

# “MEMAAYAN HACHAIM”

Mussar talks from the Masgiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit"a

## Effort and struggle in spirituality— an end in and of themselves

Sow your seed in the morning, and don't hold back your hand in the evening, since you don't know which is going to succeed, the one or the other, or if both are equally good. (Koheles 11:6)

The Gemora (Yevamos 62b) relates: Rabbi Yehoshua says: If a man married a woman in his youth, and she passed away, he should marry another woman in his old age. If he had children in his youth, he should have more children in his old age, as it is stated: “In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both alike shall be good” (Koheles 11:6). This verse indicates that a man should continue having children even after he has fulfilled the mitzva to be fruitful and multiply. Rabbi Akiva says that the verse should be understood as follows: If one studied Torah in his youth he should study more Torah in his old age; if he had students in his youth he should have additional students in his old age, as it is stated: “In the morning sow your seed, etc.” They said by way of example that Rabbi Akiva had twelve thousand pairs of students in an area of land that stretched from Gevat to Antipatris in Judea, and they all died in one period of time, because they did not treat each other with respect. (“shelo nahagu kavod zeh b'zeh”—transl.)

And the world was desolate of Torah until Rabbi Akiva came to our Rabbis in the South and taught his Torah to them. This second group of disciples consisted of Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda, Rabbi Yosi, Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua. And these are the very ones who upheld the study of Torah at that time.

Our sages cite the above-mentioned verse in Koheles to teach us that a person should not cease his Divine service in this world. Rather, he should constantly continue that work-- even in the waning years of his life, he should continue to accomplish as he did in his youth. Therefore,

although one has married and had children in his youth, he should “marry again” in his old age, “for you do not know which shall prosper”—whether that which you accomplished initially shall succeed and be established, or that which you accomplish “now”, in the evening of your life. Rebbe Akiva then extends this lesson to the act of learning Torah: even as one studies Torah and raises up many students in his younger years, he should never relax and rest on his laurels. On the contrary, he should continue, even in his later years, to spread Torah and raise up new students. The example then given by Chazal is Rebbe Akiva himself, who had taught 12,000 pairs of students, all of whom passed away. Nonetheless, he continued his efforts, taught 5 additional students who then spread Torah to all of Klal Yisrael.

We need to understand what Rabbi Akiva teaches us by citing the verse above from Koheles. Someone who “marries a woman in his youth” has already fulfilled his obligation to establish a family. Shlomo Hamelech then adds his wisdom and tells us that even in the autumn of one's life one should continue his efforts building his family, “for he knows not which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both alike shall be good.” But with Rabbi Akiva's 12,000 chavrusos, he still has not fulfilled the obligation incumbent upon a Torah scholar. Someone of Rabbi Akiva's stature is required to teach Torah and spread its wisdom to students throughout the world. Notwithstanding the simple painful truth that “his students all passed away”, Rabbi Akiva's task is not complete. Shlomo Hamelech's exhortation to “plant your seed in the morning and in the evening, do not cease” does not apply here, for R' Akiva has not yet completed the initial task of which is said, “you do not know which shall prosper”. Therefore, it is obvious that Rabbi Akiva must continue to teach students Torah. Since his first set of disciples are no longer alive, even in his old age Rabbi Akiva must fulfill the

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ultimate purpose of his efforts to bring Torah to Klal Yisrael. We understand this even without Shlomo Hamelech's logic of "you do not know which shall prosper".

Perforce, we must say that by applying the lesson from Koheles to Rabbi Akiva's situation, our sages teach us a profound principle in the worldview of the Torah. In the secular world, success or failure in any endeavor is measured by its outcome, positive is success, negative is failure. Even if one invests prodigious amount of effort into a project, if it doesn't result in a tangible accomplishment, the effort he invested is for naught, because, after all, he did not succeed. But, from a Torah viewpoint, our sages teach that true accomplishment is measured not only by outcome, but on the contrary, it is measured primarily by the effort invested. Therefore, even though it may appear to us that since Rabbi Akiva's 12,000 pairs of students died, all the struggle over many years to establish Torah in the world was wasted. Our sages teach that nothing could be further from the truth. In the spiritual world, true success is commensurate with the effort expended, and is not defined by the final result. The greater the effort, the greater the true success, the greater the eventual reward in the world-to-come.

Hence, all of the undertaking and striving during the years of cultivation and development of Rabbi Akiva's 12,000 pairs of talmidim-- albeit that they did not endure to pass their erudition on to the generations--cannot be considered to have been in vain. Rather, the efforts expended in their spiritual development profoundly influenced the quality of Rabbi Akiva's Divine service and reflect a positive accomplishment of his unique purpose in life. Thus, we can correctly say that the verse in Koheles indeed does apply to Rabbi Akiva. Even though he had already established world-renown students and built spiritual worlds through his toil and effort, the Sage learned from the possuk "even in the eventide of your life, do not give up!" (u'b'erev, al tanach!--Heb. transl.). Even if you taught students in your youth, continue to teach student in your old age! So, Rabbi Akiva went and built up 5 more great disciples, meriting to spread Torah throughout the Jewish people and the entire world, for generations to come.

In Shemos Rabba (36), on the commandment in the verse "You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly" (Shemos 27:20), the Midrash cites a verse from the Navi Yirmiah (11:16) and then expounds: "The LORD

named you "Verdant olive tree, Fair, with choice fruit" 'Yirmiah comes to teach, (The Jewish people are compared to the olive--and not only to its oil--transl.) Just as the olive, while it is still on the tree, (the workers) scrape them off, and then, when they are off the tree, they beat them. After beating, the olives are brought to the pressing vat and they are placed in the press (heavy wooden boards used to squeeze out the oil). Then, the olives are pressed, and then they are bound with ropes and heavy stones are placed on them. Finally, the olives give forth their oil. So too, the Jewish people are confronted by the non-Jewish nations who beat them, chasing them from place to place, bind them in ropes and tie their hands and feet in stocks, and hold them tight like a turtle in its shell. Finally, if they repent, Hashem answers them."

The Midrash explains why the Jewish people are compared to olives, more than to any other type of tree (which are sometimes used to describe them throughout Tanach). With the olive, in order to extract its oil, the works have to scrape them off, beat them, and then press them, and only then--"they give forth their oil". This is precisely the comparison to the Jewish nation throughout the long exile. The nations of the world "beat them", they oppress the Jews, causing untold suffering. Yet, all the beatings and maltreatment have a purpose-- to engender humility in the Jewish heart so that they will return to their Father in Heaven in teshuva, and then, He will answer them. From these words of the Midrash, we see that the Jewish people are compared specifically to the olive fruit itself rather than to its oil. What is the significance of this distinction?

According to the insight we expressed above, we can understand a meaning of the Midrash. We should not make the mistake that the objective of our Divine service is its result, the accomplishment--the oil extracted from the olive. We must recognize with clarity that there is enormous value to the effort in and of itself. In the symbolic language of the midrash, this is expressed by the olive. Without the pressing and crushing involved in the beating and squeezing of the olive fruit in order to extract its oil, we would miss its essential special value. We must understand that the preface to the olive's "giving its oil" is its nature as a recipient of just these pressures. Even more so, the greater its beatings--i.e. our struggle and effort--the more valuable the resultant extracted oil, our final success.

In addition, we can derive another significant inference from the language of the passage. The Midrash concludes



that following all the travail, the scraping and beating, the crushing and pressing, “they give forth their oil” (nosnin—Heb. transl.). The text does not say that after all the effort, we extract the oil (motzi'im—Heb. transl.). At the moment we have expended the requisite amount of effort and struggle, automatically “they give forth their oil”. In other words, with the effort alone, one has already attained a unique level of accomplishment. Thus, the Midrash concludes: “And Ha Kadosh Boruch Hu answers them”. This was our insight above, that struggle in spirituality is an end in and of itself which raises a person's spiritual level. Further, toil in Torah-- by itself-- can bring a person to merit greater accomplishments in Torah.

In Menachos 7a, the gemora relates an incident concerning Avimi:

And did Rabbi Avimi really learn in the study hall of Rav Chisda? But didn't Rav Chisda say: I absorbed many blows [*kulfei*] from Avimi as a result of that *halakha*, i.e., Avimi would mock me when I questioned his statements with regard to the sale of orphans' property by the courts, which were contradictory to the ruling of a particular *baraisa*. .. If so, Rav Chisda was in fact the pupil while Rabbi Avimi was his teacher.

The Gemara answers: Avimi was in fact the teacher, but tractate *Menachos* was uprooted for him, i.e., he forgot it, and Avimi came before his student Rav Chisda to help him recall his learning. The Gemara asks: If Rav Chisda was in fact Avimi's student, let Avimi send for him and Rav Chisda would come to Avimi. The Gemara responds: Avimi thought that this would be more helpful in this matter, i.e., that by exerting the effort to travel to his pupil in order to learn from him, he would better retain his studies.

In this passage, the Talmud relates how Avimi, the Rebbe, had forgotten tractate Menachos, and how he went to his student Rav Chisda in order that he help him recall his learning, even though the student, Rav Chisda, was certainly prepared to go Avimi, his Rebbe. Nonetheless, Avimi decided to go himself to his student to review, because, as the passage relates, “this would be more helpful in this matter”—by exerting the effort to travel to his pupil in order to learn from him, he would better recall the material. As Rashi explains (loc. Cit.) “This is an expression of the principle cited in tractate Megilla 6b, ‘If you exert effort, you will be successful.’” (yagata matzasa Heb. transl.)

We see from here that the exertion to grow in Torah is the conduit for that growth. Avimi therefore specifically chose

to extend himself and travel to his student to review tractate Menachos. Shlomo Hamelech tells us (Mishlei 16:26) “The desire of the laborer works for him” (this verse metaphorically refers to the effect of Torah learning on creating a desire for more of the same—transl.) Rashi in Sanhedrin describes this effect: “It (the Torah he has already learned) constantly returns to him and beseeches from his Creator to reveal to him the explanations of the Torah and its secrets”. In other words, one who toils in his learning, the Torah itself goes to the Almighty on his behalf and requests that He reveal its deepest meanings to him.

Thus, there are really two aspects of Torah study (as referenced in the Rashi's citation of the gemora in Megilla quoted above): toil, and then, accomplishment. Toil, though, is not only a means to amassing Torah knowledge; it is, as we have seen, a purpose and a merit in and of itself, without which one cannot attain that knowledge. After one exerts himself to understand Torah, its secrets are given to him. This is as we've explained above from the words of the midrash, that oil is given from the beaten olives: effort in Torah learning results in the ability to receive that Divine wisdom.

The Gaon R' Moshe Yehuda Landau zt"l., one of the greatest students of the Chazon Ish zt"l., may his merit protect us, once shared with me the following incident. He and R' Chaim Brim zt"l. had labored for months through the winter in order to make life-saving arrangements for a young girl with a growth in her brain who needed surgery performed in Chutz L'aretz. After all these efforts, they received a telegram that lo aleinu the young girl had passed away from her illness. Both R' Moshe and R' Chaim were quite disturbed by this news, and when they were in the home of the Chazon Ish, Rabbi Landau exclaimed, “Perhaps this is a Divine sign that we were supposed to have been learning all winter (and not involved in the eventually unsuccessful effort to help this girl)! It is a pity we've wasted all this time!”

The bed-ridden Chazon Ish heard this comment, and motioned with his finger: “You are incorrect! Torah is not a “subject” simply to study, G-d forbid! It is a spiritual reality which can only be acquired according to the greatness of one's heart—the more expansive the heart, the more Torah will enter it! Therefore, a person who is prepared to dedicate time to a kindness such as the one you've both been involved with—It's as if you've built spiritual granaries—storage houses for your acquired merits-- in Heaven!”

In merit of Sylvia Sara Soester in memory of Re'em A"H son of Nadav and Arielle Tanya Rachel Passed away at age three 6 Shevat 5780

The Chazon Ish was telling them, while it is true that they indeed had not spent the winter months learning Torah, the chesed which they were involved in during that time had broadened their ability to receive spirituality. As a result, they now were able to successfully absorb that much more Torah into their hearts. Again, we see that from the point-of-view of Heaven, effort and exertion are valued incredibly highly. Even if in the end a person does not actually “accomplish” the goal of his efforts, he nonetheless merits to build, in the words of the Chazon Ish, “storehouses in Heaven” for the spiritual merits those efforts acquire for him.

I have merited to have heard many things from R' Chaim Shmuelevitz, zt"l. Even as his life was one continuous stretch of Torah scholarship, he nevertheless once said to us, “With what shall I approach the Divine Court to be judged at the end of my life? What shall I place on the Prosecutor’s table when they ask me, ‘What did you do in this world?’ I will say to them, ‘I will bring as a merit to Heaven my 5 years of exile in Shanghai, China during World War II.’

Those 5 years were years of suffering beyond human comprehension. R' Chaim felt that since he had faced that challenge and struggled, he felt that he had an experience in his life which expressed his greatest levels of exertion and self-sacrifice. Thus, given that his entire life was one of dedicated unceasing Torah learning, he believed that he would approach the Divine Tribunal with these 5 years of toil and effort in spiritual growth in Shanghai. I recall that R' Chaim said to us, in Yiddish, “Ois geharavet” (it was a learning which came as a result of overriding struggle). He was teaching us that that which comes through effort and suffering is uniquely cherished by the Almighty. This is also what the Chazon Ish is quoted as saying, “The Divine service which is the most beloved by Hashem is toil in Torah.”

Specifically in the current difficult times, in the period when the 12,000 pairs of students of Rabbi Akiva died and the

establishment of Torah is in danger, we must strengthen ourselves to exert our utmost effort in limud haTorah haKadosha, learning the Holy Torah. We must remember that according to the effort we expend in this endeavor, to ourselves to exert our utmost effort in limud haTorah haKadosha, learning the Holy Torah. We must remember that according to the effort we expend in this endeavor, to that extent will be our success and will our deeds increase in value. With toil and struggle we build “storehouses of spirituality in Heaven” and we will merit, in the words of Shlomo Hamelech, “the desire of the laborer works for him” (the spirituality we’ve acquired with help us strive to acquire more). The Jewish point-of-view is that the success of an action is measured not only with its eventual “success”, but also and primarily in accordance with the effort involved. Especially through the “beatings” and the suffering in our spiritual work do we attain the valued “pure olive oil”, so much so, that we will not have to extract any, the olive will “give its oil” automatically. Finally, when we fulfill the verse in Koheles, “Plant in the morning your seeds, and even in the evening, do not give up!” we will merit to learn Torah and to establish disciples in our elder years, becoming a link in the chain of Torah tradition passed on to us by Rabbi Akiva.



[Written and translated according to understanding of writers]

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