘I regret so much that I did not prioritize my life and time properly! Woe is to me!! Could I please...please, have a second chance to correct my mistakes?’ I pleaded.

“And then, the unbelievable occurred. Although basically unheard of in that world, I was uncharacteristically given a reprieve! I was allowed to come back to earth and repent for my mistakes!

“What do you think the first thing I did was? I ran straight to the Beis Medrash, opened a Gemara, and started learning!

“And whenever pressure was exerted on me to leave my beloved Torah, I simply repeated this exercise. I once again pictured that I had died, gone to Shamayim, been condemned for lack of Torah study, but was then given a second chance. By contemplating this scenario, my resolve would be strengthened, as I would realize I had no time to spare.”

DYING TO LIVE

This, concludes the Chafetz Chaim, is what Chazal meant by ‘killing oneself’ in order to learn and achieve

in Torah. By recalling that one does not live forever, a person may be spurred on to make the most of his years.

Obviously, every individual has to assess his personal situation, and consult with his mentors. Yet, it is worthwhile to bear in mind the words of R’ Meir in Avos 4:10:

הוֹי מְמַעֵט בְּעֵסֶק, וְעֹסֵק בְּתוֹרָה.

“Strive to spend less time on business, and more time on learning.”

Fulfilling Chazal’s advice of ‘killing oneself’ to learn Torah is not a morbid pursuit at all. On the contrary, the enhancement to one’s life as a result of such an endeavor will be a fulfillment of another of Avos’s eternal maxims, as stated by Hillel:

מְרַבֵּה תוֹרָה, מְרַבֵּה חַיִּים.

“He who increases his Torah study, increases life.” (Avos 2:7)

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