

LIVING THROUGH DEATH

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Among the ways through which one can contract tum'ah (ritual impurity) from a dead body is "tum'as ohel - " by being situated under the same roof as a corpse, as discussed at the beginning of parshas Chukas. The Torah introduces this law by writing, "This is the law ['Torah'] concerning a person when he dies in a tent (19:14)." In a famous extrapolation of this verse, Chazal (Talmud, Shabbos 83b) learn from here that, "the words of Torah are retained only by one who 'kills himself' over them."

The Rambam elaborates on this comment in Hilchos Talmud Torah 3:12:

"The words of Torah are not retained by one who is lazy regarding them, and not by those who study surrounded by luxuries, food, and drink, but rather by one who 'kills himself' over them, denying himself physical indulgences; one who does not allow his eyes to sleep nor his eyelids to slumber. The Sages allude to this when they state: "This is the Torah concerning a person when he dies in a tent" - Torah is retained only by one who kills himself in the tents of scholars."

Taken on its simplest level, this derasha might prove quite disheartening for your average run-of-the-mill Jew. How many Jews even aspire to reach the level of dedication, self-denial, and sacrifice implied by the comparison of Torah study to death?

Of course, the simple answer is that indeed, most of us don't aspire to this level of dedication, nor do we merit its benefits. Namely, we are denied the profound wisdom and insight reserved for those few who truly dedicate themselves to Torah study. There are no shortcuts to achieving greatness in Torah - the Torah accepts no less than complete dedication and sacrifice. Just as - le-havdil - we understand that while anyone can run or jog, to become an Olympic athlete and compete at a world-class level requires years of training and tremendous discipline and dedication; so too, the Torah is accessible to all, yet to truly achieve greatness in Torah is the domain of those choice few who truly sacrifice everything.

All the same, there must be some level at which we all can benefit from that which the Torah encourages us to "kill ourselves" over its study.

The holy Chafetz Chaim zt"l explains that a person's success in Torah study depends on his ability to focus on three fundamental ideas: The first thing one should consider is that he has only one day to live. When a person thinks that this is his last day, he will certainly do all that he can to achieve a penitent mood and to perform mitzvos and study Torah to the best of his ability. Imagine you've been "given notice" - today is (G-d forbid) your last day on this earth. How would you spend it?

Would you squander your last, precious moments checking the latest news and updating your stock portfolio? Or would you make time to learn Torah with each of your children, discuss important issues with your wife, and study mussar (ethics)? While thinking about death all the time can get a little morbid, the attitude and sense of urgency this type of exercise results in is an essential ingredient of Torah study. Without it - there just never seems to be enough time. In the words of our Sages (Avos 4:8): Don't say, "When I have some free time I'll study - perhaps you won't have any free time!"

The second idea he should focus on is that the chapter of Mishnayos or the page of Gemara or Chumash he is studying at the moment is the only goal he has to achieve. When a person focuses strictly on the task at hand - this perek of Mishnayos or that daf of Gemara - he will fully apply his efforts and toil in order to complete the job to the best of his ability, without having to worry about completing the entire tractate (or the complete Shas etc.). While it's important for a person to have long-term goals and plans, all the more so with regard to one's learning, it is important not to become overwhelmed by the "big picture." Just imagine as if, for this moment, all I have to learn is this one small section. It's as if to say, "While I study this blatt Gemara, my goals are 'dead.' All I can do now is understand what's in front of me to the best of my ability."

Finally, he should consider himself to be the one and only Jew in the world who is studying Torah, and that it's in his merit that the world continues to be sustained. This sense of responsibility and obligation, that, "the world rests upon my shoulders," gives one a true feeling for the tremendous impact and effect his Torah study has, not only on himself and his soul, but on his family, his community, and even upon the world. They used to say in the Yeshivos: A bachur (young scholar) learning energetically in Poland can awaken an entire community of Jews in Paris to teshuva (repentance). And a bachur whittling away his time takes responsibility for all the good he might have brought to the world had he been more diligent. There's an expression in Yiddish - "der velt iz geshtorben - as if the whole world were dead;" you're the only one left - it's all riding on you!

It's somewhat ironic that these three aspects of "death" should be the key to Torah study, which is called "Toras Chaim - the Torah of Life." Upon reflection, however, you'll see that it's not the focus on death we're after; it's the "life" that arises from keeping our minds focused and our lives rooted in the Torah.

I once heard a ba'al darshan exclaim: "You sometimes hear people saying, 'I've got some time to kill.' It makes you wonder. After all, what is life but time - a precious collection of many little moments woven together into what we hope might ultimately become a fabric of some substance and design. They're not "killing time," they're killing themselves! May the Almighty give us the wisdom and the insight to make the most of our 120 years, give or take, that we've been granted to live a life of Torah and mitzvos!

Have a good Shabbos.

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