

"THIS VERY DAY"

We must be honest and admit that the study of Torah, of which we speak this festival of Shavuot, is in serious trouble. Every Rabbi knows that the best way to anesthetize his congregation is to speak to them about the duty of Talmud Torah. There is hardly a more effective method of putting people to sleep.

Why is that so? Why the widespread disrepute of that commandment about which it is said that Talmud Torah ke'negged kulam, it is superior to all others?

It is not because our congregations are unintelligent. By and large, they are as intelligent as any congregations of the past, and a good deal more cultured.

It is not because they do not have **sufficient** Jewish education. The refusal even to give the proposal of adult Talmud Torah a fair hearing is as characteristic of those who have studied Jewish sources as those who have not.

The reason for this sorry state of affairs is, I believe, that the study of Torah is so very 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 or save refugees?

We are so distressed by its apparent impracticality, that even we Orthodox Jews, when we occasionally hear about a young man who has devoted his life solely to the study of Torah, react with

annoyance. What will he accomplish with it? Whom does he help? Let him get a job and make a living!

We cannot abide impractical occupations. We are a vocation and work-oriented society. 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.

Today, therefore, I do not want to preach to you that we ought to study Torah, but to recommend how we might go about it. Perhaps some of these hints as to method and technique will induce us to do that which is our chief obligation as Jews.

First we must turn the tables on ourselves. Instead of asking of what use the study of Torah is, we must ask whether routine work in business and profession really makes sense, whether they are, ultimately, as meaningful and useful and practical as we tell ourselves.

This holiday of Shavuot, our zeman maltan toratenu, the time of the giving of the Torah, is a summons to us to pause in the midst of all our frenzied activities for a moment of reflection: we consider our daily work and occupations eminently practical, because they

lead to something else. Then we must ask ourselves, concerning our business or professions, the same question we ask of the study of Torah: why? for what purpose? what do we want to make all this money for? what, after all, does all this lead to?

That is a painful question. We usually seek to avoid such ultimate challenges.

Well, what for? Usually the answer^{is}: for our children. But I do not think that answer sufficient.

It is told of the Hozeh (Seer) of Lublin that he once accosted one of his people who was rushing in the marketplace. "Come with me to the study hall so that we may study Torah," the Rabbi said to the harried man. No, Rabbi, he answered, I can't because I am in a hurry. The Rabbi pressed: but why not, why can't you come with me now? Again came the response: I have to make a living. But, the Rabbi continued, what for? What do you need the money for? The man answered, quite naturally and logically: I've got to make money for my children. The Rabbi appeared satisfied.

Some twenty years later, the Rabbi, who was apparently a persistent personality, accosted another man on the street and the same dialogue ensued. Finally, the Rabbi looked deeply into the man's eyes and said to him, "Why, I recognize you! I had the same encounter and the same conversation with your father just twenty years ago. At that time he, too, told me that he was too busy to study Torah because he had to make a living for his children. And now you tell me that you must make a living for your children. When, O God Almighty, will

I meet that one human being for whom all the generations labored so mightily?"

We are caught in a vicious cycle. We allow our religious talents to atrophy because we must make money for our children; but they too do not have the time for leisure, for developing their spiritual dimensions. They must work to make money for their children, and their children for their children...

We delude ourselves if we think that our profane activities make much ~~more~~ practical sense than our supposedly unworldly pursuit of Torah. We fool ourselves if we think that our business occupations have any more lasting value than Talmud Torah for its own sake. Usually we only permit ourselves to become befuddled by our busy-ness. Most of the time we are engaged in motion, not movement; in activity, not action. Perhaps this realization of the ultimate impracticality of our profane labors will dull the sharp edge of our presumptuous challenge to Talmud Torah. Maybe, after all, things don't have to be quite so pragmatically useful.

Second, in addition to questioning whether our reputedly practical labors are really so worthwhile, we must have a clear understanding of the importance of the study of Torah in the Jewish tradition. The Ramban makes an interesting observation concerning one of the verses in the Torah about the festival of Shavuot. We read, u'keratem b'etzem ha-yom ha-zeh mikra kodesh..., "and ye shall call on this very day a holy convocation." Ramban is intrigued by the

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 Yom Kippur: ve'khol melakhah lo taasu b'etzem ha-yom ha-zeh, "and ye shall do no form of work on this very day."

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

Furthermore, it means that just as Yom Kippur is effective in offering atonement only if one fasts on etzem ha-yom ha-zeh, on this very day of Yom Kippur, so the study of Torah must be done on etzem ha-yom ha-zeh, this very day -- every single day! No matter what day it is, on etzem ha-yom ha-zeh one must study Torah; it brooks no postponement. Torah is not an activity which I undertake for the sake of doing any other activities; the reverse is true: this activity of Torah is the purpose of all else, whether sacred or profane.

The Talmud presents to us a remarkable idea. R. Ishmael makes the following comment: we know that Torah must be studied constantly. Ve'hagita bo yomam va-lailah, "and you shall meditate in it by day and by night." But if that is the case, and if we are to take

the Bible with all seriousness, then man must study all the time, whether by day or by night, and have no time to pursue any other interests or activities, even to working to support himself and his family. How, then do we know that man is indeed permitted to work for a living? He answers: we read in the second passage of the Shema the verse v'asafta deganekha ve'tiroshekha ve'yitzharekha, "and ye shall gather in your corn and your wine and your oil." Thus, the Bible explicitly tells us that we are permitted to work at profane activities, to gather in our harvest, to make a living. From this we know, concludes R. Ishmael, that a man is permitted to spend time away from Torah in order to advance his livelihood. What this means, therefore, is that Torah is the main activity of life, and we may do other things only because they enhance this major activity of our existence. It is not that we must study a little Torah during our lifetime which is devoted primarily to business or profession, but that the time we spend in our secular activities is only a hetter, a special dispensation, for time taken away from our only legitimate activity, namely, Talmud Torah.

This awareness of the special nature of Torah study leads us to a further point: successful pursuit of Torah study is a matter of timing. The Rabbis tell us that after a man dies and he comes before the Heavenly Court, he is asked, amongst other things: kavata ittim le'torah, "Did you set aside time for the study of Torah?" The first word of that question derives from the root K-V-A, which in Rabbinic language means: to set a regular time aside. We must, there-

fore, not study haphazardly but regularly.

Yet a distinguished Hasidic teacher, who was also one of the foremost Talmudic authorities of his age, the author of "Haflaah", adds an unusual insight. It is true, he says, that a man must put aside regular time for his study. But in addition, the sweetest study of Torah ^{occurs during} ~~is often~~ the times that are unscheduled! That very root, K-V-A, in Biblical Hebrew means something quite different from "to set aside." It means; "to steal!" A man, he tells us, must steal time for Torah! (Thus, the prophet Malachi says, ha-yikba adam Elohim -- can a man steal from God?) Not only must man schedule time for Torah, but he must take time away from other scheduled activities in order to add these cherished moments to the study of Torah. I personally find that most creative work is done in those precious little patches of time snatched here and there from other, duller activities.

If indeed we have the right conception of the value of Torah in Judaism, namely, that like Yom Kippur, Torah is an automanous value which must be pursued this very day, that it is the real stuff of life from which we may only occasionally be excused, then we shall certainly be willing to steal time for all else in order to indulge in Talmud Torah.

Finally, and this is especially relevant to the day that we recite Yizkor, the effective pursuit of the study of Torah in our own days requires a reflective attitude towards life as such.

Permit me to relate to you a charming story which, like its author, sounds naive and unsophisticated and simple, yet underneath it all reveals a brooding wisdom that is truly profound. And if this

tale touches some raw psychological nerve by a tinge of morbidity, it may be worth it in the results that it produces.

The great Chafetz Chayyim commented on the Rabbinic statement that ein ha-torah mitkayemet ela be'mi she'memit atzmo aleha, that Torah can exist and flourish only for one who is willing to kill himself for it. Once, he relates, there was a poor Jewish couple in Lithuania who opened a grocery store in a village which was entirely non-Jewish. They worked hard and labored long hours. Every morning the husband would make his way to the nearby town so that he could pray his morning services with the minyan -- which real Jew does not make an effort to pray with a minyan? -- and return as soon as possible. He would come late, and return early, in order that his wife would not have to be alone in the store for too long a time. But as time went on, the store appealed to him less and the synagogue appealed to him more. He came at the beginning of the services, and left at the end. Gradually the time increased: he came earlier for the reading of some Psalms, and left later after the lesson in Talmud. Towards the High Holiday season, he had to come even earlier in order to be present for the Selihot service. His wife was distraught, discovering that she was spending a great part of the day by herself in the store, and she complained about it.

That evening the husband came home and said to her, "My dear, I have something very important to discuss with you."

"Is anything wrong?," she asked, disturbed.

"Do not worry, my dear," he continued, "but I do want to talk

to you about something important. You know, that sooner or later we are going to die." He noticed that his wife was even more distressed, expecting the worst, but he continued: "No, there is nothing wrong, but I would like you to listen further. You know that I am several years older than you, and I probably shall go first. Now tell me, my dear: what will you do after I am gone? How will you support yourself?" Whereupon, the poor wife dissolved in tears at the mere contemplation of her husband's mortality and her own eventual widowhood. After a while, however, she replied: "I suppose the only way to survive will be my continuing the store and making whatever I can."

"In other words," her husband said, "you would be able to manage the store by yourself, even if I am not around?"

"Yes," the wife said, "if I have no choice, I will have to and I will succeed."

"In that case, dear wife," said the husband, "I must ask you for a favor. I hope that the two of us will live to 120 years, but, as long as I live, I ask you to imagine that every morning I have died for half an hour... Just assume that for a short part of each day you are on your own, even as eventually you will probably have to be..."

Indeed, Torah can flourish and thrive only when a man is memit atzmo aleha, when he is willing to die for it, i.e., when he is willing to take time out of a busy schedule and to be "dead to the world" in order to be alive to his own spiritual personality,

alive to his God, alive to the whole heritage of Judaism. To die a little bit to the hurried superficialities of every day life, is to let yourself live more deeply and much longer for the things that really count. One of the ways of doing this is to destroy, psychologically, that myth of our indispensibility. We will find more time for the study of Torah, more time for the Synagogue, more time for our families, if we recognize that we are not really indispensable to the functioning of our business, to the survival of society, to the progress of our professions.

Let us imagine that we are temporarily departed, that we vanish for a little part of the day from our earthly scene, and devote that extra time to studying Torah, to attending to our spiritual welfare, to spending a bit more time with wife and children. It is a greater measure of wisdom to imagine that we were dead so that we might live all the better. In that way, we may make less of a living, but we will live more life.

On this festival of the giving of the Torah, we must think deeply of our own responsibility to study that Torah, and not only to send our children to learn it. We must call an end to this American propensity for relegating Torah to the extremes of early childhood and post-retirement leisure years, to make of Torah an exercise of either pediatrics or geriatrics, and to leave the major part of life in between as a gaping vacuum.

As we ponder the means we have mentioned to make Talmud Torah

more meaningful and increase our desire to study it, let us bear in mind its lofty rewards. If the way to Torah is to recognize that it makes demands on us be'etzem ha-yom ha-zeh, this very day every day, then remember that it also grants us more than this one very day; it bestows upon us all of eternity, even as we say when we are about to study the Torah that ve'hayyei olam nata be'tokhenu, it implants in us eternal life.

If the way to get at the study of Torah is by stealing time and by pondering our own absence from this worldly scene, then let us remember that its reward is wealth for our act of noble stealing, and length of days for our temporary demises. Orekh hayyim bi'yeminah, be'smolah osher ve'khavod, length of days is at the right hand of Torah, and in its left hand is wealth and honor.