

**MORASHAH**  
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*Parashat HaShavuah Series*

**Ekev**

This week's Parashah features the second paragraph of the *Shema*, which spells out the biblical notion of reward and punishment - if you do good, you will benefit; if you do bad, you lose out. Naturally, this passage is ripe for the question as to how we do good, and what our role is in achieving our reward.

There is a passage in the Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 35b) on this subject that I find particularly interesting. The Talmud deals with the words "*you shall gather your crops.*" (Deut. 11:14):

Our Rabbis taught: what do the words 'and you shall gather your crops' teach us? Since it says, "the words of this Torah scroll should never depart from your mouth." (Joshua 1:8), it is possible that this verse is literal [i.e., that all one's time should be devoted exclusively to study of Torah]. Therefore it teaches "you shall gather your crops" - i.e., practice an occupation along with the [the study of] them (the words of Torah).

The Talmud teaches here that our study of Torah cannot lead us away from the practical, down-to-earth parts of our lives. God expects us to be a part of the world and to deal with the necessities of life.

When I read this passage, I begin to question some other Jews who perhaps don't see their role in the world the same way. There are some in the Jewish community who want to study all day, and figure that their sustenance will come from another source. I wonder how they justify such behavior. What about Rabban Gamliel's teaching in Avot 2:2 "*learning of Torah is best when combined with a livelihood?*"

My amazement at the desire to dedicate life to study of Torah is, perhaps, answered by the next words in the Talmud following the commentary on "*you shall gather your crops.*" The Talmud tells us that this is the teaching of Rabbi Yishma'el, and then contrasts the teaching of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai:

Is it possible to have a man plow when it is time to plow, seed when it is time to seed, cut when it is time to cut, thresh when it is time to thresh, and winnow at the time of winnowing?! What would happen to Torah?! Rather, when Israel does the will of God (i.e., study of Torah), their labor is done by others.

So we have here a classic rabbinic debate. To Rabbi Yishma'el and Rabban Gamliel, proper observance of Torah includes taking time for worldly needs. For Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, one need only do the spiritual side of God's will, and in that case the physical side will take care of itself. Although Rabbi Yishma'el's opinion seems to be the more accepted opinion among

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the sages (in the Talmud, note Abaye's support for Rabbi Yishma'el's statement), there certainly is a Talmudic opinion to support the opinion that Torah should be studied to the exclusion of gainful employment.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai is also part of another interesting debate. Talmud Bavli 33b reports:

Rabbi Judah, Rabbi Yosi, and Rabbi Shimon were sitting together . . . Rabbi Judah began, saying: "How wonderful are the creations of this nation [the Romans]? They made markets, and bridges, and bathhouses . . . Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai responded, saying, "Everything they made, they did only for themselves - they made markets to put harlots in them, they made bathhouses to bring themselves physical pleasure, [and built] bridges in order to charge toll for them.

So, for Rabbi Judah the Romans were decent folks. Their advanced abilities and technology had gone far to improve quality of life. But to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the Romans were wolves in sheep's clothing. Yes, they built bridges, but only to make money. And they built bath houses, but only because they enjoyed them. As for the creation of markets - these markets were created only to encourage a depraved way of life. One can almost hear Rabbi Shimon complaining about the effect of the Hollywood music industry or the like.

Sometimes I think we tend to look at the challenges facing modern halakhic Judaism as unique. We might be tempted to think that it is only because of the enlightenment that we have Jews so interested in being a part of the outside society, or interested in finding well-paying jobs. Or we might think that radical tendencies of today's right-wing orthodox have led them to decide to forsake earning a livelihood or to shun everything in the outside world. But the truth is, "*What has happened, is what will happen, what was done, is what will be done - there is nothing new under the sun.*" (Eccl. 1:9).

Our Talmud tells us that our ancient rabbis debated how best to balance our desire to serve God with our needs in this world. Like all good debates, the matter is not resolved. As we are taught in Avot 5:17, "*all disagreements that are for the sake of heaven are destined to continue.*" How do we balance our lives of Torah with our needs for livelihood? Can we have benefit from secular society, or should we try to isolate ourselves? Reasonable minds disagreed about these questions millennia ago. And reasonable minds continue to debate it today.

I suppose we should draw two conclusions. We should realize that whatever conclusions we make about this issue, we need not apologize and feel that we are less "frum" (religious) because of it. We all have a great legacy that supports us - be it that of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, or of Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Judah. We should respect those who come to different conclusions, rather than labeling them either radicals or slackers based on what they have decided. We are all part of a classic debate. We should take pride in our own positions, but have respect for those who have come to other conclusions.

May we all be privileged to continue the search for a balance between Torah and livelihood, between engaging in society and protecting our beliefs. May the search for this balance in our lives lead us to greater love of Torah and greater respect for everyone else who seeks the same.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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