

"WHAT'S THE USE?"

We are a vocation and work-oriented society. We cannot abide impractical occupations. Secular man is, above all, a pragmatist. Ideas must work, principles must have application, theories must forthwith produce results. When two modern, secular men discuss a third person, they do not ask: "Who is he?" or, "What kind of person is he?" but: "What does he do?" What a man does -- what he accomplishes, what he achieves, the results he produces -- that is what defines his very self. In a civilization of this sort we have lost the capacity for appreciating anything for its own sake; we look only for that which is beyond it, that to which it leads.

In a cultural context of this kind it is almost futile to urge people to study Torah. We are conditioned to believe that the study of Torah is impractical. People ask: What does it lead to? What diploma do you get as a result? When is the end in sight? Can it get me a better job? Will it help feed the poor and save refugees?

What we forget is that Torah is not to be considered a means to an end, but as the end itself. Study is important not only because it leads us to practice, but because it in itself is the most sacred and meaningful of deeds.

Nachmanides makes an interesting observation concerning one of the verses in which the Torah commands the observance of Shavuot: "and ye shall proclaim on this very day (b'etzem ha-yom ha-zeh) a holy convocation" (Lev. 23:21). Nachmanides is intrigued by the emphatic phrase b'etzem ha-yom ha-zeh, "this very day." There is only one other place in the Torah where this appears, and that is with regard to the solemn fast of Yom Kippur: "and ye shall do no manner of work b'etzem ha-yom ha-zeh, on this very day" (Lev. 21:28).

What is the affinity between Shavuot and Yom Kippur, such that both of them are referred to as applying to b'etzem ha-yom ha-zeh, "this very day?"

I suggest that just as Yom Kippur is not considered primarily the recollection of an historical event, but is important for its own sake, for the atonement that

it gives on its own account, so the study of Torah revealed on Shavuot is not just a ceremony or a ritual or a commemoration of something else, but is in and of itself sacred.

Hence, Torah is not an activity which I undertake for the sake of doing other activities, but the reverse is true: this activity of Torah is the purpose of all else, whether sacred or profane.

May Shavuot this year -- the very day of Shavuot -- inspire us to acknowledge this principle and implement it in our lives from now and forever more.

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