

# IT TASTES THAT GREAT

by Rabbi Label Lam

*If you will go in My statutes and guard My Mitzvos and do them... (Vayikra 26:3)*

If you will go in My statutes: *That **you should be toiling in Torah*** in order to guard and to fulfill them!  
–Rashi

What does it mean to toil in Torah? Admittedly it sounds like a very uncomfortable exercise and not too inviting. Yet we are told this is a primary pursuit! Everything good depends on it! What is it then that is being demanded from us?!

The Mishne in Pirke' Avos (6:4) seems to make what seems to be a strange statement, "This is the way of Torah: Bread with salt you will eat with a measure of water. On the ground you will sleep. A life of austerity you will live. *And in the Torah you will toil.* If you are doing so, happy you will be and it will be good for you. Happy will you be in this world and it will be good for you in the next world!"

Questions! 1) When was a vow of poverty instituted as prior requirement to learning Torah? Since when have we been an ascetic cult? 2) Why does the Mishne promise happiness in this world? We can imagine that somehow through self-denial a person can achieve a degree of good for himself in the next world but how does that match up with a promise of happiness in the here and now?

Reb Simcha Zissel, the Alter from Kelm highlighted a key phrase that may just open this statement to its true intent. The words, "if you are doing so." are critical. The Torah is not advocating poverty as a way of life. The Mishne is saying that the Torah has the ability to promote the most exalted happiness even under the most severe circumstances of life.

This can only be appreciated "if you are the one doing so"! A portrait of the inner life does not lend itself to the superficial gaze of the casual onlooker.

Finding it hard to keep my eyes open one very early morning I remarked to a study partner my amazement that the Vilna Gaon slept only two hours in a twenty-four period. How was that humanly possible? My friend corrected me and my misrepresentation of the facts, "It's not true!" I insisted that I had seen it in an authenticated biography that he slept only two hours. My study partner repeated that it wasn't true. I wondered how he dare dispute a known fact. We went back and forth like that a good few times until he clarified his point. It wasn't that he slept only two hours. He learned Torah twenty two hours each day. He wasn't into sleep deprivation. He was involved with learning Torah

twenty-two hours in a day! The joy of Torah and Mitzvos filled up and expanded his waking hours."

If one is tired while driving there is good piece of advice to eat or drink something. Almost no one in history has fallen asleep while eating ice cream. The Vilna Gaon was as if eating ice cream all day, and this delight displaced the need for sleep. Now go and explain that to someone that never had that level of experience in learning.

To the one peering in the window of the study hall, toiling in Torah does not seem so enticing. To the spectator at a fancy smorgasbord none of the food has flavor. The challenge of the Mishne is to develop an appetite! Learning Torah can excite the soul to the extent that the external and superficial are exactly that, external and superficial. Toiling in Torah therefore is not about learning 'til it hurts. It's about learning until **it tastes that great!**