

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

The Way of the World

PARSHAS EIKEV 5777

There is a well-known and fundamental Talmudic dispute regarding two competing endeavors. On the one hand, there is the imperative of constant Torah study, as contained in the *passuk*: לֹא יִמּוּשׁ סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה מִפִּיךָ וְהִגִּיתָ בוּ 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, this week’s *parshah* features the passage that constitutes the second paragraph of the daily Shema; and therein, the Torah refers to involvement in the procurement of sustenance: “*V’asafta d’ganecha* – You shall gather your grain” (*Devarim 11:14*).

Search for Consistency

In a memorable passage, the Gemara (*Berachos 35b*) records the conflicting opinions regarding the relationship between these two matters:

... Since it says, “This book of Torah shall not depart from your mouths,” I might think the literal implication is intended (i.e., to constantly study without interruption of any sort); therefore, it also says: “*V’asafta d’ganecha* – You shall gather your grain,” (resulting in the following instruction:) “*Hanheig bahen minhag derech erez* – One should ensure that his Torah studies are accompanied by involvement in ‘the way of the world’ (i.e., the procurement of material needs)”; These are the words of R’ Yishmael.

R’ Shimon ben Yochai says: Could it be, that a person should plow during the plowing season, plant during the planting season, harvest during the harvesting season, thresh during the threshing season, and winnow when there is wind? (If so –) what shall become of Torah study? Rather: When Yisrael complies with the will of Hashem, their labor shall automatically be performed by others on their behalf... But when Yisrael does not comply with the will of Hashem, they will be compelled to perform the labor themselves, (in accordance with the verse:) “*V’asafta d’ganecha.*”

We seem to have, then, a clear demarcation on this matter. All are in agreement, of course, that unnecessary and avoidable *bittul Torah* (neglect of Torah study) is forbidden, even for a moment. The question arises only in regard to providing for one’s needs. R’ Yishmael permits the cessation of learning for this endeavor, while R’ Shimon bar Yochai insists that one may not interrupt his learning even on this account.

The Chida (*Birkei Yosef, Yoreh Dei’ah 246:1*) points out that there seems to be an inconsistency with R’ Yishmael’s lenient opinion. Elsewhere, the Gemara (*Menachos 99b*) records a question that was posed to R’ Yishmael by his erudite nephew: “Someone like myself, who has learned the entire Torah – am I permitted to engage in the study of Greek wisdom?” (R’ Shach [*Introduction to Avi Ezri, 2nd Edition*] explained that this nephew sought to pursue this study to secure gainful employment thereby.) Referring to the *passuk* mentioned above (“You shall meditate therein day and night”), R’ Yishmael answered: “Go and search out an hour that is neither part of the day or night, and you may study Greek wisdom during that time.” (In other words – sorry, but “no.”) Here, then, R’ Yishmael apparently does not allow interruption for Torah study, even for the purpose of procuring

sustenance. How does this square with his stated position earlier, when he did sanction such an endeavor?

Multi-tasking

The answer may lie in the well-known Mishnah (*Avos* 2:2), which states:

יָפֵה תִּלְמוּד תּוֹרָה עִם דְּרֵךְ אֶרֶץ.

“It is proper for Torah study to be combined with ‘the way of the world’ (procurement of sustenance).”

At first glance, this statement may appear to be an endorsement of the above position, fully sanctioning the interruption of Torah study for the purpose of securing livelihood. However, R’ Chaim Volozhiner (*Ru’ach Chayim*) adds an important clarification, one which sheds much light on R’ Yishmael’s actual position. He explains that, in essence, R’ Yishmael actually *agrees* with R’ Shimon bar Yochai that Torah study may never be interrupted – not for any reason. R’ Yishmael’s leniency sanctioning the involvement in plowing, planting, etc., was not meant to *supplant* Torah study; rather, he requires the laborer to *continue meditating on Torah topics while involved with his work*. This is the meaning of the Mishnah here: “*Yafeh Talmud Torah im derech erez*” – that is, it is most proper when Torah study accompanies the engagement in work. This is also what R’ Yishmael meant when he declared: “*Hanheig bahen minhag derech erez* – Conduct yourself with them in accompaniment of *derech erez*.” That is, one should ensure that even when compelled to engage in work, his mind should not cease from dwelling on Torah thoughts; the Torah should also be a part of his involvement in his work (*cf. also Nefesh Hachayim* 1:8).

Based on this, R’ Yeruchem Olshin sought to resolve the issue raised by the Chida. In *Berachos*, R’ Yishmael seemed to permit the interruption of Torah study for engagement in sustenance, but in *Menachos*, it seems he forbade his nephew from doing just that! In light of R’ Chayim Volozhiner’s explanation, however, we see that the type of occupation can be a determining factor. That is, according to R’ Chayim, R’ Yishmael never permitted complete cessation of Torah study; he permitted the engagement in labor, but only insofar as he can continue “thinking in learning” while he works. As such, it would emerge that R’ Yishmael’s leniency would hinge on this contingency. Thus, if one were to plow or plant, for example, it is certainly possible to perform this type of activity while simultaneously dwelling on Torah thoughts. But R’ Yishmael’s nephew had inquired about engaging in the study of Greek wisdom. While this was also intended for the purpose of procuring sustenance, it is quite clear that such an endeavor would preclude the true fulfillment of “*Torah im derech erez*,” for he could not possibly keep thinking Torah thoughts while at the same time studying a different subject.

As we shall see next week, *b’ezras Hashem*, there is yet another dimension to this “simultaneous involvement” in both Torah study and necessary engagement in material affairs.

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