

TORAH VS. TV

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

Simchas Torah -- "Rejoicing in the Torah." We take this opportunity to celebrate Torah -- not even the fact that G-d gave us the Torah, which we celebrate on Shavuot, but the Torah itself!

Torah addresses every one of us; a child age seven and grandfather age seventy can both learn new things from its words. One need only look at the tremendous amount of Jewish literature written over the past thousand years to realize that it addresses Jews in vastly different communities and situations, in every era. Through Torah, we possess a common foundation, which we share with Jews of different locales and even different generations.

A recent article in the Washington Post looked wistfully at the declining market share of "ER", a popular television drama which apparently was the leading series for a few years. Besides the fact that this one show's audience is declining, and the show might be canceled before too long, the writer believes it unlikely that another TV show will ever achieve a similar level of popularity, where a truly significant portion of Americans are all watching the same TV show -- as they once did with "I Love Lucy," "The Brady Bunch", and "Seinfeld." Given the number of channels Americans now have on cable, with "Dish Network" advertising literally hundreds of channels with which to numb our brains, a unique era in U.S. history is coming to an end. No longer will Americans approach the water cooler the following morning with one show they can all discuss, something which strangers can talk about in diners across America.

Think about what this writer is saying. Besides the latest sordid tales from the White House, what common vocabulary do Americans share? Says the Washington Post: TV programs! And if another TV show will never be as popular, then Americans will lose a common bond.

Our common bond, as Jews, could not be more opposite to a mind-deadening, ephemeral evening as a couch potato, which loses all impact as soon as the season ends. We connect ourselves through intellectually demanding study, which speaks to us today as it spoke to Jews thousands of years ago. "Ma Tov Chelkeinu, u'ma Naim Goraleinu, u'ma Yaffa Yerushaseinu" -- "How good is our portion, how pleasant is our lot, and how beautiful is our inheritance!"

Studying anything else is a means to an end -- meaning, the goal is to possess knowledge of a subject, and studying the literature is the method by which you reach that goal. Torah study, by contrast, is itself the goal.

When a person finishes a significant portion of Torah literature -- study of a book in Tanach, a Seder

(section) of the Mishnah, a tractate of Talmud, etc. -- then it is customary to celebrate with a Siyum, a meal in honor of the completion. The traditional reading said then includes the following words: "we labor, and they labor; we labor and receive reward, they labor and do not receive reward." What does this mean? We know that people are paid and rewarded for all sorts of labor!

Recently, NASA lost a \$129 million Mars orbiter when, upon arrival, it burned in the Martian atmosphere rather than going into orbit. After carefully studying what went wrong, they finally realized that the contractor had told them to exert a certain amount of thrust using English measurements, which NASA then implemented as if they had been given the numbers in metric units. With the wrong amount of thrust, the orbiter dropped too far into the atmosphere, and burned. A simple math error, and years of work literally went up in smoke.

This is the meaning of "we labor and receive reward, they labor and do not receive reward." In other things, you have to complete the job to get the reward. But because Torah study is an end in itself, there is no such thing as "wasted effort." All effort is Torah study!

When we have this attitude, making a little more effort seems easier -- and little efforts can go a very long way. So let's celebrate what we have, and try to acquire more for ourselves in the coming year!