

WORK, WORK, WORK

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 266, The Laws of Chuppah Good Shabbos!

Dedicated This Year Le'eluy Nishmas Chaya Bracha Bas R. Yissocher Dov - In memory of Mrs. Adele Frand

The Difference Between 'Melacha' and 'Avodah'

We are told that after Moshe Rabbeinu came to Pharoah and asked him to free the Jews, Pharoah reacted negatively. The King of Egypt commanded the taskmasters to withhold the straw necessary for making bricks, and insisted that the slaves obtain straw on their own.

If Pharoah's goal was to make the slaves work twice as hard, his decree does not seem very wise. He should have simply doubled the quota of bricks that they were required to build each day. Then he would have achieved the same goal, that of forcing them to work twice as hard, and he would have benefited at the same time.

Pharoah had a project in progress. He wanted store-cities built. Even if he wanted to torture his workers, he should have done so in a manner that would have had the greatest payback. By withholding the straw as a means of turning the screws, Pharoah was effectively shooting himself in the foot.

The truth is that Pharoah's true goal was to impose on the Jews "Avodas Perech" -- useless work. One of the Medrashic interpretations of the term "store-cities" (arei mis'kenos) is cities that were built on quicksand. No sooner were the cities built, than they would begin to crumble and they would have to be built all over again. Pharoah's primary interest was not a construction project; he was primarily interested in breaking the spirit of the people. The way to break someone's spirit is to make

sure that he feels absolutely no sense of accomplishment for all of his efforts. Nothing can be more depressing.

It is told that in one of the Soviet labor camps there was a prisoner whose job was to turn a wheel, which, he was told, manually operated a flour mill. Day after day, year after year, the prisoner turned this wheel, which he thought was at least grinding flour. One day they took him around and showed him that on the other side of the wall, attached to the wheel there was... nothing. The prisoner was totally devastated, because he saw that all of his work for the last several years had been totally in vain.

This is the meaning of "Avodas Perech". Work, work, work... for nothing.

There is a difference in Lashon HaKodesh [the holy tongue] between the word Avodah and the word Melacha. Melacha (which we find, for instance by the forbidden Sabbath labors) connotes constructive work. Avodah is merely toil, without necessarily accomplishing anything.

We as Jews need to concentrate on this distinction, and ensure that our work is Melacha, rather than Avodah. The Talmud [Beizah 16a] remarks "These foolish Babylonians eat bread with bread." The Baalei Mussar (Masters of Ethics) interpret this Gemara allegorically. It does not mean that they sat down at their meals and had a bread sandwich, with a slice of rye between two slices of whole wheat. It means that they worked for their bread, merely so that they could obtain more bread. Bread was both the means and the ends of their life. They worked for a living and they lived only to make a living.

If that is one's life cycle -- getting up in the morning to work so that he can eat so that the next morning he can work again, etc. -- that is debilitating. That is not Melacha (constructive labor), it is Avodas Perech (vain toil). Life's purpose must be greater than making a living.

A Jew can change that cycle. Yes, we all need to earn a living, but if one makes constructive endeavors part of that cycle -- "I am making a living so that I will be able to do Mitzvos, learn Torah and help others" -- then the cycle will have meaning. We elevate the process of making a living to something higher than a rat race.

Parenting can also appear to be a meaningless cycle. When one cleans the toys up in the morning only to find the same toys scattered in the afternoon, and then puts them away in the evening only to find them scattered again in the morning, when one changes the baby's diaper only to find the baby dirty again a couple of hours later, it can feel, G-d forbid, like Avodah rather than Melacha.

For children to develop and learn, and for spirituality to flourish in a home, the household first needs to function. When people appreciate that their efforts are vital to maintaining a functioning household, then all the efforts which seemed to be nothing more than meaningless and repetitive work have a much greater impact. Enabling a household to function is certainly a major accomplishment. It is not an Avodah (vain effort); it is a Melacha (constructive).

Rabbi Zev Leff offers the following insight based on the Gematria methodology of A"T BA"SH (whereby the numeric value of words is calculated from the relative position of each letter from the end of the alphabet, rather than the beginning. Instead of Aleph being 1 and Beis 2, Taf is 1 and Shin is 2, etc.). Using this methodology, the word Perach (in the phrase Avodas Perach) equals 39. The implication is that the converse (A"T BA"SH transformation) of the term which depicts meaningless labor is the number which represents constructive labor (39 corresponds to the number of categories of constructive activity prohibited on the Sabbath).

We can make our endeavors, our work and our labors constructive by giving them a constructive purpose, and by making proper use of our lives in the time that G-d has allotted us in this world.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Shmos are provided below:

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