

Rav Kook Torah



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Balancing Torah and Work

Summary: Rabbi Shimon advocated for total immersion in Torah study, whereas Rabbi Yishmael viewed the integration of spiritual growth with worldly occupation as the ideal path for the majority.

Constant Torah Study?

What is the ideal? Should we strive to dedicate ourselves totally to Torah study? Or should we divide our time between Torah study and an occupation?

The Sages debated this issue on the basis of an apparent contradiction between two verses. On the one hand, we are exhorted to study Torah constantly:

This book of Torah shall not depart from your mouth; you shall meditate in them day and night (Yehoshua 1:8).

Yet, the Torah also says, “You shall gather your grains, your wine and your oil” (D'varim 11:14) – implying that we should occupy ourselves with working the land and a livelihood. Which is correct?

Rabbi Yishmael explained that the

verse exhorting constant Torah study cannot be taken literally. The second verse teaches us that one should combine the study of Torah with a worldly occupation. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, however, disagreed:

Can it be that a person will plow and plant and harvest and mill and winnow, each labor in its season? What will become of Torah? Rather, when Israel fulfills God's will, their work will be performed by others ... And when Israel does not fulfill God's will, they must perform their own labor. (B'rachot 35b)

The Nature of the Human Soul

According to Rashi, both scholars agreed that the ideal is full-time Torah study. Rabbi Yishmael, however, took a pragmatic stand that it is better to have a livelihood and not be dependent on charity.

But Rav Kook explained that the disagreement is not a matter of practicality versus an ideal state. Rather, they disagreed about the nature of the human soul and its spiritual capabilities.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai held that the human soul is meant to be continually occupied with intellectual and spiritual pursuits. If necessary, we may be forced to deal with mundane matters, but such activity is, in fact, beneath our true potential. The human soul is so elevated that it

can only be satisfied with total dedication to study and contemplation.

Thus, the command that “This book of Torah shall not depart from your mouth” should be understood literally. It applies to the complete human being who has not become soiled by sin. Some people may feel a weakness in spirit due to excessive study, but this frailty is only due to flaws in character. As the Jewish people perfect themselves, their work will be performed by others, and their sole desire will be to dedicate themselves to knowing God and His ways.

Rabbi Yishmael, on the other hand, felt that human nature is a composite of both theoretical and practical inclinations. According to his view, to occupy oneself with worldly matters in the proper measure is not just a concession to the current state of the world; rather, it meets an innate need of our inner makeup. Rabbi Yishmael came to this conclusion through his observation that most people are not satisfied to spend their days only in study and spiritual pursuits.

Who Was Right?

The Talmud records that many followed the advice of Rabbi Yishmael, and it worked well for them. Those who followed Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, on the other hand, were not successful.

There may be a select few who feel they are destined for greatness and are happy to delve constantly in wisdom and Torah. However, the Torah was not given to angels; its teachings must be suitable for the majority of people.

While it is difficult to determine the true capacity of the human soul, we can ascertain from empirical evidence that what works for most people is indicative of humanity’s true inner nature. Many followed Rabbi Yishmael’s counsel and found satisfaction in both their Torah study and their material accomplishments, while those following Rabbi Shimon’s opinion felt less successful, due to an internal resistance to constant Torah study. This indicates that Rabbi Yishmael’s assessment of human nature is accurate for the vast majority of people. Rabbi Shimon’s outlook is only valid for the select few who are blessed with rare spiritual gifts.

The Right Balance

Having ascertained that for most people it is preferable to combine Torah study with an occupation, we still need to determine the proper balance between Torah and work. How should we divide our time and effort between them?

The Talmud (B'rachot 35b) made the following observation:

See what a difference there is between the earlier and the later generations. Earlier generations made the study of Torah their main concern and their livelihood secondary to it, and both prospered in their hands. Later generations made their livelihood their main concern and their Torah study secondary, and neither prospered in their hands.

Even in worldly matters, one's sense of contentment and happiness is influenced by his spiritual state. A person who has acquired virtuous character traits, a strong faith and an awe of heaven is protected against many of the aspects of life that can lead one astray and that make life's burdens so difficult. Such a person is content with his portion in life. For this reason, the earlier generations who made Torah study and ethical pursuits their principal concern, were successful in both their spiritual and material endeavors.

However, one who has not properly developed his ethical nature, since he concentrated all of his energy on his livelihood, will never be content with what he has acquired. His flawed character traits will lead him to chase after ill-advised cravings. Even if he succeeds in amassing great wealth, he will not be satisfied and will never feel true peace of mind.

Quality, not Quantity

Rav Kook concluded with a very significant comment. The amount of time devoted to a particular activity is not the sole factor in determining that this is our main pursuit in life. What truly matters is our mindset. That which we consider to be the central focus of our life, even if we are unable to devote most of our time to it, constitutes our principal activity.

*Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 310-313.
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