

B'CHUKOTAI

The Work-Study Program

It is quite a long time now since I first heard the term "work-study program". This was a special federal program designed to assist young adults with limited financial means to achieve a professional education. Recipients of this grant were encouraged to continue with their jobs, to work, but were also paid to enroll in college level training courses, to study. Hence the term "work-study program".

There was something about this term that struck me as odd. It seemed to make a distinction between work and study. It conveyed, to me at least, the notion that study was not work. To someone who had been trained in the yeshiva system, this notion was unacceptable. Study is work!

in the beginning of this week's sedra - B'chukotai, we come across the following phrase: "If you shall walk in My statutes..." (Vayikra 26:3) Rashi explains what it means to "walk" in the ways of God's statutes. He suggests that "walking" here means that we must "toil in the Torah, shetihyu ameilim batorah".

The concept of "toiling in the Torah" is a basic one to anyone familiar with Torah study. But those less familiar with the subject can legitimately be puzzled by the phrase. They surely can understand learning Torah, or studying Torah, or comprehending Torah. But what does it mean to "toil" in the Torah?

My life-long interest in educational psychology has prompted me to analyze the process of "Torah-toil" and break it down into several components, or stages.

The first stage consists of diligence, of what is known in Hebrew as *hatmada*. This is a requirement of putting in time. Torah study cannot be done on a piecemeal basis, in small segments of five or ten minutes. It requires sustained concentration and long hours of simply sitting and poring over the text.

The ideal Torah student is constantly studying. His is the image portrayed by the great poet Chaim Nachman Bialik in his masterpiece, *HaMatmid*. There he describes the night and day devotion of the young man to his studying task in moving and inspiring terms. For Bialik, himself once a yeshiva student, the "matmid" is the true hero of Jewish history.

The second stage is that of struggle,

of encountering the text and figuring out its basic meaning. This is difficult even to the student whose first language is Hebrew, and is even more challenging to those of us who grew up speaking English or another language and who come to the texts at a disadvantage.

There are skills that must be mastered in order to decipher the give and take of the Talmud and its commentaries. Simple meaning, punctuation, knowing where questions end and answers begin, understanding implicit assumptions, appreciating nuance - these are all aspects of this second stage of wrestling with the text.

In recent times, aids to Torah study have proliferated. Translations, elucidations, and abbreviations make the process much more user friendly. Sometimes, however, in my opinion, these valuable tools come at the cost of the kind of mastery which can only emerge from intense efforts and cannot be achieved through shortcuts.

And here we come to a third stage of Torah study: learning from one's mistakes. The Talmud itself maintains that "a person can only study Torah successfully if he makes errors in the process, elah im kein nichshal bah." All Torah students make mistakes in the initial phases of study sessions. They, or their study partners, soon detect these errors

and correct them. Then real learning occurs.

In the fourth stage of this toil, the student probes and questions. He searches his memory for passages which might contradict the text at hand. He wonders about the underlying assumptions of what he has just read, and how they fit with principles from other sections of the Torah with which he is familiar. He consults the numerous super-commentaries to see whether his questions were anticipated by previous Torah students, perhaps centuries ago. This is stage four.

A fifth stage, omitted by some but essential in my personal opinion, is the search for relevance. "What personal meaning", the student must ask, "can I find in the text I have just mastered?" "How can it be applied to current events, to contemporary problems, or maybe even to my own life experience and personal dilemmas?"

And finally we come to a sixth stage: teaching others. Maimonides, in his Treatise on the Mitzvot, asserts that one has not fulfilled the mitzva of Torah study unless he shares his learning with others. Lilmod, to study, ul'lamed, to teach.

How well I recall the process demanded of us by my favorite teacher, Reb Shmuel Dovid, who had each of us explain aloud every

passage we learned to the rest of the class until our peers felt that we had explained it well. "If you can't explain something", he insisted, "then you don't understand it."

Ed. note: Not to detract at all from Rabbi Weinreb's Reb Shmuel Dovid, just FYI, Albert Einstein said: "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough."

I have shared with you my own personal analysis of the many ingredients of effort-ful Torah study. Others have offered different analyses to be sure. But I hope that my highly personal perspective has helped clarify the idea of "toiling in the Torah" to you.

The fact that the Torah involves so much effort, such intense and diverse tasks, helps us understand why true Torah greatness, gadlut, is so rare and so appreciated.

We also understand why the reward for such toil is "rain in its season, a land of bountiful crops, and trees of the field that yield their fruit." (Vayikra 26:4)

Enjoy your Shabbat, and remember that one way to enjoy it is to use it to "toil in the Torah". 🕒