

CHAPTER 3, MISHNA 6: BORN TO TOIL

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Nechunia ben (son of) Ha'kaneh said: Whoever accepts upon himself the yoke of Torah study, the yoke of government and the yoke of earning a living will be removed from him. Whoever casts off of himself the yoke of Torah study, the yokes of government and earning a living will be placed upon him.

This week's mishna provides us with an important life insight, one not only philosophically intriguing but practically valuable as well. One who accepts upon himself the "yoke of Torah" -- meaning he undertakes to study Torah diligently and without interruption, will find the yokes of government and of livelihood less burdensome or removed altogether. (The "yoke of government" means national service of some kind, typically military duty.) One, however, who attempts to ease up on himself by slacking off in Torah study will find himself none the better off. G-d -- who really pulls all the strings -- will easily see to it that an endless barrage of other difficulties come that person's way. In the end, he will be just as burdened and stressed out; it will just not be for the sake of the Torah.

The commentator Rabbeinu Yonah, while agreeing with the above, adds an additional, equally pivotal insight. Our mishna is not merely informing us of a Divine promise -- that G-d extends favors to those who study Torah. There is something very logical about this as well. A person who makes Torah study an integral part of his life will slowly but surely place less emphasis on his material needs. And so, he will naturally put less effort into earning his livelihood. His dreams and life goals will no longer be for social or economic status or for material comforts.

One, however, whose insatiable pursuit of wealth or success allows him no time for Torah study, will find himself ever increasingly caught up in his career. And in a vicious cycle, his religious life will deteriorate ever further. King Solomon stated it simply but best: "One who loves money will never be satisfied with money" (Koheles 5:9).

R. Nechunia of our mishna is not only offering us wise advice. He is opening our eyes to one of the chief methods through which G-d controls the world -- and one of the great truths of life. We are taught in Scripture: "For man is born to toil" (Job 5:7). We were born to struggle, to battle the elements, to take plow against an unyielding earth, to eat bread through the sweat of our brow, to fight rush-hour traffic, and to agonizingly wait for our slides to develop five minutes before the big presentation (after noticing those glaring mistakes in our previous slides ten minutes before the big event).

And as Job is told, this is simply the human condition. Life is hard -- and it was meant to be that way. As sluggish as our flesh sometimes is, our psyches thrive on work and productivity. The Mishna (Kesuvos 5:5) writes that inactivity leads to madness, as well as to lewdness. We feel most content and fulfilled when we are productive and contributing to mankind. It makes us feel **alive** -- and in a sense, it is what truly gives us life.

For this reason, G-d wills it that we be busy and productive. And He does not allow us to free ourselves from our fate. We might want to win the lottery and drop out of life, but G-d generally does not allow this. (There are always exceptions to this of course -- but let's just say such people are generally very high-risk for rather depressing lives.)

We could almost say that there is a preordained amount of toil we must endure throughout the course our lives. It is a constant we cannot avoid. And so, attempting to cut Torah study and religious duty out of our lives is not only morally incorrect; it will never work. We will not save ourselves one iota. G-d's equation will take effect. The yokes of government, of livelihood, of cleaning out a flooded basement, or of troubleshooting an on-the-blink server will come into play (in the 24-hours-a-day support plan you offer your clients -- and for some strange reason your client needs his system running at 3 AM). And so in a practical sense we just "might as well" study Torah. Why wait to see what other forms of drudgery G-d will impose upon us in its stead?

And so, man is fated to toil. But we have a hand in it as well. It is up to us to decide how worthy and beneficial our toil will be. In the Talmud, Rava, commenting on the dictum "for man is born to toil," adds: "Fortunate is he who merits to toil in the study of Torah" (Sanhedrin 99b). We will work regardless, but how valuable, how fulfilling, how beneficial it will be to mankind is in our own hands alone.

(Many years ago, I interviewed for a software firm whose business was to provide on-line games and gambling opportunities. It bothered me to no end at the time that this would have been the fruits of my labor and my contribution to mankind. The position wasn't offered anyway, but I had already decided not to accept it.)

Incidentally, the same principle holds true regarding money. One who feels he will save money by hoarding it and withholding it from charity will quickly and decidedly be taught otherwise by G-d. Here too our income is preordained. We will be none the better off by giving less to charity; it will disappear just as fast some other way. The Talmud tells us that our yearly earnings (or at least our earning potential) are foreordained from one Rosh Hashanah to the next (Beitzah 16a). If we use our earnings prudently and give our fair share back to G-d in the form of charity, we will receive our allotment justly and deservedly. If, however, we attempt to keep more than G-d wants us to have, G-d will be forced, so to speak, to even out our bottom line some other way.

And of course, we're not talking miracles. G-d has many messengers to take away that which is not deserved: The fridge will break, a child will need braces, your car's CV boot will crack. (As far as I'm

concerned, CV boots exist only in order to crack and need to be replaced. I've never heard a mechanic listen to an engine and say, "Purring like a kitten! Those CV boots sure are doing their thing!") G-d need not perform open miracles to show us who is the true boss of our finances. Those of us who earn money -- and even try to keep track of where it all goes (and I do mean all) -- can see G-d's Hand in our checkbooks every month. G-d did not give us our income for free, He entrusted us with it; He **loaned** it to us. We should use it well while we have it.

Writing personally, I have always felt this to be a message we must carry with us throughout our lives. G-d constantly challenges us in life: to give or not to give, to help or not to help, to study or not to study. We must not see the issue as one of sacrifice: I'd rather watch TV tonight, but I'll sacrifice of my time to study Torah. I'd rather hold onto this money and buy myself a ice cream cone, but I'll forgo it to give charity. These are simply not accurate depictions of what the issue truly is.

Rather, we should ask ourselves as follows: I know my life will have its share of struggles and frustrations, and I will never have as much money as I'd like. Why not make that sacrifice on my own terms -- for the sake of what I know to be important, rather than in some random and unexpected way, which may wind up being no more than plain old aggravation? G-d is truly running my life -- the stresses which will come my way and certainly my income. I control one thing alone -- and this even more than G-d does -- my free will. I can elect to turn my financial and anxiety-related challenges into spiritual ones, or I can allow G-d to call the shots. And this alone is my prerogative.

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