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Torah u-Madda u-Ma'aseh: in Israel and America

I have chosen to define the subject of this presentation as not just “Torah u-Madda” but also “*ma'aseh*” as well. It is my understanding that a vast majority of students at Yeshiva University will be entering the professions of law, medicine or business and will therefore be dealing on a regular basis with the practical problems that fall under the category of *ma'aseh*. Only a very small percentage will dedicate their lives purely to *madda* in the classic sense of “*hokhmah*.” I want therefore to address an area which I feel will be more relevant. Furthermore, Jewish literature contains some very clear definitions of “*ma'aseh*,” while “*madda*” or “*hokhmah*,” as in “*hokhmat yevanit*,” is not as clearly defined. Nevertheless, my remarks will be relevant to Torah u-Madda as well.

I define “*ma'aseh*” as referring to a way of life. The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 40b) presents a debate between Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva regarding which is more important, גדול או מעשה גדול? Their conclusion is that תלמוד גדול שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה. Rashi and Tosafot already note that the Talmud’s answer is inconclusive and explain that, in truth, it is really *ma'aseh* that is greater. Since *talmud* gets its importance only from the fact that it leads towards *ma'aseh* then, in effect, *ma'aseh* is of greater significance. *Ma'aseh ha-mizvot* is the most important thing. It is the life of Torah.¹

The first question to raise, then, is: Is involvement in a profession a *mizvah*? Judaism allows for three categories of behavior: *reshut* (something permitted); *issur* (something forbidden) or *mizvah* (something required). Into which category does pursuing a trade or a profession fall? It is certainly not *asur* but is it a *mizvah* or just a *reshut*, something

permitted only in order to earn enough money to sustain one's life? Some authorities consider it a *mizvah de-'orayta*, basing themselves on the verses of *ואספת דגנך* (Deut. 18:20) and *והודעת להם את הדרך ילכו בה* (Ex. 18:20), and *ובחרת בחיים* (Deut. 30:19).² Yet none of the *monei mizvot* count the obligation to work as one of the 613 commandments. The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 29a) states: *חייב אדם ללמד בנו אומנות*, a father is required to teach his son a trade. The majority of the Rishonim consider this to be a *mizvah de-rabbanan*. And if a father has a *mizvah* to teach his son a trade, then certainly each person has an obligation to teach himself a trade. "Why?" asks Rashi. Because, he says, someone without a trade—*סופו מלסטם את הבריות*—he will end up a thief. At the very least, therefore, such activity is the fulfillment of a *mizvah de-rabbanan*.

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 35b) states in the name of R. Yehudah b. Ilai: *דורות הראשונים עשו תורתן קבע ומלאכתן עראי, זו וזו נתקיימה בידן*. Those who lived in earlier generations who made the Torah the center of their lives and kept *umanut* only on the periphery were successful in both. *דורות האחרונים עשו מלאכתן קבע ותורתן עראי, זו וזו לא נתקיימה בידן*. However, those in later generations who placed the Torah on the periphery of their lives and considered their work central to their existence were successful in neither. It is not that Torah was not important to them. It was important, but not the center of their lives.

For many years I have been troubled by this rabbinic statement and here in America it troubles me even more. I can understand that if someone does not make Torah the center of his life it is fair to say that whatever Torah he does study is not *nitkayemah bi-yado*. But how can you say that he is also not successful in business? America is full of people who do not learn Torah, who have no knowledge of Torah and yet are very successful financially. How can the Gemara say, *זו וזו לא נתקיימה בידן*?

Many years ago I had some theories to explain this, but now the matter is perhaps a little bit clearer to me. Every ben-Torah knows of the famous debate (*Berakhot* 35b) between Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai and Rabbi Yishmael about how a person should conduct his life. Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai maintains that one should constantly study Torah and not worry about *parnassah*. Somehow the *Ribbono shel 'Olam* will support him. Rabbi Yishmael says, *הנהג בהן מנהג דרך ארץ*—one should work to support oneself. The Rambam, Tur and Shulḥan Arukh, all say that the halakhah is in accordance with the view of Rabbi Yishmael.³

The Ḥatam Sofer asks a very interesting question: How can so many good, pious, and observant Jews not follow this halakhah? How can they indeed be totally involved in Torah study and not play a more active role in pursuing *parnassah*? Does this not violate the halakhah following the

opinion of Rabbi Yishmael? He answers that Rabbi Yishmael's position only applies in Erez Yisra'el. הנהגה בהן מנהג דרך ארץ, yes, but only in Erez Yisra'el. Why? Because every profession one engages in there is part of the *mizvah* of *yishuv Erez Yisra'el*. Whether one is a doctor or a businessman, whatever one does helps strengthen the community of Erez Yisra'el. However, outside of Erez Yisra'el, Rabbi Yishmael's opinion does not apply.⁴

How can the Ḥatam Sofer make such a distinction? Must one not earn a livelihood outside of Erez Yisra'el as well? What about the verses cited earlier referring to the importance of making a living? What about the obligation to refrain from stealing which, as mentioned above, is considered to be a corollary of one who does not earn his own livelihood? To answer the question, we need to define the problem more clearly. We must understand the *mizvah* of *yishuv ha-arez* and how exactly *par-nassah* is involved in it, and we must understand the *mizvah* of earning a livelihood outside of Erez Yisra'el.

First, there are two kinds of *mizvot*. There is one type wherein the act of the *mizvah* is itself a *hefzah* of *mizvah*; it is a *mizvah be-'ezem*. There is another type of *mizvah* wherein the act performed is only a means to fulfill the real *mizvah*, it is a vehicle for the performance of the *mizvah*, a *hekhsher mizvah*.

For example, the *mizvah* of ללמד בנו אומנות (according to Rashi) or the *mizvah* incumbent upon a person to support his family is not a *mizvah be-'ezem*. It is only a *hekhsher mizvah* and, as a result, is only considered something of value if it is necessary for the performance of the *mizvah*. Will performing that act actually help the one who does so fulfill a *mizvah*? If someone has money and does not have to work for a living, would he fulfill a *mizvah* by working? After all, it is not his working that keeps him from stealing or from starvation. The fact that he has the money anyway makes his work seem worthless. However, if this work were to be considered a *mizvah be-'ezem*, like *yishuv Erez Yisra'el*, then even if he were a rich man, every time he went to work it would be a *mizvah*.

Another difference between a *mizvah be-'ezem* and a *hekhsher mizvah* relates to the issue of מצוות צריכות כונה. If it is a *mizvah be-'ezem*, one's intention is irrelevant. After all, an act of *mizvah* is being performed. True, if someone does a *mizvah be-'ezem* with the explicit intention of *not* fulfilling a *mizvah*, then no *mizvah* has been done. But, on the whole, positive *mizvah* intention is unnecessary. However, if the *mizvah* act is only in the category of *hekhsher mizvah*, then one's intention matters a great deal. One must constantly ask oneself what one's aim is in doing the act. If your aim is, "I'm working because I want to be a success story, because I want to make something of myself"—these are American values which have nothing to do with the basic reason for performing

that *mizvah*. If your intention is for the purpose of the *mizvah*, i.e., to earn a livelihood for the sake of being able to do God's will, then that working becomes a worthwhile action.

This is the meaning of the Ḥatam Sofer's statement. Rabbi Yishmael's ארץ is a *mizvah be-'ezem* only in Erez Yisra'el as part of the *mizvah* of *yishuv Erez Yisra'el*. Outside of Israel, it is only a *hekhsher mizvah* and, as such, must always be scrutinized if, in fact, it is indispensable for the performance of a *mizvah* or *mizvot*!

To return to our original question. I made reference earlier to the Talmudic passage in the name of R. Yehudah b. Ilai that דורות האחרונים עשו מלאכתן קבע ותורתן עראי, זו וזו לא נתקיימה בידן. How, I asked, can we say that the *dorot aḥaronim* were unsuccessful when we see so many people for whom the Torah is not the most important thing in their lives, and nevertheless they have achieved a high measure of material and financial success? The answer I believe is that the Talmud never meant success in material or financial terms. עשו מלאכתן קבע ותורתן עראי does not mean that someone was very rich and לא נתקיימה בידן does not mean that they were poor. That expression means that the work they did had a positive spiritual value for them in their lives. When Torah study is one's most important activity, then even work has a value. In Erez Yisra'el, it is part of the *mizvah* of *yishuv ha-arez*. Outside of Erez Yisra'el, as long as it is considered as a vehicle for 'avodat Hashem and *mizvah* performance then it is "successful." But when Torah is not the 'ikar, as in the time of the *dorot aḥaronim*, then any *parnassah* one is engaged in is not considered a "successful" activity for it is done solely for its own sake and not for the sake of God and His *mizvot*.

Let us turn now to more practical concerns. What does it mean to say that תורתן קבע ומלאכתן עראי? In his *Moreh Nevukhim*, the Rambam speaks of the 'avot as being great because they were not only a part of society, but they were also permanently connected with God in their spiritual lives. They were somehow able to bring both worlds together. Even when they worked, they were connected to Hashem, soul and mind. But how practical and realistic is such a position? Do we know anyone like this today? Do we know any doctor, lawyer or engineer who can honestly say that they are constantly involved in 'avodat Hashem while doing their work? I have been involved for many years in educating people who go into engineering. After all, building society is a *mizvah* and so what they are doing is very important. But I cannot say that I know of one person who can in all honesty say about himself, שויתי ה', לנגדי תמיד, that whatever I do is for the *Ribbono shel 'Olam*.

The problem remains when we turn to the *Mishneh Torah*. There (*Hil. Talmud Torah* I:11–12) the Rambam defines *toratan keva* as a situation

in which three-quarters of the day is reserved for the learning of Torah and one-quarter is given to earning a living. Once again, is this realistic? Do people really do this? How can a society exist when its entire population is not prepared to undertake all of the tasks necessary for its functioning, all of which require a full-time commitment? Some small, marginal enclaves within society may be able to exist this way, but not society as a whole. And certainly not in Erez Yisra'el where we are committed to building an entire society based on Torah, with all its economic, social and political needs. How can a society be built when none of its inhabitants, committed to Torah, are prepared to commit themselves full time to the task?

We at the Jerusalem College of Technology have tried for many years to establish an industry wherein people who graduate would learn for half a day and work the other half. We wanted it to run as a business, but everyone we approached laughed at us and said that a business must be run like a business. No business can ever be successful with only part-time workers. Certainly an entire society cannot function this way.

What about other definitions of *keva* with regard to *talmud Torah*? According to the Meiri, it refers not to the number of hours a person learns but to the value he ascribes to that learning whenever he does it.⁵ Let me explain with an example. Suppose a person has a hobby like stamp collecting. He may dedicate only one half an hour a day or one half a day a week to this hobby, but his entire week revolves around that activity. He is always thinking about it, planning it, looking forward to it. It is the most important part of his week and almost of his life. Similarly, says the Meiri, this is the meaning of *toratan keva*. If a person can only spend two hours a day studying Torah but those are the most important hours of his day, then his Torah is *keva*. But a person has to be frank with himself and try to be constantly concerned with Torah. He works at earning a livelihood because he must, but whenever he has the time, he must learn, וְהָיָה בְּיוֹמָם וּלְלֵילָה. In *huz la-arez* this can be the only acceptable approach.

There can be no claim of spiritual value without acknowledging the centrality of Torah. Yet, it is hard to find people whose motivation for work is purely *le-shem shamayim*. Even the most observant Jews identify with the values of American society—money, power and success. Students may say, “I want to become a great doctor or lawyer so I can contribute to society,” but it is difficult to remain so altruistic in a money-oriented society. But this is your challenge—to be rooted in society but yet be governed by a desire to do all of your actions, whatever they may be, *le-shem shamayim*.

In Erez Yisra'el, work is a *mizvah be-ezem*, it is part of *mizvat yishuv ha-arez*. Outside of Erez Yisra'el, work is only a vehicle or a means, and if you don't have the proper intention then it is nothing. Your generation

has taken upon itself the yoke of bridging the two worlds of *'olam ha-ma'aseh* and *'olam ha-mizvot*. Each of you must make a tremendous *heshbon ha-nefesh* and decide to truly devote all the aspects of your life, even the *ma'aseh* part, to *'avodat Hashem*.

There was a time when the Torah world had a tremendous fear of secular learning. There was a real justified concern that if a yeshiva boy would look in a secular book, he would become a *mehallel Shabbat*. Today, this is no longer true, not because we are so much more religious but because society has become less threatening. We are no longer on the defensive but on the offensive. The only way to continue this offensive is to create a society wherein *madda* and *ma'aseh* are truly part of Torah, and where we all become exemplars of the best that a Torah way of life has to offer.

NOTES

1. See Rashi and Tosafot, *Baba Kamma* 17a.
[For more on the open-ended nature of this rabbinic statement, see I. Twersky, "Religion and Law," *Religion in a Religious Age*, ed. by S. D. Goitein (Cambridge, 1974), 79, n. 7; N. Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah's Sake* (New York and Hoboken, 1989), 138f.—ED.]
2. See, for example, *Baba Mezia* 30b: רב יוסף והודעת להם זה בית חייהם; Rashi: ללמוד להם אומנות להתפרנס בו; Talmud Yerushalmi, *Pe'ah* I:8. See also *Kiddushin* 30b: מנלן אמר חזקיה דאמר קרא, ראה חיים עם אשה אשר ללמדו אומנות. אהבת, אם אשה ממש היא כשם שחייב להשיאו אשה כך חייב ללמדו אומנות.
3. See Rambam, *Hil. Talmud Torah* III:8, *Tur* and *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* #156; *Yoreh De'ah* #246:21 (in glosses of Rama).
4. See *Hiddushei Hatam Sofer, Sukkah* 36b.
5. See Meiri, *Berakhot* 35b.