

Leisure and Relaxation in Halacha, Week 1:

“But Don’t I have to be Learning Torah?”

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1. Devarim 6:7 (Alhatorah translation)

וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבָבוֹתֵיכֶם וּדְבַרְתֶּם בָּם בְּשֹׁכְבְתֶיךָ וּבְלִכְתְּךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:

and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up.



2. Yehoshua 1:8 (Alhatorah translation)

לֹא-יָמוּשׁ סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה מִפִּיךָ וְהִגִּיתָ בוֹ יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה לְמַעַן תִּשְׁמָר לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכֹל-הַפְּתוּיִם בּוֹ כִּי-אֶזְרְאֶנּוּ תַּעֲלִיחַ אֶת-דְּרָכְךָ וְאֶזְרְאֶנּוּ תִּשְׁקִיל:

This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein; for then thou shalt make thy ways prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.

3. Menachot 99b (Soncino Edition translation)

תניא רבי יוסי אומר אפילו סילק את הישנה שחרית וסידר את החדשה ערבית אין בכך כלום אלא מה אני מקיים לפני תמיד שלא ילין שלחן בלא לחם אמר ר' אמי מדבריו של ר' יוסי נלמוד אפילו לא שנה אדם אלא פרק אחד שחרית ופרק אחד ערבית קיים מצות (יהושע א, ח) לא ימוש (את) ספר התורה הזה מפיו אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי שמעון בן יוחי אפילו לא קרא אדם אלא קרית שמע שחרית וערבית קיים לא ימוש ודבר זה אסור לאומרו בפני עמי הארץ ורבא אמר מצוה לאומרו בפני עמי הארץ שאל בן דמה בן אחותו של ר' ישמעאל את ר' ישמעאל כגון אני שלמדתי כל התורה כולה מהו ללמוד חכמת יונית קרא עליו המקרא הזה לא ימוש ספר התורה הזה מפיו והגית בו יומם ולילה צא ובדוק שעה שאינה לא מן היום ולא מן הלילה ולמוד בה חכמת יונית ופליגא דר' שמואל בר נחמני דאמר ר' שמואל בר נחמני אמר ר' יונתן פסוק זה אינו לא חובה ולא מצוה אלא ברכה ראה הקב"ה את יהושע שדברי תורה חביבים עליו ביותר שנאמר (שמות לג, יא) ומשרתו יהושע בן נון נער לא ימיש מתוך האהל אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא יהושע כל כך חביבין עליך דברי תורה לא ימוש ספר התורה הזה מפיו

It was taught: R. Jose says, Even if the old [Showbread] was taken away in the morning and the new was set down in the evening there is no harm. How then am I to explain the verse, ‘Before me continually’? [It teaches that] the table should not remain overnight without bread. R. Ammi said, From these words of R. Jose we learn that even though a man learns but one chapter in the morning and one chapter in the evening he has thereby fulfilled the precept of ‘This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth’. R. Johanan said in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai, Even though a man but reads the Shema’ morning and evening he has thereby fulfilled the precept of ‘[This book of the law] shall not depart’. It is forbidden, however, to say this in the presence of ‘amme ha-arez. But Raba said, It is a meritorious act to say it in the presence of amme haarez. Ben Damah the son of R. Ishmael's sister once asked R. Ishmael, May one such as I who have studied the whole of the Torah learn Greek wisdom? He thereupon read to him the following verse, This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night. Go then and find a time that is neither day nor night and learn then Greek wisdom. This, however, is at variance with the view of R. Samuel b. Nahmani. For R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Jonathan, This verse is neither duty nor command but a blessing. For when the Holy One, blessed be He, saw that the words of the Torah were most precious to Joshua, as it is written, His minister Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, departed not out of the tent, He said to him, ‘Joshua, since the words of the Torah are so precious to thee, [I assure thee,] ‘this book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth’!

4. Shabbat 31a (Davidson Edition translation)

אמר רבא בשעה שמכניסין אדם לדין אומרים לו נשאת ונתת באמונה קבעת עתים לתורה עסקת בפריה ורביה צפית לישועה פלפלת בחכמה הבנת דבר מתוך דבר ואפילו הכי אי יראת ה' היא אוצרו אין אי לא לא משל לאדם שאמר לשלוחו העלה לי כור חיטין לעלייה הלך והעלה לו אמר לו עירבת לי בהן קב חומטון אמר לו לאו אמר לו מוטב אם לא העליתה

Rava said: After departing from this world, when a person is brought to judgment for the life he lived in this world, they say to him in the order of that verse: Did you conduct business faithfully? Did you designate times

for Torah study? Did you engage in procreation? Did you await salvation? Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom or understand one matter from another? And, nevertheless, beyond all these, if the fear of the Lord is his treasure, yes, he is worthy, and if not, no, none of these accomplishments have any value. There is a parable that illustrates this. A person who said to his emissary: Bring a kor of wheat up to the attic for me to store there. The messenger went and brought it up for him. He said to the emissary: Did you mix a kav of homton, a preservative to keep away worms, into it for me? He said to him: No. He said to him: If so, it would have been preferable had you not brought it up. Of what use is worm-infested wheat? Likewise, Torah and mitzvot without the fear of God are of no value.

5. Rambam, Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:1 (Glazer translation)

נְשִׂיִם וְעֶבְדִּים וְקַטְנִים פְּטוּרִים מִתְּלִמּוּד תּוֹרָה. אֲבָל קָטָן אֲבִיו חַיֵּב לְלַמְּדוֹ תּוֹרָה שְׁנַאֲמַר (דְּבָרִים י"א יט) "וְלִמַּדְתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת בְּנֵיכֶם לְדַבֵּר בָּם".
וְאִין הָאִשָּׁה חַיֵּב לְלַמְּדוֹ אֶת בְּנָהּ. שְׁפָל הַחַיֵּב לְלַמְּדוֹ חַיֵּב לְלַמְּדוֹ:

Women, slaves, and infants are absolved from the study of the Torah; but the father is obliged to instruct his infant son in the Torah, for it is said: "And ye shall teach them your children, talking of them" (Deut. 11.19); but a woman is not charged to teach her son, for only one obliged to study is obliged to instruct.

6. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 246:1 (based on Sefaria Community translation)

כל איש ישראל חייב בתלמוד תורה בין עני בין עשיר בין שלם בגופו בין בעל יסורים בין בחור בין זקן גדול אפי' עני המחזור על הפתחים אפילו בעל אשה ובנים חייב לקבוע לו זמן לתלמוד תורה ביום ובלילה שנאמר והגית בו יומם ולילה. (ובשעת הדחק אפילו לא קרא רק ק"ש שחרית וערבית לא ימוש מפיד קרינן ביה) (הגהות מיימוני פ"א וסמ"ג עשין י"ב)

Every Jewish man is obligated in studying Torah, whether poor or rich, whether completely healthy or suffering, whether young or very old. Even a poor man who frequents doorways (to beg) and even one with a wife and children is obligated to set a time for himself to study Torah, by day and by night, as it says, "And you shall meditate in it day and night." (And in a pressing time, even if he only read Shem" a in the morning or evening, it is called "It shall not be moved from your mouth...") (Hagahot Maimuni 1 & Semag Asein 12).

7. Ba'er Hetev, Yoreh De'ah 246:1

ק"ש. בסמ"ג מסיים ודבר זה אסור לאמרו בפני ע"ה אבל הש"ך כתב בשם הרבה פוסקים דיש לפסוק כרבא דאמר מצוה לאמרה ע"ש: Semag concludes "and it is prohibited to say this in front of an 'Am Ha'aretz'", but the Shach wrote in the name of many poskim that we should follow Rava, who said that it is a mitzvah to say this [in front of an 'Am Ha'aretz'].

8. Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 246:25

כל שאפשר לו לעסוק בתורה ואינו עוסק או שקרא ושנה ופירש להבלי העולם והניח תלמודו וזנחו הרי זה בכלל כי דבר ה' בזה (ואסור לדבר בשיחת חולין...)

Anyone who is able to learn Torah and does not, or if he learned Mikra and Mishna, and turned away to the vanities of the world and left his learning and abandoned it, behold he is included in "for the word of Hashem he despised". (And it is prohibited to speak "small talk"...))

9. Rabbi David Stav, Bein Hazmanim, pages 50-51

בדברי האחרונים אפשר למצוא כמה גישות בהבנת הפער בין המקורות השונים והדרכות המעשיות הנובעות מהם. גישה אחת, המתבססת על דברי הר"ן ועוד ראשונים, עולה מדבריהם של הגר"א, שולחן ערוך הרב ובעל האגרות משה. לפי פוסקים אלו, מוטל על כל אדם חיוב עקרוני לתלמוד יומם ולילה עד שיידע את כל התורה, וחיוב זה אמור למנוע ממנו כל עיסוק שאיננו הכרחי לקיומו...

In the words of the Acharonim it is possible to find many approaches in understanding the gap between the different sources and the practical instructions that emerge from them. One approach, based on the words of the Ra"n and other Rishonim, rises from the words of the Gr" a, Shulchan Aruch Harav, and author of Igrot Moshe. According to these poskim, a basic obligation is placed on each individual to learn day and night until he knows the entire Torah, and this obligation is intended to withhold from him any other business that is not essential for his existence...

10. Rabbi Gil Student, Is Leisure Kosher?, Torah Musings

...A Jewish man is required to spend all his free time studying Torah (see Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 246:25). All time engaged in unnecessary activities is wasted, bitul Torah. However, no one can concentrate continuously. Constant study is unattainable. We need breaks, down time, naps, leisure—all kosher, of course, both in spirit and in content. In contemporary Judaism, I see three main attitudes toward leisure.



Constructive Leisure

The first is leisure as an opportunity for personal development. R. Norman Lamm wrote an essay titled “A Jewish Ethics of Leisure” (in Faith & Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought) in which he advances the idea that leisure is a time for expanding one’s personality. It is a time of creativity, expression, discovery and transformation. If I may take liberty in expanding his presentation, people exercise different aspects of your brain during leisure, often arriving at intellectual and emotional discoveries by indirect means. Additionally, leisure includes the arts, which spark ideas and contemplation. In this sense, leisure is a form of non-traditional study and self-development.

Furthermore, leisure includes exercise, which is important for health (see Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Dei’os ch. 4). Sports, hiking and working out are important avenues for maintaining and improving health. It is this aspect that is similar to a nap. A nap can improve some people’s health, depending on their situation. For them, naps are a form of medicine and therefore a mitzvah.

Hiking adds to exercise the dimension of appreciating nature, God’s creation. This can increase our belief in and awe of God. In all these senses, leisure is a mitzvah.

Distractive Leisure

...Life is full of different kinds of pressures and everyone responds differently to them. Leisure provides a much needed occasional relief from these pressures. Like a nap relieves exhaustion, a break relieves pressure. On this aspect, the Shulchan Arukh (Orach Chaim 231:1) rules that if you need a nap in order to learn Torah, you may take one. Even though a nap is bitul Torah (Rashi, Sukah 26a sv. lishon), it is permissible if it furthers the study of Torah. Similarly, a break that helps you study Torah afterward is also permissible.

The key, writes the Shulchan Arukh, is the following verse: “In all your ways acknowledge Him” (Prov. 3:6). The Sages (see Berakhos 63a) explained this verse to mean that everything you do, whether specifically a mitzvah or not, should be intended for the sake of a mitzvah. As long as you intend your actions—eating, sleeping, discussing—as a form of worship, as a religious activity, then it constitutes a mitzvah.

The Chovos Ha-Levavos (Avodah, ch. 4) offers a classic explanation of this concept that serves as a foundation of modern thought. Most people see things in this world in three categories: required (mitzvah), forbidden (issur) and neutral (reshus). However, this is incorrect. Something neutral that is done for the sake of Heaven becomes a mitzvah while if done for other reasons is part of issur. Even the aspects of life that do not fall under direct commandment are still subject to religious evaluation based on intention.

With this in mind, we can confidently say that leisure le-sheim Shamayim, for positive religious purposes, is a mitzvah, even if not in the technical sense of fulfilling a commandment. If it gives you a much-needed break, provides some balance in your life and relieves some of your pressure, then it is a mitzvah.

But when leisure becomes a goal in itself, it is improper. Just like an unnecessary nap is forbidden, so too is an unnecessary break. Fun must be for the sake of a break (she-lo li-shmah), and not for the sake of fun. It must be a means to a religious end and not an end in itself...

Disruptive Leisure

There is a third attitude I see in contemporary Judaism that I find troubling. Some see Judaism as a series of ritual behaviors, with the time in between unguided by religion. They may consider Judaism to be a very encompassing religion, with many daily activities. However, other than the rituals, everything else is non-religious (barring explicit prohibitions). Therefore, as long as they pray with a minyan, wear tefillin, learn some Torah, recite blessings, etc.—all praiseworthy—they can spend their free time as they wish.

If so, there is no question about leisure. If it isn't forbidden and doesn't interfere with other religious obligations, why should Judaism object? You have fulfilled all your obligations to God!

I do not believe this is a legitimate view. Going back to the Chovos Ha-Levavos and the Shulchan Aruch, everything we do has to involve God. Judaism is an all-encompassing religion. Everything is either religiously positive or negative. There is no neutral territory. There is certainly room for personal tastes and judgments, for decisions on how to allocate one's time. But if done for the wrong intentions, these judgmental areas are not neutral but negative...

11. Ein Ayah, Berachot 1:4

נראה לתן רמז במחלוקת רבי יהודה ורבי יוסי, אם יש לעמוד על זמן בין השמשות, או שאין שיעור מורגש כלל לבין השמשות. ויש לפרש ע"פ דברי חז"ל במדרש, ויקרא ד' לאור יום אלו מעשיהם של צדיקים, ולחושך קרא לילה אלו מעשיהם של רשעים. והנה בחובת הלבבות חקר אם יש במציאות ענין ממוצע בין מעשה המצות לעבירות, והחליט שאין ביניהם ממוצע כלל, שהרי ההכרח הוא מכלל מעשה המצוה, והמותר נכנס בשער האסור. אמנם יש לדון בדבריו ז"ל. ומדברי הראב"ד בשער הקדושה שבספר בעלי הנפש, משמע שיש מציאות גם כן לדבר של רשות. ויש לומר שזה רמוז ג"כ בענין מחלוקתם הטבעית...

It seems that we can give a hint in the disagreement between Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yosei, if it is possible to signify a time for 'Bein Hashmashot', or if there is no actual length of time to it. And it can be explained based on the words of Chaza"l in a Midrash: "And Hashem called light 'day'" – these are the actions of Tzaddikim, "and darkness He called 'night'" – these are the actions of Resha'im. In the Chovot Halevavot he explored if there is in reality a 'middle ground' between actions of 'mitzvot' and 'aveirot', and he concluded that there is no compromise at all, as that which is required [for good] is part of a mitzvah action, and the remainder enters the classification of prohibition. However, his words [require further investigation]. From the words of the Ra'avad in Sha'ar Hakedushah in Sefer Ba'alei Hanefesh, it seems that there is a reality also for actions which are [simply] permissible. We can say that this is also hinted to in their disagreement about nature...

12. Rabbi David Stav, Bein Hazmanim, pages 51-54

גישה שונה לחלוטין עולה מתוך דבריהם של בעל ערוך השולחן ובעל האור שמח... חילוק זה של ערוך השולחן... מובא גם בדברי הראי"ה קוק...

גם מתוך דברי האבן האזל עולה שאין חיוב טוטלי על כל אדם ללמוד תורה כל היום, ומותר לאדם "להתענג אף שזה יגרום לבטול תורה... A significantly different approach rises from the words of the author of the Aruch Hashulchan and the author of the Or Same'ach... This distinction of the Aruch Hashulchan... is also brought in the words of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook...

Also from the words of the Even Ha'azel it rises that there is no total obligation on a person to learn Torah all day, and it is permitted for a person "to enjoy leisure even though it will certainly cause 'Bittul Torah'". Nevertheless, even for a person of this status it is prohibited to cease learning for no reason.

13. Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chaim 156:2

...ויראה לי דזהו בתלמיד חכם שעיקר עסקו בתורה, כמבואר ביורה דעה סימן רמ"ו. אבל בבעל בית סתם – לא שייך זה. ועל סתם בעל בית אין מוטל חיוב רק לקבוע עתים לתורה, ואותם שואלים ביום הדין: "קבעת עתים לתורה?" דלתלמיד חכם שעיקר עסקו בתורה לא שייך לומר "קבעת עתים", שהרי החיוב עליו ללמוד תמיד כל היום וכל הלילה לבד מה שמוכרח לפרנסתו, וכמו שכתבתי ביורה דעה שם. ...And it seems to me that this is [written about] a Talmid Chacham whose main involvement is in Torah, as explained in Yoreh De'ah 246. But for a simple homeowner, this is not relevant. On a simple homeowner, there is no obligation except for setting aside time for Torah, and those individuals are asked on the day of judgement "Did you set aside time for Torah?", as for a Talmid Chacham whose main involvement is in Torah, it is not relevant to ask "did you set aside time?", as the obligation on him is to learn constantly, all day and all night, other than what is required for his livelihood, as I wrote in Yoreh De'ah there.