



Insights into Pirke Avot

by

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Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom

Perek Alef, Mishnah Yud (Part 1)

1:10 Shemayah and Avtalyon received from them. Shemayah says, love work and despise positions of authority, and do not become close to the government.

Keeping Busy

Shemayah and Avtalyon, the *Nasi* and *Av Bet Din* of their generation, received the Oral Tradition from Yehudah ben Tabai and Shimon ben Shatah. These two giants of Torah, who attained great levels of scholarship along with extremely prestigious positions of leadership, were converts to Judaism.

Love work.

The *Tanna* tells us that we should be eager and happy to earn our own living. Work is an undeniable necessity, dating back to the days of Adam, the first man. When he sinned by eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge he was cursed, and his entire existence was transformed. In the Garden of Eden, “angels roasted meat and filtered wine for him” (*Sanhedrin* 59b). Now, he was told, “by the sweat of your brow you will eat bread” (*Bereshit* 3:19). From then on, Adam would have to work hard for every morsel that entered his mouth. The need to work is a punishment and a curse, not a blessing. How can our Sages tell us to love what is, in essence, a curse?

Let us try to better understand Shemayah’s words.

The Bartenura explains why **work**, in and of itself, is positive and important. He writes that “Even if one has the means to support himself he must engage in work, because ‘idleness leads to boredom’ (*Ketubot* 59b).” Boredom is a dangerous state of mind, as we learn from a well-known troublemaker who had far too much empty time on his hands. The Torah tells us, “And Esav was an *ish yode’a tzayid*, a man



skilled in hunting” (*Bereshit* 25:27). Onkelos’ translation of the phrase *ish yode’a tzayid* is surprising: *gevar nahshirchan*, “a man who is bored.” What was Esav’s problem? Why was he out doing everything he shouldn’t have done? He was bored!

The bored individual is not enjoying the moment. Uncomfortable with himself and lacking any special plans, he craves action and excitement. Hunting, shoplifting, picking fights, and waylaying innocent passersby are all fair game, simply because he has nothing else to do. Our Sages understood the dangers of idleness and warned us against it time after time. We should **love work** and seek it out, even if our means allow us to relax comfortably at home, because indolence is hazardous and can easily be disastrous. They advise us further, “Torah study together with employment is good, for the exertion of them both makes one forget sin” (*Avot* 2:2). If we are gainfully employed in working hard and learning hard, we are unlikely to find time for mischief. We are too busy with other, more useful pursuits.

Apparently, the Bartenura’s words do not refer to those fortunate individuals who are *always* doing something useful. Torah scholars who are deeply involved in their learning are never bored, never have “dead” time on their hands, and are never at a loss for something to do. If a Torah scholar has been blessed with an independent income there is no need for him to find adult busy work, just to keep out of trouble. We find this concept in a later *mishnah*: “Rabbi Meir says, lessen your involvement in business and engage more in Torah” (*Avot* 4:10). Torah scholars know how to make productive use of their “free” time in the best possible manner.

In fact, our Sages teach that Torah scholars, whose time is dedicated to learning, will be freed of other burdens. They cite the verse, “‘Man was born to labor’ (*Iyov* 5:7). If he merits, he labors in Torah. If he is not worthy, he labors on the land. Fortunate is he who labors in Torah” (*Bereshit* 13:7). In this world, come what may, we are going to work. We can, however, choose where we wish to invest our efforts, in Torah or in backbreaking physical labor. They tell us further, “One who accepts upon himself the yoke of Torah will be freed from the yoke of the government and the yoke of *derech eretz*” (*Avot* 3:5). If we sincerely commit ourselves solely to Torah, the Al-mighty will free us of material responsibilities and worries.

Employment will only be an effective deterrent from sin, as the Bartenrua writes, if we **love the work** we do, and find it satisfying and fulfilling. If we work at a job that does not suit our natural aptitudes, long hours of dreary hard labor will not occupy our heart and mind and keep us from sin.



Self-sufficient

What should be our attitude to a good, solid day's work?

Our Sages teach, "Skin a carcass in the marketplace [if necessary to earn a living] and do not say, 'I am an important person, I am a priest'" (*Pesachim* 113a). How many people are attracted to this unusual and challenging line of work? It is messy and revolting, and the stench is dreadful. And yet, our Sages tell us to be prepared even for this, rather than claiming education, lineage, and the like as excuses for not working at a lowly job. It is better to be self-supporting through humble, menial labor than to be the dignified recipient of charity. In the words of King David, "When you eat the labor of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you" (*Tehillim* 128:2).

Our Sages extol the virtues of work: "One who enjoys the labor of his hands is greater than one who fears Heaven" (*Berachot* 8a). They also tell us that "Great is work, it brings honor to one who does it" (*Nedarim* 49b). As we see, they did not differentiate between more or less dignified endeavors.

I personally was privileged to know many great Torah scholars who fulfilled our Sages' words in their strictest, most literal sense. I recall one great Torah scholar, a true *tzaddik* who absolutely refused to accept any form of financial support from others, no matter how it was presented. He insisted on earning a meager living by the labor of his own hands; for him, that was enough. A certain wealthy Jew who greatly respected this pious scholar was eager to extend him much-needed financial support. Knowing that the *hacham* would never accept money he had not earned, he came up with a ruse. He told the *hacham* that his elder brother in Baghdad had passed away, leaving him a sizable inheritance. He then used this "inheritance money" to purchase a store for the *hacham*, which would provide him with a respectable income. For quite some time, the well-meant plan was successful. Then the day came when the *hacham* discovered that the supposed inheritance was a fabrication, devised by the wealthy man as a way around the *hacham's* principles. The *hacham* immediately returned the store and the money to its rightful owner. So upset was he by this subterfuge that he refused to speak another word to his wealthy would-be benefactor to the end of his days...

Ideally, everyone should be self-supporting, Torah scholars included: "Do not make it [the Torah] a spade to dig with" (*Avot* 4:5). Learning Torah should be our primary occupation, but not a paid profession. This is also the halachic ruling of the Rambam (*Hilchot Talmud Torah* 3:10-11). As we see from the *Gemara*, many *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* in fact supported themselves with some sort of trade. Hillel, for example, worked as a woodchopper, and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya burned



charcoal (see *Perush HaMishnayot*, *Avot* 4:5 and *Berachot* 28a). These great Sages “made their Torah study their main occupation and their work casual” (*Berachot* 35b).

Practically speaking, what does this mean?

Making a Living

Let us begin with the words of the Rambam, who advocated working for a living. He suggests the following schedule: three hours a day should be spent at one’s trade, and nine hours a day should be spent learning (*Hilchot Talmud Torah* 1:12). This bears repeating: three hours on the job, nine hours in the *bet midrash* – every day. This is what the Rambam calls “working for a living” in order to be self-sufficient, and this is what our Sages considered an acceptable manner of supporting oneself. Did they really recommend nine hours a day of learning for a working man? Today’s full time Torah students are quite proud if they spend a whole nine hours a day learning!

The *Tanna* describes basic *halachah* in its ideal state: rather than viewing honest labor as demeaning or disgraceful, we should not be ashamed of earning a living; we should **love work**. If we do as our Sages intended and can support ourselves by working two or three hours a day, spending the rest of our time learning, we are fortunate. And yet, we find that many Torah scholars today accept stipends, rather than working for a living. How does the Rambam’s ideal translate into contemporary terms?

The unfortunate economic realities of our times make it very unusual to be able to support a family on three hours a day of unskilled or semi-skilled labor. If every promising, talented *yeshivah* student is immediately thrust into the present-day working world, who will be the Torah scholars of the next generation, and of all the generations to come? Who will be our rabbis, halachic authorities, and *roshe yeshivah*?

The Early Authorities objected to the Rambam’s ruling as impractical in actual practice (see *Bet Yosef* on *Tur Yoreh Deah* 247:47). In light of contemporary circumstances, the halachic authorities of our generations also write that this ruling does not apply in our times in the same literal sense as in the past (see *Igrot Moshe*, *Yoreh Deah* 116). For one thing, the early generations had a clearer understanding of just what it means to “earn a living.” They shared our Forefather Yaakov’s perceptions, so that “a garment to wear and bread to eat” (*Bereshit* 28:20) were the only consumer goods they required. “How good are your tents, Yaakov” (*Bamidbar*



24:5) was also quite literally interpreted, with a simple hut or shelter viewed as adequate housing. How do our standards compare?

In his discussion of the proper balance between working and learning, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin writes that one should seek employment which enables him to keep his mind on learning even while on the job. Also, one should only work enough to earn the minimum to cover his needs (*Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Alef*, Chapter 8). The question is, what do we perceive as our needs? “A living” in our times includes a spacious home with air conditioning, good furniture, modern appliances, carpets, and attractive lighting, plus a decent car and ample wardrobe. We live expensive lives.

There is another difference as well. Today, a degree leading to a really good, high-income profession will require five, six, seven or more years of academic training. After that, before beginning work as, say, a lawyer or a dentist, several years more are invested in glorified apprenticeship. By the time one actually gets down to business, a substantial part of his adult life has been devoured by preliminaries.

For those who are at last employed, a new demand now lays claim to their time: the daily commute. Many people travel an hour or more to work each day, leaving home at six-thirty or seven every morning and not returning before six-thirty, seven, or even later at night. By that time they are drained and exhausted. Work plus freeway becomes the sum total of their life, or perhaps, its end. This is not what our Sages meant when they encouraged us to **love work**.

It is popularly noted that the Rambam was a skilled physician as well as a great Torah scholar. Why, then, the reasoning often runs, can we not all do the same? And yet, the Rambam himself was unhappy with his working life and bemoaned the fact that more than half his day was taken up by a constant stream of patients, leaving him far too little time to learn (Rambam’s Letter to Ibn Tibbon). Can we, in our complicated times, hope to do better? In the words of our Sages, “not everyone is privileged to have two tables” (*Berachot* 5b). It is not easy to be a successful earner and a successful learner at the same time.

Those who are truly, seriously committed to Torah study may receive financial assistance which enables them to stay in learning, because otherwise Torah will be forgotten, G-d forbid. This concept is hardly a modern invention. The great *Tanna* Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai teaches that the needs of those who are totally involved in Torah study will be provided by others, who will have the merit of supporting their learning (*Berachot* 35b). The Rambam himself writes that one who dedicates himself wholeheartedly to Torah is sanctified: “Hashem is his lot for all eternity, and He will grant him what suffices for him in this world” (*Hilchot Shemittah V’Yovel*



13:12-13). There is a principle that “It is a time to act for Hashem, they have desecrated Your Torah” (*Tehillim* 119:126). If we do not maintain *yeshivot* and *kollelim* we will have plenty of respectable working men who pay their own way in life, but without scholars to teach us Torah, we are lost. Our people must have Torah, and part-time learning will not produce the caliber of scholars we need in order to survive.

Partners

One possible solution is a partnership, in which a Torah scholar invests funds with a businessman. The latter uses these funds to conduct business, with the Torah scholar receiving the proceeds of his investment. This has many precedents in our history. To cite just one example, Rabbi Yaakov Emden writes that when wealthy local businessmen foresaw a profitable transaction, they would encourage his father, the Hacham Tzvi, to invest money in the deal. They paid him handsome dividends on his investment, providing him with a respectable and dignified living (*Megillat Sefer*, p.37-38).

Unfortunately, in our times no cautions and precautions are too extreme for those who contemplate entrusting money to “investment experts” and “financial advisors.” The potential for easy earnings can be so attractive that innocent investors are too quick to trust the experts, with disastrous results, may Hashem spare us.

Brothers in Torah

As a result, the only available solution, and the one most widely practiced today, is that of the archetypal Yissachar-Zevulun relationship (*Bereshit* 49:13-14, Rashi; *Devarim* 33:18, Rashi). Yissachar devoted himself to Torah while his brother Zevulun engaged in commerce, with the material and spiritual proceeds divided between the two. This arrangement is not a no-choice last resort, resurrected when there is no other way to manage. It is a first choice to begin with, and it is acceptable and pleasing to the Al-mighty. Hashem in His wisdom willed that two such tribes exist, each with its own distinctive character, and He intended them to live in this manner.

Our Sages tell us that at the Dedication of the Tabernacle in the desert, the Princes of the twelve Tribes each offered a sacrifice. First was the Prince of the Tribe of Yehudah, followed by Yissachar, with Zevulun as the third. Zevulun merited this respected position because of the Tribe’s immense love of Torah, evidenced by their unstinting support of their brother-tribe, Yissachar, who engaged exclusively in Torah study. We find allusion to this in the verse, “A man’s gift broadens [his path] for him,



and leads him before the great” (*Mishle* 18:16); Zevulun’s generous support of Torah placed him before many of the other Tribes (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:17).

A Yissachar-Zevulun agreement is not a charitable relationship, but a legitimate spiritual and financial partnership. A Torah scholar who undertakes such an agreement has not made himself dependent on community support, a practice sharply criticized by the Rambam (*Perush HaMishnayot* 4:5). However, it is worth noting that this refers to accepting sufficient support to learn without the distraction of financial worries. There is no justification to accept money from others in order to live on a luxurious standard; this is not the Torah’s intent.

Lofty Labor

We can understand Shemayah’s injunction to **love work** on a more profound level as well. Our actions, even those which appear to be physical and mundane, have great spiritual import.

When we fulfill *mitzvot* such as *tzitzit*, *tefillin*, or *shofar* in this world, our deeds ascend on high and generate Divine influx in the higher spiritual worlds. The same is true of seemingly material acts such as plowing, planting, pruning, and harvesting. These simple activities are actually replete with the opportunity to fulfill positive and negative commandments, and they too generate an abundance of Divine influx in the Higher Worlds.

The Arizal teaches that there are “sparks of holiness” (*nitzotzot*) scattered everywhere in our world. These sparks are the life force of every physical entity in this world. Lacking the holiness imparted by these sparks, the entity could no longer exist. It is our job to retrieve and rectify all these scattered sparks, wherever they are. We do so by utilizing physical objects in keeping with the Will of the Al-mighty. When we grow and prepare food, tend livestock, or do business with a commodity, we retrieve and rectify its holy sparks. In this sense, our **work** serves a most lofty spiritual purpose (*Shaar HaMitzvot, Parashat Behar*, p. 25b).

Our Sages cite the verse, “Who can count the dust of Yaakov?” (*Bamidbar* 23:10). Who can count the commandments they fulfill with dust? ‘Do not plow with an ox and a donkey’ (*Devarim* 22:10); ‘Do not plant your vineyard with hybrids’ (*Devarim* 22:9); ‘And a pure man will collect gather the dust of the [Red] Heifer’ (*Bamidbar* 19:9); ‘And [the Cohen will take] from the dust that is on the floor of the Tabernacle’ [a reference to the trial of a married woman accused of immorality] (*Bamidbar* 5:17); ‘For three years they [the fruits of a new tree] will be forbidden to you’ (*Vayikra* 19:23), and the like” (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 20:19).



The *mitzvot* we fulfill with these physical entities elevate their Divine sparks, raising them from the lowly material world to the highest spiritual worlds. Rabbi Shlomo Eliyahu, author of the Kabbalistic work *Kerem Shlomo*, writes that this holds true also of business dealings. He describes an example of the process. A merchant buys flax in Africa, and ships it to China to be spun into thread. From there, it goes to Europe to be woven into fabric. The fabric is sent to *Eretz Yisrael* where it is cut and sewn into garments worn in honor of Shabbat. Its use for a *mitzvah* elevates the holy sparks invested in all the many components of the finished product (*Kerem Shlomo, Perush al Etz Hayyim, Shaar Gimmel, Chapter 2, Ot bet*). This is the real reason that we should **love work** – because of the spiritual elevation of the *nitzotzot* it brings about.

With this in mind, we can understand why our people have lived in so many different lands throughout our centuries of exile. Wherever we go, our Torah and *mitzvot* elevate the sparks of holiness in the country where we reside. The classic example of an exile which fulfilled its purpose is that of Egypt. When Hashem told Avraham that his children would be enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years, He promised him that “Afterwards, they will go out with great wealth” (*Bereshit* 15:14). This does not refer only to the material spoils of Egypt (*Shmot* 12:35) and at the Red Sea (see Rashi on *Shmot* 15:22, citing *Mechilta*); that was only gold, silver, jewels, and clothing. The Torah also tells us that “they emptied out Egypt” (12:36), leaving it “like a net without fish, and like a storehouse without grain” (*Berachot* 9b). The Arizal explains that they emptied the country in a spiritual sense, by retrieving and rectifying all the sparks of sanctity scattered in Egypt, and carrying them away when they left. This is why the Torah forbids us to settle in Egypt (see *Devarim* 17:16). Once the land was emptied of every trace of holiness, there was no reason for our people to return there ever again (*Shaar HaMitzvot, Parashat Re’eh*, p. 48a; see *Petah Enayim* on *Berachot* 9b). The Hidda teaches that this retrieval and rectification of the sparks of holiness throughout our exile is the meaning of the term *shakle v’azle*, literally “collecting and walking,” used in the *Gemara* to define “going somewhere” (*Devash L’Fi, Maarechet Bet, Ot tet-vav*.)

This may be why the Amora Rava told his students not to come to the *bet midrash* during the harvest in Nisan and the grape and olive pressing in Tishre, instructing them instead to stay home to take care of their work in the fields and farms. This was an indirect way of reminding them of the various agricultural *mitzvot* to be fulfilled in these seasons. The Arizal teaches that the two hundred and forty-eight positive commandments and three hundred and sixty-five negative commandments correspond respectively to man’s two hundred and forty-eight spiritual limbs and three hundred and sixty five spiritual sinews. Every commandment we fulfill completes and perfects its related limb or sinew. If we lack commandments, our limbs and sinews will be blemished and incomplete (see



Introduction to *Shaar HaMitzvot*, p.1a). By loving **work** and turning our mundane activities into *mitzvot*, we bring perfection to ourselves and to the Higher Worlds.

What could be more physical and material than **work**? And yet, bottom line, even work is a spiritual activity which brings perfection and blessing into the world at all levels. By working and engaging in business honestly and in keeping with *halachah*, we effect great *tikunim* in all the worlds, bringing them closer to their ultimate rectification and perfection.

Honest

Our discussion of the question of the proper balance between working and learning helps us resolve what appears to be a difference of opinion among the Sages. They teach that when man is brought before the Heavenly Court for judgment, he is questioned about his conduct in this world. The first question on the list is, “Did you deal honestly in business?” followed by “Did you establish fixed times for Torah study?” (*Shabbat* 31b). However, elsewhere they explicitly tell us that man’s judgment in the Heavenly Court begins with the question of his Torah study. Is this not a contradiction (*Kiddushin* 40b, *Tosfot*)?

We may say that these two questions are actually one and the same. “Did you deal honestly in business” refers to the way we related to business. How much time did we allot it in our lives? Were we honest in our breakdown of work vs. learning, or did we give business more time than it really needed, at the expense of Torah? Did we trust that the Al-mighty would care for us and provide our needs, or did we neglect Torah for the sake of extra earnings?

Clearly, this search for the proper, honest balance is highly individual. Finding and maintaining it is a lifelong test of our devotion to Hashem and his Torah.

This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.