

"VACATION AS VOCATION AND AVOCATION"

Most people regard vacation as a time for relaxation, "fun," and "good times," but hardly as a matter for profound thought. Yet the fact remains that, as an important aspect of leisure, vacation presents a most pressing problem. A growing literature, both in scholarly periodicals and heavily annotated tomes, testifies to the increasing concern with vacation and leisure. The new scientific, industrial, and economic conditions of our day have made more time available for more people than was ever dreamt of by our parents and grandparents. And even more is expected in the coming years. Predicted for the near future, for instance, is a four-day, twenty-hour week. In addition, early retirement alongside an increasing longevity means the addition of many non-work years to the ordinary life-time. What shall we do with all this time?

Vacation is therefore an important sociological, psychological, and even religious-spiritual problem. Of course the subject is too broad and comprehensive to attempt to exhaust within the confines of one talk.

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Nevertheless, permit me to explore with you some general Jewish guide-lines to the theory and practice of vacation.

There are basically three attitudes to vacation. The first is held by a respectable minority. This group consists of those who are frightened by leisure, and who are annoyed by anything but long hours of intensive work in which they feel comfortable and secure. They have no patience for relaxation, which they regard as mere idleness. They are happy only when they are occupied in their profession or business or skill.

Now is this an attractive point of view. Of course, anyone prefers a work-horse to a playboy. The late Lord Beaverbrook, in his book Don't Trust to Luck, very correctly said that "a man will come to less harm by over-work than by over-play."

Yet a Jewish approach is incompatible with this attitude, according to which work tends to become obsessive rather than creative, an end rather than a means, a form of neurotic escape from having to decide what to do with one's life. If one spends all his time in work it can make of him a mere human beast of burden, and squelch any aspects of his personality which are hidden and yearn for expression. Indeed, if, according to our point of view, to rest on Shabbat is divine, ^ethan to relax in middle of the week is -- human!

The second attitude towards vacation is entertained by many more people than the first. It regards vacation as a vocation, as a goal, indeed as the highest ideal and true purpose of man. It is an approach which issues from a dissatisfaction with labor, from a man's unhappiness with his work. Such people would like to have life-long leisure, vacation as a full time vocation or occupation.

The ancient Greeks, for instance, shared this view. They had more days of celebration than work-days in their calendar. The Romans, by the fourth century, counted 175 holidays in every year.

A thousand years ago, Saadia (Emunot Ve'deot, Part X) cited a group -- presumably Jewish -- who held the theory that "rest" (what we would call leisure or vacation) is the ideal human condition. There is a deceptive simplicity to their argument: since all good people strive for rest; since the higher one climbs on the social and economic ladder the more he takes for himself; since it is a condition in which there is no fatigue or anxiety; and since the Almighty gave us Shabbat and Yom Tov; hence it follows that this state of rest is the true desideratum, and vacation ought to be permanent. Saadia, of course, dismisses this as senseless. It is logical, he says, that rest should be valuable only after a period of exertion. Furthermore, it is unhygienic, and at best this kind of philosophy is a rationalization of laziness. Saadia might have added that more fatigue or anxiety results from an excess of rest than from an excess of work. It is an essentially negative attitude towards labor, which now becomes a chore and not a joy. Even more important, the Halakhah could never accept such a point of view. Jewish law

regards a professional gambler as pasul l'edot, automatically disqualified as a witness in court. The reason is not so much the suspicion that a professional gambler is a man who has no scruples about taking someone else's money or property, as much as that such people ein mitatkim be'yishuvo shel olam -- that they do not engage in productive activities, in the kind of creative work which advances civilization. That is why vacation can not be an ideal, and ought not be considered as the goal of one's life.

The third attitude, and the most adviseable, is that which views vacation as an avocation, as a necessary diversion; as a hobby, as it were. This point of view retains a positive attitude towards work. It loves it and revels in it. Yet a man does not remain a slave to his work. Indeed, Shabbat and Yom Tov are the models of this kind of leisure-vacation by virtue of the Torah's issur melakhah, the prohibition of labor. Yet this does not imply a derision of labor; on the contrary, just as it is a mitzvah not to work on the Sabbath, so is it a mitzvah that sheshet yamim ta'avod, "thou shalt labor for six days." But a free man is one who requires free time, away from his work. Therefore the ideal is the kind of combination of Shabbat and work-day that our Bible and tradition has ordained for us: a rhythm of work and play, of time-on and time-off.

For indeed a normal, healthy man wants and deserves both work and play. During work he looks forward towards leisure; and during his rest he looks forward to resuming his work. The English poet Robert Browning put it this way:

"When a man's busy, why leisure
"Strikes him as a wonderful pleasure.
"' Faith, and at leisure once is he?
"Straightway he wants to be busy."

Let us go a step further. Not only does he "also" need leisure, but it may be more important, in the ultimate scale of values, than his work! When the ancient Jewish philosopher of Greek Alexandria, Philo, came to explaining the Sabbath, he maintained that it was a divine commandment to rest on the seventh day so as to recuperate and refresh ourselves in order to draw strength for the next six days of labor.

This, however, is not really an authentic Jewish idea. According to it, the Sabbath

was made for the purpose of the weekdays. A much more genuinely Jewish idea was expressed by ^{bar} Abarbanel. He pointed to the first description of the Sabbath in the Torah in Genesis, where we read vayekhulu ha'shamayim ve'ha-eretz, that the Heavens and earth and all they contain were completed by the seventh day. The word vayekhulu, however, means more than "they were completed." It is related by its root to the Hebrew word takhlit, ^{purpose} ~~perfect~~. In other words, the purpose of the creation of heaven and earth during the six days of work was -- the Sabbath rest! Indeed, as Abarbanel points out, our Prayer Books supports this contention. In the Amidah on Friday nights we say atta kidashta et shemekhah takhlit ma'aseh shamayim va-aretz, Thou hast sanctified the seventh day for Thy name, (it is) the purpose of the creation of heaven and earth."

Perhaps the best proof to confirm this whole approach is from the Bible itself. For, whereas Shabbat is the last day of the week according to the divine scheme of creation, it was the first day in the life of the first man. Since Adam was created on Friday before dark, the Shabbat was his first full day on this earth! So that the leisure represented and symbolized by Shabbat is the higher purpose for which a man works all his life. That is why the Shabbat, in our tradition, has in addition to the negative element of refraining from labor, such vastly important positive elements as: kedushah, for the sanctity of the Sabbath is the first instance of holiness mentioned in the Torah and the most important source of holiness in all of Judaism; kibbud of Shabbat, the enjoyment or oneg of the Sabbath; and the charming and profound teaching of our tradition that on the Sabbath every Jew receives a neshamah yetarah, an additional soul. It is the quality of our leisure activity that lends it or denies it dignity.

Here we come, then, to the major problem: what do we do with all this new time that is available to us? How do we spend this leisure? One need not describe in all its gory details, especially not from the pulpit on Shabbat, what goes on in our resorts, those places sacred to American leisure. Of course, the sports and the relaxation are legitimate and highly commendable for our physical and psychological well being. But what happens beyond that? Can this kind of activity be said to be

the takhlit, the purpose of man's life? Or is it the very negation and antithesis of purposefulness in life? One writer on the leisure problem has correctly stated that modern technology has mastered the art of saving time, but has failed to tell us how to spend our time. That is a matter of values -- and values are beyond technology.

The religious -- and human -- insight into leisure begins with the observation that modern man has too many holidays but too few holy days. Our great question is: how do we recapture for our weekday leisure and vacation some of the meaningfulness of the Shabbat with its holiness, its honor, its joy, its "additional soul?"

Part of the answer can be derived from the fact that Hebrew has no special term for leisure. Indeed, the Hebraic mind cannot comprehend the whole idea. The whole problem of leisure is irrelevant to the Jewish way of thinking. What does "spare time" mean? How can there be a problem of what to do with time, when there is Torah to study? The study of Torah is the most rewarding activity of man. If man were given ten life times to live, and he worked at the study of Torah incessantly, he would never exhaust it.

For us the answer is the same: the most important activity of man awaits his attention -- the study of Torah, each on his own level. I cannot believe that we of this generation, who have universal free education and an ever-growing number of university graduates, people who read more and who take more courses than ever before -- that we should not be able to study the Torah with some kind/intensity. Those who can ought to study Gemara, those who are able ought to study the Torah commentaries, those who prefer ought to read through the Soncino Nakh, and whoever finds that difficult ought at least to study the portion of the week with the Hertz Commentary.

There are some people who think that whatever study of Torah we engage in is reserved for the "shul" during the "season" of Rosh Hashanah through the end of June. But I beg to differ: Talmud Torah has no "season." It must be engaged in at all times: Ve'hagita bo yomam va-alayla, "thou shalt meditate in it by day

and by night." In today's Sidra the heathen prophet Balaam turns towards our ancestors and says to them, in words which we repeat every morning before entering the synagogue, ma tovu ohalekha Ya'akov mishkenotekha Yisrael -- how goodly are thy tents ^{O Jacob}, thy dwelling places, O Israel." Our Rabbis saw in this a reference not merely to physical/places, but to our spiritual homes. The word for "tent" and "dwelling places," ilu batei midrashot u-vatei knesiyot, they refer to synagogues and schools. It was those, our places of prayer and Torah-study, that so impressed our heathen adversary. But then Balaam added two significant words: ki'nehalim nitayu, "they are stretched forth as streams." And here our tradition points out that the word for "stream", naḥal, refers to a very special kind of stream -- she'enan poskin lo bi'yemei ha-ḥamah ve'lo bi'yemei ha-gešhamim, the kind that never dries up, neither during the hot season ~~not/during~~ ~~the/hot/season~~ nor during the rainy season, neither during summer nor during winter. This is what the Torah must mean to us: a year-round activity, not reserved only for the synagogue "season"! Both in summer and winter, day and night, for old and for young, the study of Torah must be the source and fountain of our life.

As a matter of fact, given the conditions of our society, I dare say that it is more important to emphasize the study of Torah during leisure hours and vacation weeks and months than during our working periods. For it is during these times that we can apply ourselves with greater intensity and concentration, without constant distractions, to what is the truest and noblest purpose of anyone's existence. There was a time when in our batei Knesiyot uvatei midrashot one could see only retired, ancient, superannuated people studying in the old tomes. But for the last fifteen or twenty years the situation has been reversed: now all Jewish education seems to be concentrated in the pre-Bar Mitzvah years. In other words, the study of Torah was once regarded as exclusively a geriatric activity, and now has become a pediatric activity. What it should be is a life-long, mature, constant and uninterrupted activity of Jewish life. For this indeed is the highest "recreation" -- which simply means re-creation, the highest form of form of/creativity known to mankind. Otherwise we fall to that low level of people who seek means "to kill time" -- the most horrendous blasphemy of which any man

can be culpable! For to kill time is to spill the blood of existence, to destroy the very soul of a man. All God gives us in this world is time; how dare we speak of killing it? It is only upon a lightweight upon whom time weighs heavily!

As leisure increases, as many more years free from work are added to the end of a man's or woman's life, we must reorient our whole philosophy of education as well.

There once was a time when a father's major responsibility and obligation was to train his son in a formal, rewarding occupation. Now, however, we must recognize that the next generation and all those following will have more time to spend in leisure than in work. It therefore becomes a major responsibility for us to spend at least as much energy and effort in training children in the use of their leisure as we do in educating them toward succeeding in their work. "Living" is at least as important as "making a living." And, as we have pointed out, according to the whole Jewish world-view, there basically is no problem. If we will teach our children Torah -- and, far more important, teach them by personal example that the study of Torah is a life-long activity and not reserved only to the beginning or to the very end of one's career -- then we will have succeeded in giving our children the fullest education possible, and in discharging our obligations as parents to the fullest satisfaction of our consciences before Almighty God.

The Mishnah in Berakhot tells us that when Rabbi Nehunya b. Hakanah would leave his study hall, he would offer a brief prayer of thanksgiving. According to the Talmud, that prayer read: Modeh ani lefanekha hashem Elohai she'santa helki mi'yoshvei bet ha-midrash, I thank you O Lord my God for making my portion amongst those who dwell in the study hall. One of the leading thinkers of the Musar movement asked: since this prayer was recited bi yetziato mi-bet ha-midrash, when Rabbi Nehunya b. Hakanah was leaving the study hall, should he not have thanked God for having thrown his lot amongst those who leave the study hall, rather than amongst those who dwell there? But the answer is: this prayer teaches a man that even bi'yetziato mi-bet ha-midrash, even when he leaves the study hall, he must still consider himself mi'yoshvei bet ha-midrash, those who dwell in the study hall!

So, as so many of us this week make our way to our vacations, to sea-shore or countryside, to hotel or to cruise or to travel, as we are on the threshold of yetziato mi-bet ha-midrash, leaving The Jewish Center for our leisure activity, let us thank and pray to God to help us continue to be mi'yoshvei bet ha-midrash; that mentally and spiritually we remain in this House of God; that we take with us, wherever we go, its spirit of prayer and consecration, of total loyalty and commitment to the values of God, Torah, and Israel.