

# Gain Through Pain

## A Proposal for Contemporary Orthodoxy

*by Rabbi Eytan Kobre*

**E**arlier this year, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks took a tour of Brooklyn's Orthodox Jewish community accompanied by Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, then of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Deeply impressed by what he saw, Brooks devoted a column he entitled "The Orthodox Surge" to extolling the vibrancy and self-confidence of a newly resurgent American Orthodoxy.

Brooks was particularly taken by his visit to a large, upscale food emporium in the borough's Midwood section, which he compared to a "really nice Whole Foods." The store, Brooks wrote,

looks like any island of upscale consumerism, but deep down . . . is based on a countercultural understanding of how life should work. Those of us in secular America live in a culture that takes the supremacy of individual autonomy as a given . . . . You choose your own path. For the people who shop [here], the collective covenant with God is the primary reality and obedience to the laws is the primary obligation. They go shopping like the rest of us, but their shopping is minutely governed by an external moral order.

Not surprisingly, the column created quite a stir in the Orthodox community. Many *frum* Jews expressed pride in the image presented of their world and satisfaction that, in contrast to the negative coverage they are usually accorded

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by the secular Jewish and general media, here, finally, was a highly positive portrayal of their lifestyle and values—and on the op-ed pages of the often less-than-Orthodox-friendly *Times*, no less.

But there was a certain great irony in Brooks' observations, because the thriving Orthodox consumer culture to which he had received an eye-opening introduction is a more complex phenomenon than he might realize. On the one hand, from his vantage point atop secular America, Brooks correctly identifies the uniqueness of a community that seems to be successfully navigating the tortuous path of strong religious commitment amidst abundant material comforts and significant, if consciously selective, engagement with the surrounding society.

At the same time, the unwitting irony of Brooks' words lies in the reality that many of the families he met, “stuffing their groceries into their Honda Odyssey minivans in the [store's] parking lot,” can rightly be seen as engaged in a subtle and incremental process of acculturation into the very American mainstream to which Brooks believes—again, in many senses, accurately—that they “represent a challenging counterculture.” And that irony is only compounded by Brooks' use of the store he visited as a metaphor for today's Orthodox Jews, writing that they “are like [this] store, . . . superficially a comfortable part of mainstream American culture, but built upon a moral code that is deeply countercultural.”

## Dickens and the Jewish Problem

**W**hat David Brooks found on his day outing to Flatbush provides a bracing snapshot of a community, both in Brooklyn and well beyond, very much in the throes of spiritual turmoil; hard as one tries to avoid using a very tired cliché, American Orthodoxy in this second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century truly is experiencing “the best of times and the worst of times.” For every positive development within Orthodox society, and there have been many in recent decades, there seems to be a negative phenomenon corresponding to and, in some cases, stemming from it.

To wit: Exponential population growth, with an upwardly spiraling pace of births and marriages, and at the same time, a young women's “*shidduch* crisis” of ominous proportions, significant religious attrition and social dysfunction

## GAIN THROUGH PAIN

among teenagers, and a marked rise in divorce across age groups, from young newlyweds to the long-married middle-aged; the establishment of ever more schools, shuls and other communal institutions, and concomitantly, the manifestation of various educational problems attendant to the expanding number and size of classes, an increased incidence of learning and behavioral issues in the burgeoning student population, and the emergence of yet another “crisis,” this one for middle-income families straining under the burden of multiple high tuitions; widespread acceptance of the value of therapeutic interventions and the availability of many Torah-observant mental health professionals, yet a correspondingly large number of community members grappling with the whole gamut of addictions, disorders, abuse and other dysfunctions.

Then there is the matter of the state of *frum* Jews’ spiritual lives: the quantity and quality of Torah study and performance of mitzvos, of course, but beyond those areas, too, the extent to which Orthodox Jews feel spiritually fulfilled and are able to transmit that feeling to the next generation. In sheer numerical terms, contemporary levels of Torah learning have reached unprecedented heights, whether measured by the number of yeshivos, kollelim and well-attended shiurim for laymen, or by the remarkable profusion of Torah-themed publications of every imaginable sort and other vehicles for dissemination of Torah texts and teachings.

Such, at least, is the view from afar. A closer examination of the landscape yields evidence of a primarily quantitative growth in limud haTorah amongst the rank-and-file, but not nearly as much in—and perhaps even at the expense of—its quality. The intensity of commitment of our bnei Torah in institutions of advanced learning is indeed a thing of beauty and a source of unending pride. Yet, it cannot be gainsaid that despite having matured greatly, the American Torah community cannot nearly approximate Eretz Yisrael’s output of large numbers of *talmidei chachamim* of stature. The reasons for that disparity surely deserve exploration.

Punctiliousness in mitzvah observance is certainly the order of the day. This includes, happily, much greater attention to once-neglected areas like the application of *Choshen Mishpat* to financial dealings and a laudable emphasis on halachos governing interpersonal relationships and especially those relating to proper speech. Yet, there remain worrying signs that important areas of halacha have been given short shrift in the general move toward more scrupulous observance. There are the intermittent scandals in kashrus and endemic lapses in *tzni’us* that

are as recent as last evening's *chasunos*, and entire areas of halacha that are more honored in the breach than the observance.

Finally, there is the question of the overall spiritual health of this generation's observant Jews. An essential aspect of Orthodoxy's self-image is that of a lone bulwark against the secular *zeitgeist*, proudly resistant of the American cultural melting pot and spectacularly successful at keeping its young within the fold and its intermarriage rate nil. It would thus shock the Orthodox community's sensibilities for it to be described as caught up in an ongoing process of assimilation.

But in a very real sense, that is precisely what seems to be underway, albeit in a process that is the inverse of the great secularizing wave that swept and ultimately transformed Jewry in the first half of the twentieth century. The turn-of-the-century European immigrants, like their suburbia-bound children and grandchildren after them, shed their external Jewish trappings—the garb, the beard, the observance—ahead of their idiosyncratically Jewish worldview and values.

Contemporary Orthodox Jews, by contrast, have not only staunchly held firm in regard to the visible indicia of religious commitment, but on the contrary, have become progressively less self-conscious of leading openly religion-centered lives. Where thirty years ago, it was the rare observant attorney who had the courage to wear his yarmulke to work or to court, today it's *de rigueur*, with numerous white-shoe Manhattan firms featuring daily *minyanim* and *shiurim* comprised of just such individuals.

At the very same time, however, there has been a hollowing out of many *frum* Jews' internal thought-worlds, a blurring of the particularistic values that should, ideally, create a bright-line demarcation between Torah Jewry and all others. To employ a martial metaphor, the United States Army's arsenal includes an explosive device known as the neutron bomb which, when detonated inside a building, obliterates its occupants and much of its contents while leaving the structure's external shell intact.

In a similar sense, a not insignificant number of Orthodox Jews are leading lives that externally conform to the norms of Torah observance and the baseline expectations of Orthodox society, yet are seriously bereft of positive spiritual energy and emotion and are intellectually and spiritually unfulfilling. The shell of the Orthodox Jew remains, perhaps appearing even more pious than ever before, but a glimpse inside reveals a religious life on autopilot, mechanistic

and largely devoid of religious feeling. But as Rav Yisroel Salanter taught, one's spiritual life is always dynamic, never static, and the absence of vitality makes deterioration, and eventually dissolution, inevitable.

And here we return briefly to the by-now iconic purveyor of epicurean delights that stirred Mr. Brooks to compose his paean to Orthodoxy. In the store's pre-Shavuot publicity that appeared in various *frum* publications, the tag line read: *And you thought Shavuot was only about cheesecake and blintzes? Think again.*

Now, there's much to rue in what passes these days for *frum* advertising, or more accurately put, advertising targeting the *frum* consumer as hapless mark. But this particular come-on is more revealing than most, indeed doubly so. First, it makes an assumption about the consumer's thinking that, if not true, ought to be rather off-putting: It takes for granted, after all, that for the average Orthodox reader of this ad copy, *z'man matan Toraseinu*, the day Divinely ordained for re-living that apex of Jewish history, the transmission of the Torah from God to man at Sinai, centers instead around what will be served at the customary dairy meal (only to be forgotten by the time one is ready, appetite restored, to heartily indulge in the next Yom Tov repast).

But then, the advertiser takes matters to the next level, effectively assuring the consumer that he hasn't even begun to exhaust Shavuot's culinary possibilities. Although the precise nature of what awaits patrons upon their arrival on store premises is left tantalizingly vague, the message conveyed is this: *You knew this holiday is nothing but a chance to gorge yourself silly, but we're here to tell you that you don't know the half of it; we'll show you just what an unparalleled opportunity for gluttonous excess it actually is.*

This, then, is the question for us to ponder: Where do we begin in addressing the spiritual state of a community in which many wonder whether there's more to Shavuot—or a Torah life generally—than cheesecake and blintzes?

## **A Proposal for a New Approach: Judaism**

**A** recent issue of the well-received online journal *Klal Perspectives* took up this very topic, framing it as a discussion of what Agudath Israel's Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel called Orthodoxy's greatest challenge, "the increasing numbers from across the spectrum who feel no meaningful connection to Hashem, His

Torah or even His people.” In truth, that rendering of the problem is perhaps too narrowly drawn, and should be expanded to encompass the many who feel some degree of spiritual connectedness, yet find their progress stalled, and are frustrated by a perceived inability, despite many attempts over many years, to make measurable headway in their spiritual and ethical growth.

The issue’s fifteen essays, encompassing a spectrum of both diagnoses of and antidotes for the problem, offer many worthwhile insights. None of them, however, take as their starting point that the spiritual alienation plaguing our community might stem from a more fundamental failure to have fully mined basic Jewish religious practice for all it has to offer.

In proposing responses ranging from the study of particular, inspiring works on *avodas Hashem* to seeking out a spiritual mentor to placing more emphasis on the transmission of *ikarei emunah* (basic principles of faith) in the classroom, these offerings seem not to consider that in the everyday life of Orthodox Jews, some basic elements of the Judaic framework for purposeful living have simply been marginalized, or even jettisoned, and that therein can be found the roots of much that ails them. But precisely that is the contention of the paragraphs that follow: Judaism’s fundamentals are, in important respects, simply not being implemented.

There are many senses in which this is true, and only a book-length treatment would begin to do justice to the topic. Here we will focus on something we can all do that, while requiring a great deal of time and effort, would effect a remarkable transformation in our individual and communal lives. In truth, however, this “something” isn’t one thing, but many things, taking many forms; and the “time and effort” it requires is not the price to be paid for its achievement, but is of its essence.

**We need, at long last, to bring to a halt to our headlong flight from lavishing upon the service of God and fulfillment of His commandments the time, effort, and devotion they inevitably entail and richly deserve. We need to reverse course and begin to embrace difficulty, welcome exertion and ostensible inconvenience, and recognize the priceless opportunity that temporary setbacks represent. We need to give abundant time, attention and care to those things that, if we are true to our own avowed aspirations, are the only ones that truly matter in our brief time in this world.**

**We have to stop outsourcing our spiritual lives to others, using our own money but the efforts, talents, and passion of others, as proxies for**

discharging a responsibility and pursuing a mission that is ours alone. We have to invest in our *avodas Hashem* that which only we—each one of us—can give: ourselves.

We must acknowledge, finally, that a basic psychological truth we accept and apply in the rest of our lives is all the more applicable in the realm of the spiritual: The need to overcome challenges and expend effort does not impede our ability to find existential meaning, forge connectedness with God and experience spiritual enrichment, but to the contrary, makes those very things possible.

*Klal Perspectives* queried its respondents as to why so many Orthodox Jews feel alienated from God and Godliness, why so many in our communities experience a great soul-emptiness and have no idea how to go about filling it. But the Torah has already addressed the problem of emptiness, and prescribed its antidote. On the verse (*Devarim* 32:47) *ki lo davar reik hu mikem* (“for it is not an empty thing from you”), Chazal (*Yerushalmi Pei’ah* 1:1) comment that if we indeed do experience a void, we must know that it is *mikem*, from within us, and we must look within ourselves for its source. More specifically, Chazal elaborate, the feeling of emptiness derives from a failure to toil in Torah; and so too, does the verse’s conclusion, *ki hu chayeichem* (“for [Torah] is your life”), refer to the power of toil in Torah to breathe new life into the seemingly lifeless.

The uncomfortable truth is that through the religious rhythms of a Jew’s quotidian life, connection to Hashem is on continuous offer. Through His *mitzvos* and *ma’asim tovim*, His Torah and *tefillah*, His *mo’adim* of both joy and sorrow, *Hakadosh Boruch Hu* offers us a relationship with Him—but all too often, our response is to turn and flee.

We do not do so consciously, of course; we are, after all, *ma’aminim bnei ma’aminim*. Chazal (*Berachos* 17a) describe us as a nation that, at bottom, wishes to do Hashem’s will, and it is only the “yeast in the dough” that prevents us from following through on that desire. That unusual phrase denotes the *yetzer hara*, and with its imagery of a slow, leaden process of leavening, perhaps its use in this context is intended to convey that it is the failure to invest ourselves in doing His will with passion, effort and alacrity that holds us back from becoming all we can be, and ultimately yearn to be, as faithful Jews.

There is no relationship, whether familial, personal or professional, that doesn’t require a significant investment of time and commitment and effort and sacrifice for a purpose larger than oneself. Much in this Age of Amazon

and Era of Airborne Express can, for the right price, be effortlessly ordered up to specification and delivered to one's doorstep, ready to be enjoyed—but not a relationship. And what is true of our human relationships is all the more true of that between man and his Creator, for which the former serve as models.

## **An Era of Decadence Works Its Effects**

**A** defining feature of the times in which we live is the rejection of difficulty and toil as inevitable and indeed essential aspects of human living. The search for ways to make life ever easier, tidier and expeditious, is seen as not merely a byproduct of modernity, but its very definition. Contemporary man sees all of human history, in fact, as one upward trajectory, in successive stages, of emergence from primitivism, as we become ever more adept at manipulating our environment for our benefit and becoming ever more impervious to the vagaries of the natural world.

This conception of modernity as synonymous with comfort and speed and the avoidance of pain and effort, has been significantly advanced by the inexorable march of technology and the revolution this has wrought in every imaginable area of human life. Those activities that remain, despite all our vaunted technological know-how, stubbornly difficult and time-consuming, are not valued, but instead targeted for obsolescence.

We are all, for better or for worse, the products of acclimation. The Internet and the digitization of published works have put a near-infinity of knowledge, albeit often mistake-ridden, superficial and context-less, instantaneously at our fingertips, and mobile devices have made all this information accessible wherever and whenever we want it. All this can't bode well at all for endeavors like the slow, careful parsing of complicated texts and painstaking research. The implications for living a contemplative life and doing the hard, internal work of ethical self-improvement are equally dire.

And we Jews are not at all immune to the societal winds gusting about. A thread that seems to run throughout much of our communal life is that, ever so subtly, many of us are avoiding, in a host of ways, the prospect of doing the hard work of living full, vibrant Jewish lives. Yet it is precisely in that work that the deep wellsprings of meaning, of Divine connection, of joy, are to be found.



## GAIN THROUGH PAIN

Once upon a time, life as a Jew involved serious hardships of many sorts. It meant bearing the brunt of anti-Semitic harassment and violence in word and deed. It also meant foregoing the societal acceptance and career advancement, not to mention the escape from grinding poverty, awaiting those who forfeited their faith and community for such blandishments.

Even in this country, blessedly free of the kind of violent and sadistic anti-Jewish oppression that held sway in Europe for a thousand years, Jews, and observant ones in particular, had many hurdles to overcome for most of the twentieth century. There was the pervasive “Gentleman’s Agreement” genre of anti-Semitic blacklisting; Jewish education, kosher food and most other amenities of Jewish living were in short supply both qualitatively and quantitatively; and with Orthodoxy politically powerless, its adherents’ religious rights often went unprotected.

None of us would ever wish that these travails still existed in our time, just as we can be certain that those who experienced them prayed mightily for them to vanish. And yet, it cannot be gainsaid that those tribulations elevated and fortified Jews by giving them something invaluable: It clarified for them the price to be paid for being God’s chosen people, and in so doing, it immeasurably exalted that mission in their eyes. We may hanker after a bargain, but we only truly value that which comes at a cost. The higher an item’s price, the more we know it is worth, and the more precious the item is to us once we have paid dearly to acquire it.

The Gemara (*Yevamos* 47a) teaches that Jews are bidden to dissuade a prospective convert by telling him, ‘what did you see that brought you to want to convert? Don’t you know that the Jews nowadays are treated as pariahs and suffer great travail?’” And the Gemara concludes: “If he responds ‘yes, I know—and I’m not worthy’ [Rashi - ‘I’m not worthy of sharing in their pain; would that I’d merit doing so’], we accept him immediately . . .”

At first blush, the would-be proselyte’s response seems so counter-intuitive as to be almost comical. It’s surely understandable that the Jew’s lot to be shunned, ridiculed and hated might not deter a sincere convert, who considers it worthwhile to join our nation even at that great cost. But to refer to as a privilege of which he’s not worthy—he can’t be serious, can he?

But serious he is indeed, for he has penetrated to the deep core of what it means to be a Jew and what it is that brings forth the nations’ unremitting hatred and scorn. He has understood that Sinai is so called because, as Chazal

explain the name, “from there *sin’ah*, hatred, descended to the world.” We are hated because of the message of moral responsibility we carry to humanity in Hashem’s name, which the “community of nations” seeks desperately to drown out, even if that requires obliterating the messenger from upon the face of the earth. He who understands what a singular honor it is to be spat upon for being a Jew truly deserves to be able to become one, joining those whose privilege that is by reason of birth.

Today, the life circumstances of the Orthodox Jew have been radically, blessedly altered. To be Orthodox now is to belong to the one part of the Jewish world that is ascendant, with the wind at its back. We live in relative safety, we enjoy a level of affluence unimaginable to our forebears, our religious freedoms are guaranteed and spiritual opportunities abound. As for material comforts, suffice it to say that among the only remaining sacrifices of the *frum* lifestyle is the necessity for the *cholorv Yisrael*-observant Jew to make do with pastries that aren’t quite as delectable as Entenmann’s mouth-watering originals.

All this is unquestionably wonderful news for Orthodoxy as a faith community, but perhaps not quite as positive a development for the spiritual health of Orthodox Jews individually. Sacrifice engenders commitment, with the proviso that it is undertaken not grudgingly but with the attitude of *s’iz gut tzu zein ah Yid* (“How wonderful it is to be a Jew!”), as Rav Moshe Feinstein’s well-known observation about early-twentieth-century American Jewry has it. Willing investment of oneself fosters love for and attachment to that in which one invests.

Even in these times of unprecedented tranquility and ease for Jews, however, it might be possible to find some degree of spiritual fulfillment in our status as members of an *am hanivchar* whose mission it is to serve as Divinely ordained models for humankind of monotheistic morality. Ever since the first Jew put down his ideological stakes “across the river” from the then-contemporary world, his descendants have thrived on being spiritual contrarians. Not for naught does the Gemara (*Beitzah* 25b) describe the Jewish people as *azin shebe’umos*, the fiercest of peoples, with the ideological certitude and personal fortitude to swim upstream against strong societal currents.

Thus, our calling as countercultural warriors, bearing a Divine message of dissent from prevailing societal mores, could be the means to express the *azus*, that sacred contrapuntal impulse that is of our essence. Our principled non-conformity could, in theory, provide the resistant force that is essential for us to feel fulfilled in our Judaism.

## GAIN THROUGH PAIN

Unfortunately, however, the times we live in are unprecedented in the extent of moral depravity that exists in even the most civilized of societies. It is not high-brow, nor even middle-brow, culture that reigns supreme, but the most degraded forms of entertainment and lifestyle.

This has required Orthodox Jews to erect high walls, as impenetrable as practicable, between us and the surrounding society, and to make our interactions with it ever more selective. But as we engage in a necessary sealing off of our world, the larger world beyond our own begins to recede from view. There is so much about our host society that is unsavory and inimical to our values and beliefs that over time it fades from our consciousness and we cease to even acknowledge its existence.

That is as it should be, but we must recognize that something important is lost in the process: our self-perception as members of a people that, in Rav Yehuda Halevi's imagery, is the heart pulsating with Divinity within the body politic of humanity, marching through history to its own beat. And that loss affects, in turn, our ability to see ourselves as individuals leading heroic Jewish lives, surmounting resistance and difficulty in pursuance of our sacred mission, which self-perception might have fostered a greater appreciation and love for our Judaism.

### **Finding Meaning Through "Sacrifice" for *Avodas Hashem***

**N**ow that external oppression is largely a relic of history and material deprivation is thankfully no longer nearly as widespread or as acute as in earlier eras, what remains the price to be paid for living as a Jew? Put differently, what can serve as a source of resistance to the faithful Jew against which he must push back with the strength of his convictions and thereby derive meaning?

What remains are Hashem's *mitzvos*, the vehicles through which our souls bond deeply with He Who commanded us. But such connection comes at a price, in terms of effort, convenience, time and money. Chazal refer to an *ohl mitzvos*, because performing them properly requires us to step out of our comfort zones, to shake free of our natural slothfulness, to part with the money we treasure. Only if we view the *mitzvos* as deserving of our time and money, worthy of our

physical exertions and creative fervor to perform them in optimal fashion and in all their particulars, will such efforts yield the yearned-for result of *v'dabeik libeinu b'mitzvosecha*, of our hearts cleaving to His commandments.

Several times throughout the year, Hashem calls us to join Him in a *mo'eid*, which is, as the name literally conveys, a rendezvous in time, an opportunity to commune with the Divine, renewing our personal relationship and reconfirming our historical/national bonds with Him. But can that relationship possibly thrive if we arrive for our meeting, this covenantal convocation, without having invested any mental, physical or emotional energy in preparing for it?

An ad now appearing in the Orthodox press for some sort of new-fangled permanent sukkah proclaims unabashedly that it “eliminates the hassle of building a sukkah—FOREVER.” Let’s put aside the view (*Rashi to Makkos 8b, She’iltos D’Rav Achai Gaon, et al*) that the building of a *sukkah* is itself a *mitzvah*. What’s critical here is that we’ve reached a point where Torah Jews are being told, forthrightly and with no fear of censure, that building a *sukkah*—the hallowed structure of which the Gemara says *sheim Shomayim chal alav* and that the *sifrei machshavah* view as akin to *Eretz Yisroel*, to the *Beis Hamikdash*, and to *Gan Eiden*; the haven in which we take shelter under Hashem’s wings following our rapprochement with Him just four days earlier; the little, humble space that teaches us priceless lessons about *bitachon*, about true *simcha*, about the fleeting and fragile nature of life—is nothing but a hassle. That is an appalling tragedy.

The hassle-free *sukkah*, it should be noted, joins an existing venture designed to take yet another highly inconvenient chore off one’s hands by offering to select a set of the *arba minim*, undoubtedly *mehudar* in all respects, and deliver them to the customer’s door. And thus, during *zman simchaseinu*, can a good, hassle-free time be had by all.

Yet it is neither coincidental nor counterintuitive that Sukkos is both the “time of our rejoicing” and the Yom Tov whose central mitzvah of Sukkah not only takes effort to construct but also requires the Jew to leave the comforts of home behind and dwell for an entire week in a makeshift hut at the mercy of the elements. This Yom Tov is paradigmatic of spiritual joy on the one hand and eschewal of comfort and investment of effort on the other precisely because the two are symbiotic in nature.

Even when we stay home and build a *sukkah* of our own, do we truly leave our homes behind, both mentally and literally, by spending long stretches in

that sacred space? The *sukkah* has so much to tell us, if only we'll listen intently—but how often in the course of that week are we there to hear it?

And with the advent of the “pop-up” *sukkah* that allows us to roam far from home, we are there less and less. A certain *mashgiach ruchani* once noted wryly that *bachurim* seem to treat *Shacharis* as a *matir* (unavoidable prerequisite) for breakfast rather than an *avodas halev* quite more important than whatever the cook has waiting for them in the dining room. The ingenious “pop-up” invention turns the *sukkah* from a mitzvah into the quintessential *matir*.

Can the relationship of sacred love between the Master of the Universe and His treasured nation that began as we followed Him out of *Mitzrayim* into a barren wilderness and is so lyrically described in *Shir HaShirim* possibly flourish if we eschew the exhaustive, and indeed, exhausting, pre-Pesach preparations; if we deprive our children, and ourselves, of the redolent aromas of Pesach cooking that always filled the air in Jewish homes on *erev* Pesach; if we deny them, and us, the excitement that builds as the *Seder* table is readied for that most auspicious of evenings due to arrive in a few short hours?

In truth, the discussion of the “Pesach hotel” phenomenon is not a simple one. On the one hand, there are those people for whom such respite is, for a variety of reasons, a necessity. On the other hand, the problems these vacations pose with regard to *kashrus* and *tz'niyus* and *hilchos Yom Tov and Shabbos* are serious and deserving of far more communal attention than they've received to this point.

But beyond the arena of what is prohibited and what is permitted, or perhaps for some, even imperative, there would seem to be a need for another discussion to commence. As this trend grows from year to year, should not the question be asked: Is not something ineffably precious, something downright indispensable to us as Jews, being irretrievably lost when Pesach has come to mean—and for many in today's younger generation, has always meant—packing one's bags and journeying to an amenities-filled resort to spend the holiday being pampered and waited upon hand and foot? That ‘something’ is a physical investment capable of producing spiritual returns of meaning and connection.

The Ramban (*Bereishis* 29:2) cites the Midrash that sees the three flocks of sheep that Ya'akov encountered upon his arrival at the well on Charan's outskirts as evocative of days of yore, when, on the three *regalim*, all of Israel would ascend to Yerushalayim to bask in the spirituality-drenched atmosphere of the *Beis Hamikdash* and its environs. Although we are long denied that peak spiritual experience, the *regalim* retain a semblance of what always they were:

wells from which to draw forth inspiration and spiritual sustenance, periodic opportunities for a recharging, as it were, of the soul's batteries.

But how can a Yom Tov fill such essential function in an environment in which the invitation to indulge in the shallowest pleasures beckons from every direction? From lavish accommodations and cuisine so exquisite that, as one ad put it, "you'll almost forget it's Pesach,"—a phrase that seems to capture so well the heart of this whole matter—to the nightly entertainment and day trips to the full complement of recreational facilities, the voice of the soul is being constricted, muffled, silenced.

For a long time, the tagline on the advertisements for a leading Pesach program, one with more Torah content than most, read: "Where the best of *ruchniyus* and *gashmiyus* combine for a great Pesach vacation." The problem with that statement isn't that it's offensive or sacrilegious, but that it's simply untrue. It seeks to sell the consumer public on the validity of a notion to which, it's fair to say, the entirety of Torah stands opposed.

Not only don't *ruchniyus* and *gashmiyus* combine, they can't even co-exist. They are, in fact, at veritable war with each other for primacy; and the way in which we identify the totality of who and what we are—as essentially bodies or souls—turns entirely on the outcome of that struggle to the death.

And, if the standard ad text for these getaways is any indication, one would have to believe that the battle between body and soul is often a rout in favor of the former. True, each ad showcases a long list of what makes that particular resort the one in which to invest one's hard-earned money, and, to be sure, "chassidische shechita," "cholor Yisrael" and "non-gebruchts" all appear there somewhere, along with "well-stocked *beis medrash*" and of course, the promise of scholars-in-residence of prominence. But it would probably be instructive to have our young children read these ads and, with an innocence unsullied by commercialism, tell us what they think is the overarching theme of these hotel vacations; it's difficult to imagine their response being couched in primarily spiritual terms.

The Jewish calendar also knows of another sort of *mo'eid*, the *kara alai mo'eid lishbor bachurai* of Tish'a B'Av and the period that precedes it, which mark the fateful historical encounters we've had with Hashem's judgment. Yet, here too, one sees attempts to avoid squarely facing the messages this period is intended to convey. In Jewish communities of old, the atmosphere in the street during this time was palpably one of muted expression, humble submission to Hashem's chastisement and yearning for redemption. Today, we see creative attempts to

finesse the relevant halachic strictures through non-instrumental music and exploring new vistas in *milchig* cuisine; the yearning is all too often only the one expressed in the supermarket ad that read “Meat me after the Nine Days.”

And what began as a spring-time phenomenon has now mushroomed into a year-round industry that encompasses not only Shavuot and Sukkot, but also an ever-expanding itinerary of Jewish-themed tours to locales worldwide. Let us put aside the numerous better uses that exist for the enormous amounts of money being spent on these junkets, as anyone minimally familiar with the fiscal state of our schools and the parents whose children they educate, or any of the other *tzorchei amcha hamerubim*, can attest.

These trips bring to mind the classic Chassidic tale of Reb Isaac Reb Yekel’s, the simple, small-town Jew for whom Providence arranges a trip to majestic, faraway Cracow so he can learn that his true treasure lies waiting for him to discover in his humble shanty back home. What is it that a thinking Jew thinks he will find on a tour of the Jewish community in some enchanting, far-flung land or a cruise to the end of the earth that he can’t find in his own living room?

Only this: A brief escape from the realities of daily life, the same flight from life that society generally is engaged in, living as so many moderns do from weekend to weekend, punctuated only by each evening’s “Happy Hour,” and from vacation to vacation. But real meaning will not be found in Alaska or Greece, only right in one’s own, decidedly un-exotic Jewish home, where there’s homework to be done and dishes to be washed and a bedtime story to be told and, finally, a blatt Gemara to be learned before retiring for the evening—of such stuff is purposeful, joyous living made, and, ultimately, eternity too.

One opens the pages of *frum* newspapers to find a great deal of space devoted to advertisements for upcoming inspirational talks and *shiurim* delivered by a wide spectrum of speakers in venues nationwide. Now, the mere existence of such a wide array of well-attended programs intended to deepen commitment to growth in Judaism’s twin pillars of *bein adam l’Makom* and *bein adam l’chaveiro* is unique to the Orthodox Jewish world, a shining testament to the idealism and moral and religious seriousness of our community.

The speakers who devote time and energy to travel about sharing their bounty of knowledge and enthusiasm for Torah and *mitzvos* are deserving of high praise, as are, of course, the people who make time in extraordinarily busy lives to attend these events. The publications that promote and cover them, too, perform a signal service.

But are such talks truly the most effective way to engender personal growth and spiritual change? Does there not come a point at which a form of “inspiration overload” takes over, triggering a spiritual analog to the economist’s law of diminishing returns? We must ask ourselves honestly whether it is perhaps the case that the many talks we’ve attended, albeit edifying and enjoyable, have not produced all that much in the way of lasting personal change—or, perhaps, have even inured us to our current spiritual levels, leaving us content with the fleeting spiritual high these events afford us.

It can sometimes appear as if the communal event calendar, replete with its own “speakers’ circuit” catering to every oratorical taste, is contemporary Orthodoxy’s version of an entertaining evening out. To be sure, if we are to contrast this with what passes for entertainment in other segments of society, ranging from the trite and meaningless to the gory and inhumane, this ought to mark us as a spiritually striving elite.

Nevertheless, a program for steady and focused spiritual growth it is not. That requires sustained effort, *sans* stories and one-liners. It calls for study and practice that is: active, not passive; regular, not episodic; incremental and realistic, not primarily emotion-driven; and involves repeated, practical exercises to achieve measurable, sustainable success. It calls, in short, for everything that the masters of Mussar have identified as the path towards penetrating the unfeeling human heart and enlivening the deadened soul, of succeeding at the project of Mussar as Rav Yisroel Salanter described it: “Enabling the heart to feel that which the mind knows.”

Imagine the scene: An “evening of inspiration” has been publicized all over town, featuring a renowned speaker who is sure to uplift and enthrall his audience. At “curtain time,” however, the scheduled speaker announces a change in plans: all present will pair off with a partner, spending the next half hour working their way through a Mussar text or passage of *Aggadata* bearing on some significant area of self-improvement.

A good percentage, perhaps a majority, of the attendees would demand their admittance fee back, if any was charged. But others would take up the challenge, and would receive an invaluable gift that evening: The power to be self-inspired and take responsibility for one’s own spiritual and ethical growth.

Another manifestation of the tendency toward the spiritual quick-fix solution is the contemporary propensity for consulting *mekubalim* (as addressed in Rav Yaakov Hillel’s essay elsewhere in this journal) and the concomitant



pursuit of *segulos* as ways to address woes like illness or a lack of *parnassa* and *shidduchim* as well as those of a spiritual nature. While these avenues have their place in a Torah framework, one wonders whether the emphasis placed on them might often be rooted in the opportunity they provide to obviate the need for the self-critique and concerted betterment of one's ways that, Chazal teach, are the most appropriate responses to life's trials.

## **Talmud Torah: Where Toil Is of the Essence**

**A**reorientation towards valuing, rather than recoiling from, the growth potential that lies in struggle would have innumerable ramifications in every area of our lives, but perhaps most radically so with regard to the role and impact of *talmud Torah* in our lives.

For all the varied spiritual and educational lacunae identified by the distinguished contributors to the aforementioned issue of *Klal Perspectives*, there is one essential lack that none of them diagnosed: As a community, we are substantially bereft of an essential element of Torah, without which, we are taught, we cannot make Torah ours, we cannot truly aspire to infuse ourselves or others with *yir'as shamayim*, we cannot vanquish the *yetzer hara*, and we cannot hope to merit the gamut of blessings that the Torah holds out to us as the natural consequence of the flourishing of Torah study in a community's midst.

*Talmud Torah's* uniqueness lies not only in its pre-eminence within the 613 *mitzvos*, but also in that *ameilus*, i.e., sustained mental toil, is of its very essence. While the nature of the difficulty it poses changes, of course, as one ascends the ladder of proficiency in Torah, making one's way through the intellectual thicket of the Talmud, with its bottomless profundity and limitless breadth, forever remains a daunting challenge.

This cannot be said of any other *mitzvah*. One to whom, for example, the acquisition or baking of matzos and their consumption at the *seder leil Pesach* come effortlessly may have been denied a precious opportunity for achieving the closeness to God that only sacrifice for Him can produce. But he has not been remiss in the slightest in his fulfillment of the Torah's charge of *ba'erev tochlu matzos*.

Not so *limud haTorah*. Its *sine qua non* is the full investment of one's mental, emotional and physical faculties and the slaying, as it were, of one's desire for comfort and pleasure. Chazal refer to one who approaches Torah study in this

way as a *maimis atzmo b'oholah shel Torah*, and teach that the Torah he studies will be *miskayaim*, it will endure. But what does that mean?

Rav Eliyahu Dessler writes that one's station in the World-to-Come is not a function of how well he develops the latent cognitive potential of his brain; the latter is, after all, a mere bodily organ that, at life's end, will be buried and decompose along with the rest of his physical body. Only intensive, sustained *limud HaTorah* has the power to alter one's spiritual DNA, elevating the soul to a higher level, at which it will be capable of experiencing, for all eternity, that much greater a proximity to the Divine source of the supernal delight that we refer to as *Olam Haba*.

It is important to note at this juncture that *amalah shel Torah* is not a function of any particular level of Torah literacy, and can be experienced by anyone, irrespective of how learned he is in Torah. The neophyte struggling with the meaning, even the pronunciation, of a *posuk* or *mishnah* will enjoy all the manifold benefits that toiling in Torah affords, no less than the advanced *lamdan* grappling with the *shitos haRishonim* in a *sugya chamurah* in Shas.

The role of toil as a central, indispensable component of Torah enables us to comprehend a statement of the Chazon Ish with implications for the contemporary Orthodox community that are hard to overstate. In *Koveitz Igros Chazon Ish* (1:2), he writes: "All the *segulos* of *limud haTorah* are said with regard to toil in Torah."

In speaking of the "*segulos* of *limud haTorah*," the Chazon Ish appears to intend the following: There are a large number of statements by Chazal describing the salutary effects of Torah upon our world and its inhabitants. Some examples: One who learns Torah brings goodness to the world and will have his prayers for rain answered (*Tanna Dvei Eliyahu* (ch. 18); when Jews study Torah, God turns to them with blessing (*ibid.*); *yissurin* are withheld from one who studies Torah (*Berachos* 5a), and this protection endures even when he is not engaged in its study (*Sotah* 21a); the remedy for one whose whole body is in pain is to study Torah (*Eiruvin* 54a); God fulfills the desires of and gives financial success to one who studies Torah (*Avodah Zarah* 19a); one who studies Torah is protected from danger (*Zohar* 242); one who studies Torah gladdens God, Who in turn showers the world with blessing, gladdening its inhabitants (*Avos* 6:1).

Most of these citations appear in multiple sources in Chazal, and there are a great many more teachings of similar import. What emerges clearly from the

totality of these many teachings is that *talmud Torah* can be an unparalleled catalyst for the bestowal of Divine favor and blessing not only on the student of Torah and his environs but, indeed, on the Jewish people and the world as a whole.

The following formidable challenge thus arises: The current generation is one in which truly unprecedented advances in the mass dissemination of Torah have been achieved. When ever before had the entire Talmud been made as accessible to the average Jew as it is today through its translation into the vernacular? Has there ever before in history been a uniform, globe-spanning program of Torah study comparable to the Daf HaYomi in sheer numbers? But if *limud haTorah* opens, so to speak, the spigot of Divine goodwill, ought we not to be blessedly free of so many of the ills that beset us? Should not the state of our families, our communities, our selves, be quite better than it is?

But, as the Chazon Ish has clarified, it is not the detached intellectual absorption of Torah knowledge that guarantees the showering of multifarious Divine blessings upon us. Only *limud haTorah* in its ideal form, as a dynamic experience that engages all of one's focus and energy, that pervades the entirety of one's being, can do so. And that, it must be acknowledged, is so much of a rarity.

Contemplating the vast array of *shiurim* that fill the communal event schedule, one is struck by the glaring dearth of *sedarim* and *shiurim* devoted to *iyun* and *chazara*, bringing the phrase "a mile wide and an inch deep" to mind. David Brooks may have been more likely to have glimpsed a unicorn cavorting among the Honda Odysseys in the Flatbush supermarket parking lot he visited than a well-attended *shiur* for *ba'alei batim* in Gemara with Tosfos that has learned through the same masechta twice in a row. There's a good reason we don't hear of such things: they're virtually unheard of.

The prevailing norm is what might be termed "spectator learning," in which a teacher transmits *gemara* or other Torah subjects to a group of listeners exhibiting varying levels of engagement. The twin predilections for passive, class-based learning, as opposed to that involving active, individual study, and for superficial learning at breakneck speed, as opposed to learning at greater depth and with ample review, reign supreme.

The culture is one in which making a *siyum*, however inadequate the journey to arrive at that milestone, is considered the apex of achievement, rather than, say, the hard-won acquisition of a masechta by dint of multiple reviews or having mastered every last Tosfos in it. The state of affairs regarding

*limud haTorah* is such that one wonders whether it is even still possible for some communal figure commanding wide respect, or group of them, could, to borrow William F. Buckley's line about the goal of political conservatism, stand athwart the *frum zeitgeist* and shout "Stop!"

The manifestations of this easy-does-it approach to Torah are all about us. It is evident in the ubiquitous *parsha* sheets that blanket our shuls each Shabbos, with their quickly digestible nuggets and stories that render obsolete the use of actual *mefarshei haTorah* in hard-cover, bound form, whose wisdom requires time and effort to grasp.

It is evident, as well, in the *shiurim* being delivered in shuls on Shavuot night or at the legal-holiday *yom iyun* programs currently in vogue. Here, finally, is one uninterrupted stretch of several hours during which a *ba'al habayis* can experience what yeshiva men do each day, delving deeply with a *chavrusa* into a *sugya* in all its profundity. Often, instead, it is only trite, pre-packaged lectures, source sheets and all, on the order of "Gun Control in Jewish Law," or for a more frum crowd, "Segulos and Shidduchim: Are They a Match?" that are on offer.

And it is evident, of course, in the pervasiveness of two phenomena that have redefined Torah study in the contemporary era: The first is the plethora of seforim translated into the vernacular, Talmud Bavli chief among them, and the various technological tools that put the entirety of Torah literature at our virtual fingertips. The second is that preeminent engine of Torah study, the Daf HaYomi.

It must be said at the outset that both have had an incalculably positive effect on both the actual volume of Torah being studied and the entrée they have given Torah into the ranks of those who would never otherwise have taken up its study to the extent they have, or, sometimes, at all. Equally important is the prestige they have brought to Torah and those who study it, both within the frum community and in the estimation of the world at large. For all of these achievements, we all owe a very great debt of gratitude to those involved in initiating and advancing these endeavors.

But all this ought not to make us oblivious to the reality that the broad masses of observant Jewry have embraced these unquestionably positive developments without any guidance as to how and when to do so. In the absence of such personalized guidance, many people never wean themselves away from the use of translations, nor deepen their level of learning as one Daf HaYomi cycle concludes and the next commences.

## GAIN THROUGH PAIN

The deleterious effects of this lack of guidance are two-fold: First, they deny *lomdei Torah* the opportunity to experience heightened levels of *amalah shel Torah*, which, as noted earlier, is a defining element of *Talmud Torah*. The extent, of course, to which *ameilus* will go lacking for someone utilizing a translated and elucidated *sefer* or attending a Daf HaYomi shiur is subject to many variables, and it should be obvious that all *limud haTorah* entails some level of mental exertion and personal commitment.

The effort one makes to attend a *shiur*, whether by dint of rising early, carving out time in a frenetic workday or fighting off nighttime exhaustion, or by overcoming any other obstacle, is, without cavil, worthy of the highest approbation. Such people are, quite simply, heroes for our time.

Ultimately, however, *ameilus b'Torah* means one thing only: toil *in* Torah, not toil *for* it or *before* it. Rav Dessler famously expounded the Hebrew word for love, *ahava*, as derivative of the word *hav*, to give, reflecting that the very act of giving engenders feelings of love on the giver's part toward the recipient. It is an axiom of human emotion that applies as well to one who gives of himself to the Torah as to a flesh-and-blood beneficiary.

When one trudges, bleary-eyed, to a Daf HaYomi shiur while it is yet dark out and others are still nestled in their warm beds, he is, without doubt, giving mightily of that part of himself that craves creature comfort. In the experience, however, of straining time and again to understand a complex piece of Gemara, or reviewing it for the umpteenth time despite the natural predilection for the new and untried, one is reaching deep into the essence of his humanity, his heart and mind, and testing the mettle of character traits such as patience, fortitude and humility, and offering them up, as it were, to the Torah. The more fundamental the part of oneself that is being proffered, the greater the love it fosters toward the object of one's giving.

And reciprocally, the Torah responds to our sacrifices for it by seeking to give itself over and make itself ours. The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 99b) expounds the verse in Mishlei (16:26), "*Nefesh ameil amlah lo*," to mean that the Torah itself toils on behalf of he who toils in its study, which, Rashi explains, means that it beseeches Hashem to grant the student of Torah access to its deeper and recondite meanings.

Moreover, our bond with Torah is created not only by how much of ourselves we give to it, but by the pleasure we derive from its study. An axiom of human psychology has it that pleasurable experiences foster connection, and that is the

case whether the bond is a physical one (see Rashi to *Sanhedrin* 58b, s.v. *shelo*) or between the Jew and the Torah he studies. And the depth of that enjoyment is demonstrably commensurate with the effort one expends to arrive at *p'shat*, whether for the *lamdan* in a previously confounding *Rashba*, or the novice in a heretofore indecipherable line of *Mishnah*.

On a more practical level, the indiscriminate use of translated texts can significantly stunt a person's growth in Torah. One is almost tempted to advocate for such volumes to come with a label advising their use only as part of a structured program of study, prepared by one's rav or rebbi, designed to make the student progressively less dependent on them as he ascends the rungs of Torah proficiency. The reality is, however, that most people do not seek out such guidance, nor is it being provided on an unsolicited basis.

The same holds true for Daf HaYomi: it's a peerless program of mass-scale *limud HaTorah*, one that has likely done more, spiritually and educationally, for more Jews than any single other initiative in modern times. But masses are comprised of individuals, each with his own abilities and limitations, of which serious account must be taken if he is to thrive as a Jew.

It is all too often the case that *lomdei haDaf* have been through the cycle two or more times without their skills for independent study having grown appreciably from one go-round to the next and with the thousands of *dapim* they've traversed in the earlier cycles naught but a distant, hazy memory. Yet, is the energetic promotion of Daf HaYomi study in the run-up to each Siyum accompanied by calls of equal passion for those already "with the program" to deepen their study appreciably or even move on to other Torah pursuits that might be more in their long-term interest?

Attendees of the twelfth Siyum Hashas in August 2012 received a commemorative journal of some 200 pages that included an interview with Rav Shmuel Wosner, *shlit"a*, a *talmid* of Rav Meir Shapiro in Lublin, that ought to be required reading for all already on or contemplating joining the Daf Hayomi bandwagon. He notes the merit that accrues to any Jew who studies Torah in even the most superficial manner, but exhorts people to make every effort to deepen their comprehension and review what they've learned, in keeping with the expressed intentions of the founder of Daf HaYomi himself. He concludes:

We hear today about huge crowds, thousands upon thousands, coming to take part in the Siyum celebrations, many of whom were personally *zocheh* to

## GAIN THROUGH PAIN

be *mesayem* . . . . They, and the Jewish people as a whole, have a great *zechus!* However, “I am a friend to all who fear You” (*Tehillim* 119:63), and as a ‘good friend,’ I allow myself the liberty of giving constructive criticism that emanates from the mitzvah of “Love your friend as yourself.” I call on my beloved Yidden: Taste the sweetness of toil in Torah! The value of this toil is indescribable and beyond imagination. Nothing is more important; it is the source of everything.

It would be invaluable if congregational *rabbonim* would meet yearly with each *mispallel* to take stock of his current level of Torah literacy and to tailor for him a program of *limud haTorah* that facilitates retention of his learning, fosters growth in comprehension and helps develop his ability to engage in independent study. Many rabbonim, their resources of time and energy already stretched to the limit in the attempt to minister to the spectrum of their congregants’ needs, will see this as wishful thinking. But at the very least, these *manhigim ruchaniyim* could deliver a message of the primacy of *ameilus b’Torah* and regular *chazarah* on a shul-wide level, in their drashos as well as in regard to the types of shul programming they initiate and support.

It’s quite ironic that so many of those participating in Daf HaYomi, and using translated sefarim to do so, are in their professional lives people for whom continuing education is either a personal desideratum that enables them to remain competitive and competent, or is actually mandated by the licensing agencies in their fields of endeavor. Yet, when it comes to Torah, that paramount field of endeavor regarding which we daily pray for success, we meekly make our peace with a state of affairs that fosters stagnation and a lifelong inability to truly enter and feel at home in the incredibly magnificent palace of Torah.

Many Jews readily reject minimalism in just about every other area of their lives, in regard to the homes they reside in, the cars they drive, the clothes they wear and the vacations they take. They strive mightily for excellence and self-sufficiency in regard to education, career and avocation. Yet, paradoxically, Torah study is that one endeavor regarding which people seem un-self-consciously content to remain dependent on an educational crutch throughout their adult lives.

Returning to the Chazon Ish’s statement that “all the *segulos* of *limud haTorah* are said with regard to toil in Torah,” he has, in this pithy formulation, revealed something striking about the power of Torah to influence us and affect

the world around us: All Torah is not created equal, and it is the toil quotient, much more than any other, that determines what benefits flow forth as a result of the Torah we study. And so, when we ask why, despite the profusion of Torah study in our midst, things are not better for us as individuals and communities, and are in many ways only worsening, the discomfiting answer might just lie in a searchingly honest examination of our relationship to *talmud Torah*.

## In Conclusion: The Lesson of the *Akeida*

Though it might surprise chronic latecomers to shul, who must daily ‘sacrifice’ the recitation of *korbanos* and other prayers preceding *Pesukei D’zimra* in order to keep pace with the *minyan* in progress, the *parsha* of *akeidas Yitzchok* appears in the *siddur* for recitation each morning following the *Birchos Hashachar*. Why, of all possible Torah passages, was this one chosen for inclusion? The implicit message would seem to be that this episode, with its powerful theme of the willingness, indeed eagerness, of one of history’s greatest Jews to give up all for his Creator, makes it the ideal one with which to begin a new day brimming with opportunities for *avodas Hashem*. Such is what His service entails, and the Jew is the better, and will be the happier and more fulfilled, for it.

But it is equally important to recall that no word exists in *lashon hakodesh* that translates into the word ‘sacrifice.’ Biblical Hebrew knows of *korban*, with its root reflecting closeness; Chazal coined the term *mesirus nefesh*, which refers to the giving of one’s soul or one’s will to a higher cause. But neither indicates any sense of self-abnegation, of acting to one’s own detriment for the sake of another, as ‘sacrifice’ connotes.

From the Torah’s perspective, any mitzvah one does, no matter how seemingly at odds with one’s nature or how otherwise difficult to perform, is, in the long view, the most self-interested thing one can do. It is what guarantees happiness and success in this world, and eternity in the next.

We need only to truly accept that this is so, and begin to act upon it.