

CHAPTER 2: MISHNA 9: PART 2

by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai received (the tradition) from Hillel and Shammai. He used to say: If you have learned a large amount of Torah, don't hold yourself in high regard, since it was for this purpose that you were created.

There are three levels to the life forces of man's existence. First, he has the life force shared with all animals. He also has an intelligent life force, which is the source of his speaking ability. Finally, he has a transcendent spiritual life force.

Man was not created to be at rest, but to be in a dynamic state, working constantly to realize his potential perfection. G-d created the world with every element existing in a state of completeness, implying a condition of repose. This is the meaning of the verse "ki tov" ("And G-d saw that it was good," implying a completeness), written after each element of creation. However, this phrase was not used after man's creation, for man was not created in the desired state that would allow him to be in a state of rest. Man is incomplete, and he must be constantly striving to reach completeness. Only then will he be in a state of rest and tranquillity. His struggle and striving is an inherent element in making his creation complete.

This will help us understand the verse (Koheleth 7:1) "A good name is better than good oil; and the day of death [is better] than the day of his birth." (Why is the day of death better than the day of birth?!) On the day he is born, man lacks completeness, as he is constantly struggling and moving in an attempt to realize his potential. The day of his death, however, marks the time that he has become as complete as he will become, thus reaching a state of rest.

When the Talmud states "I don't know whether it ("amal") is for the toil of the mouth or toil of [physical] labor," the question is built on the different life-forces that man possesses. There is the toil of physical labor which is part of the animal life-force of man, and this physical toil is something man shares in common with animals. There is also the toil of the mouth which is part of the intelligent life-force of man, and is exclusive to him. The ambiguity of the verse ("Man is born to toil") is resolved by an additional verse (Koheleth 6:7) "All of man's toil is for his mouth," which indicates that man has not been created for his physical labor, and his completeness cannot be dependent on his physical life-force. (This verse is not the one brought in the Talmud section we have been discussing, but is introduced by the Maharal.) If man's perfection was dependent on the physical life-force, his toil

could not be for his mouth, which is connected to his intelligent life-force.

However, there is still an ambiguity about whether the toil of the mouth refers to the toil of talking, which is part of the intelligent life-force, or to the toil of Torah, which is part of the spiritual life-force. This is clarified with the verse (Joshua 1:8) "This book of the Torah will not move from your mouth," teaching that man's perfection comes from the toil of Torah study.

This will shed light on the conclusion in the Talmud (Shabbath 86b) "All agree that on Shabbath the Torah was given to the Jewish people." Why on Shabbath? If the Torah was given during the week, one could say that just as there is cessation from physical labor on Shabbath, so, too, there is cessation from the labor of Torah study on Shabbath. But with the Torah being given on Shabbath, it is clear that Shabbath is the time to cease physical labor but not to cease Torah study. And if on Shabbath, when man ceases his physical labor, he still continues the labor of his Torah study, then during the week, which is a time of physical labor (as he strives to make himself more complete in his physical dimension) he should certainly be laboring in Torah study (to move towards greater perfection in his primary dimension, the spiritual one).

Furthermore, since man is created to be in a dynamic state of striving, rather than in a static state of completion, if Torah would not have been given on Shabbath, then man would be in a **full** state of rest and completion on Shabbath. This would go against the nature of his creation in this world, since man was created to toil. The giving of the Torah on Shabbath ensures that even on Shabbath man's existence will continue in a state of movement towards perfection, in the dimension of his spiritual life-force. (This may explain why some people find keeping Shabbath difficult and "boring." If they cease their normal activities, which involve striving for a level of perfection and improvement in the physical world, and don't replace these activities with alternative ones that involve movement towards some dimension of greater perfection, there is a void in their feeling of existence.)

(This section of the Maharal should shed light on the Torah attitude towards the modern goal of increased "leisure time." In fact, the results of the relentless pursuit of this goal over the past forty or fifty years is the strongest validation of the verse "Man is born to toil." As hard as society has worked to develop technology and other mechanisms to ease man's burden and increase his leisure time, today the average person works more than ten percent more hours each week than he did a few decades ago. And this is at a time when the number of families with two "breadwinners" has increased dramatically. While it defies the predictions made by most sociologists and economists twenty or thirty years ago, it is consistent with Koheleth. Man's existence in this world is one of toil. The only thing he can choose is what dimension of his humanity will be toiling -- his physical one, his intellectual one, or his spiritual one. It is in the next world that man will be at rest -- enjoying "well deserved leisure time.")

We now understand Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's lesson. Man was created to learn Torah, and there is no respite from this, since man never reaches perfection and completion. Working towards

this perfection, which is what happens as he learns more and more Torah, is simply a fulfillment of his purpose of existence, and this should not cause man to hold himself in too high regard. (Except, of course, to feel a sense of accomplishment for doing the basic job for which he was put on this earth.)

The class is taught by [Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky](#), Dean of [Darche Noam Institutions](#), Yeshivat Darche Noam/Shapell's and Midreshet Rachel for Women.
