

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Yehoshua *ben* Yitzchok *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

The Continuous Learning Process of Life

PARSHAS RE’EH 5777

The Conflict

Last week, we addressed the conundrum of competing imperatives, or, more accurately, the manner in which it is addressed by Chazal. There is, on the one hand, the directive to involve oneself constantly in Torah study; as the *passuk* states: לֹא יִמּוּשׁ סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה מִפִּיךָ וְהָגִיתָ בוֹ יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה – “This book of Torah shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall meditate therein day and night” (*Yehoshua 1:8*). On the other hand, there is the unfortunate reality that man has been cursed to retrieve “your bread by the sweat of your brow” (*cf. Bereishis 3:17-19*). And so, this gives rise to an ongoing conflict of sorts: how can these essential endeavors be reconciled?

As we pointed out last week, this matter is the subject of a fundamental Tannaic debate (*Berachos 35b*). R’ Shimon bar Yochai was of the opinion that Torah study is completely paramount, to the extent that one must never cease – not even to engage in a livelihood. Should Yisrael prove worthy, he explained, their labor would be performed by others on their behalf. R’ Yishmael, however, took a different approach. While of course also subscribing to the primacy of Torah, he nevertheless sanctions the involvement in pursuing a livelihood.

An important question that seems to remain, however, is how exactly R’ Yishmael reconciles the *pesukim*. That is, he does cite a verse from the Torah – “*V’asafta deganecha* – And you shall gather your grain” (*Devarim 11:14*) – which seems to support the involvement in securing a livelihood. At the same time, however, he must also contend with the other directive, whose plain meaning implies an imperative to maintain uninterrupted involvement in Torah study: לֹא יִמּוּשׁ סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה מִפִּיךָ – “This book of Torah shall not depart from your mouth.” The enlightening explanation of R’ Chayim Volozhiner seems to have clarified this issue. While the common perception is that R’ Yishmael’s leniency allows for at least a temporary interruption of Torah study, R’ Chayim asserts that this is not, in fact, the case. Essentially, R’ Yishmael agrees with R’ Shimon bar Yochai that involvement in Torah may not cease – not even for a moment and not even for the pressing need of procuring sustenance. When R’ Yishmael sanctioned the pursuit of a livelihood, he intended this to be done only in concert with simultaneous Torah study; that is, even while plowing or sowing, the worker should continue to “think in learning.” What emerges, then, is that a dedicated servant of Hashem can indeed fulfill the dictum of “*V’hagisa bo yomam va’laylah*,” even while engaging in other necessities of life.

As we shall see, this week’s *parshah* provides some further insight into how it is possible, at the same time, to engage in these seemingly conflicting endeavors.

Keeping and Waiting

There is a certain term that appears with some frequency in connection with Torah observance; but with its familiarity, there may be a certain paucity of understanding its true intent. This is the (ostensibly) simple notion of “*shemiras hamitzvos*,” which comes up in the beginning of the *parshah*. As it states: וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל־הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת־הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִּי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם – “And you shall ‘keep’ to do all of the statutes and laws that I am placing before you today” (*Devarim 11:32*). We have translated this term in its conventional sense, meaning

to “keep.” But upon some further contemplation, one may realize that the definition is somewhat vague; what exactly does “keeping” the *mitzvos* entail? Doing them? That is stated immediately afterward: “*U’shmartem la’asos* – You shall keep to do.” What, then, is the Torah really implying here?

The Chafetz Chayim (*Sichos Chafetz Chayim*) interprets this term in accordance with its usage in the episode involving Yosef and his dreams. The Torah relates the dreams Yosef had about his dominance over his brothers, which caused them no lack of consternation and led to a rebuke from his father. Nonetheless, the *passuk* concludes: “*V’aviv shamar es ha’davar* – And his father ‘kept’ the matter” (*Bereishis 37:11*). Rashi there elucidates what was meant by his father’s “keeping”: “He would wait and hope expectantly when the matter would actually be fulfilled.” “*Shemirah*,” then, in this context, refers to waiting with eager anticipation. The Chafetz Chayim applies this definition to our verse as well; the Torah here is conveying to us the ideal attitude toward *mitzvos*. “*U’shmartem la’asos*”: you should eagerly anticipate *mitzvos*, constantly searching for an opportunity and chance to fulfill even more.

Elsewhere (*Shem Olam, ch. 5*) the Chafetz Chayim elaborates on the application of such a mindset specifically regarding Torah study. How may it be determined if one is truly anticipating and hoping for an opportunity to learn more? The litmus test, he explains, is how he spends his spare moments. A person may be in a circumstance in which he is weighed down and preoccupied with procuring his sustenance. But there inevitably arise certain moments when he does find himself temporarily freed from the burden. Something remarkable occurs if he seizes those times and utilizes them for Torah study. For then he reveals where his true desire lies; when such is the case, then, Hashem accounts it to that individual as if he had been engaged in constant Torah study – *even while actually involved in addressing his material needs*.

In a most interesting way, this notion is manifest in the Mishnah in Avos (4:10), which states:

אם בטלת מן התורה, יש לך בטלים הרבה כנגדך. ואם עמלת בתורה, יש לו שכר הרבה לתן לך.

“If you neglect Torah study, there shall be many ‘neglects’ against you. But if you toil in the Torah, (Hashem) has abundant reward to grant to you.”

The Chafetz Chayim explains this somewhat enigmatic teaching as referring to the person described above: one who is normally unable to engage in constant Torah study due to the pressing needs of his livelihood. The real question is how he spends his few free moments – for this will have an overall, monumental effect. If he neglects Torah study in his spare time, then: “there are many ‘neglects against you.’” He reveals that he has no real interest in the endeavor of Torah study; as such, not only is he held accountable for wasting time in his spare moments, but even his working hours are seen as time away from Torah. On the other hand, if he grabs the opportunity and toils in Torah during his extra minutes, he shows where his heart is really at; had he the time and ability, he would learn even during his “preoccupied” hours. As such, he receives an abundance of reward. He is credited not only for the actual moments of study, but even his working period is accounted to him as if he was really learning Torah. (We shall see more on this broad topic in the coming weeks, *b’ezras Hashem*.)

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