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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Our Readers

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Readers Discuss 'The Obligation To Work'

Editor's Note: Reflecting the heavy volume of responses to Chananya Weissman's Feb. 23 front-page essay, this week's Letters section is devoted entirely to that subject.

A House Cannot Build Itself

My compliments to Rabbi Chananya Weissman on his erudite and thoughtful front-page essay.

I believe a scholar learning half a day and selling insurance half a day produces both a better *lamdan* and a better insurance representative. The Torah, the guidebook for our lives, is an instruction manual in maintaining balance in one's endeavors. While there is a role for full-time scholars to fulfill the *mitzvah* of learning and to assure an educated people, this privilege is reserved for a few select qualifying individuals. But in order for the culture to survive, mankind is destined to perform mundane work to provide for society's subsistence. Under the Almighty's plan, a house cannot build itself.

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There is nothing more satisfying than putting bread on a table for oneself and others. We should applaud Rabbi Weissman's insight that we must not foster an atmosphere in which honest work becomes a shameful thing that one would rather hide from neighbors. My father, David Bernstein, *a"h*, woke up every workday of his marital life at 4:15 a.m. to cut wood in a factory in order to support his family and send his children to yeshiva. He was also the first to arrive in *shul* on *Shabbos* for the rabbi's *shiur*. He was one of the most righteous men I have ever known.

Rabbi Weissman makes a compelling argument in support of work as a means of attaining personal growth and sustaining society, let alone supporting one's family.

Jeffrey Bernstein, Esq.
North Bergen, NJ

The Highest Authority

Many thanks to Rabbi Weissman for his excellent article on the "Obligation to Work." I published a similar article several years ago, in Yiddish, and was scolded for daring to question the wisdom of renowned *roshei yeshiva* who encouraged the perpetuation of a system that denigrates people who work to support their families rather than depend on handouts.

The Mechaber (Rav Yosef Karo) in *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 156:1, after outlining the daily obligations of a Jew, says, "and then he should go to his business, because any Torah that is not accompanied by work will at the end not stand; it will only cause sin because poverty will make a person rebel against his creator."

The Ramo (Rav Moshe Isserless) in *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 246:21 writes, "Any one that puts his mind to study Torah but not to work and to be supported by charity, he profanes the Almighty and denigrates the Torah; and any Torah that is not accompanied by work, will cause sin and lead to the robbing of people."

It's instructive that the Gemara (tractate *Shabbos* 31A) states: "Rava says that when a person will appear before the *Bais Din Shel Maalo* (the heavenly supreme court), he will be asked: "did you set aside times for Torah study?" Rashi explains, "[A person has to set aside fixed times for Torah study] because one has to make a livelihood, since if there is no livelihood there can be no Torah. Therefore, one has to set aside fixed times for Torah study in

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order not to spend all his time on making a living."

In other words, the *Bais Din Shel Maalo*, the highest authority in the world to come, understands that a person has to work, or do business, in order to support himself and his family. All the *Bais Din* is asking us is to "set aside fixed times for Torah study" in our busy daily schedule.

What is even more interesting is that the Mechaber in *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 155:1 is using the same language as the Gemara in *Shabbos* when the requirement of Torah study is stated: "a person is obligated to set aside fixed times for Torah study." There is not one word about having to study Torah all day long. To reiterate, this is *halacha*, the bottom line.

Bezalel Fixler
Kew Gardens, NY

Dayan Grunfeld On Work

Rabbi Chananya Weissman quotes a number of sources on the topic of working for a living. I would like to add another. The following is from pages 120-121 of *Three Generations, The Influence of Samson Raphael Hirsch on Jewish Life and Thought* by Dayan Dr. I. Grunfeld:

The Talmud places great value on people earning their own independent livelihood so as not to need charitable assistance. It teaches that one must use every honest means to achieve this end, and that to achieve it one should not be ashamed of any kind of work or service but should suffer the greatest hardship and privation rather than depend on help from others.

The Talmudic sages held labour in great honour: Their principle was "Great is work, for it honours him who does it." (*Nedarim* 49b). They declare: "Even skin a dead animal in the street to earn your bread and do not say I am a priest, a great man, it is not fitting for me." (*Pesachim* 11:3a). "Hire yourself out to do work that would otherwise be repulsive to you so as to remain independent of others" (*Baba Bathra* 110a). "As it is a father's duty to instruct his son in religious laws, so is it his duty to teach him a trade" (*Kiddushin* 30b). A son should be taught a trade that would keep him as far as possible from temptation and which also leaves him leisure for study. "The God-fearing man who lives by the work of his hands is doubly well off; he is happy in this life and in the next" (*Berachot* 8a).

This is the attitude of our sages in the Talmud, whom nobody can accuse of having neglected *Limud Torah*. And in the [*Sefer HaYirah*] of Rabbenu Yona Gerondi we find the following significant passage: "Before a man begins his daily occupation he should study the Torah in order to fulfill the commandment 'Thou shalt meditate therein day and night' " (*Joshua* 1.8). Afterwards one should go to one's business; for "*Derech Eretz*" is a good thing and no one can serve God properly unless he takes pains to earn an honest livelihood.

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ

Creating Helpless Men

Finally, someone brave enough to publicly lament the travesty that is engulfing the Orthodox community. This problem, though, goes even further than just not working and involves the "art" of shirking responsibility of any kind.

Just walk into one of the smaller *kollels* (those without enough money to hire a cleaning crew) and chances are you'll be horrified, as I often am. The boys can't even put away a cereal box or container of milk after they've used it. Refrigerators and stoves are indescribably filthy. Lights are left on all night long, with no regard for utility expenses.

In one case, when I asked why the boys didn't pitch in and clean up, I was answered with, "Why should they clean? That's what we have women for!" Is this what yeshivas are teaching?

How can we expect these boys to take on the tasks of adulthood if the yeshivas are going to foster this *gyver* mentality when it comes to fundamental responsibilities? We are creating a sorry generation of helpless men whose forte is hiding their heads in a Gemara.

Robert F. Strassman
(Via E-Mail)

Universe Maintained By Torah Study

The world cannot exist without Torah. Even by the holy *shvatim* there was Yissocher, who sat in *kollel* and learned day and night, and there was Zevulun, who learned and worked to support Yissocher. Yaakov *Avinu* sent Yehuda ahead to *Mitzrayim* to build a *beis medrash* for the *bnai Torah* to sit and learn full time in *golus*. We cannot survive in *golus* without Torah.

Hagaon Harav Ahron Kotler, zt"l, built Torah in America by introducing the *kollel* movement in Lakewood. Rav Ahron (along with other *gedolim* such as *Harav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, zt"l, menahel* of Yeshiva and Mesivta Torah Vodaas) was responsible for saving Torah in the *golus* of America. When Rav Ahron would visit potential donors, he would take pride in the fact that there were *Yidden* just sitting in *kollel* day and night studying Hashem's holy Torah that keeps the entire world in existence.

It's true that not everyone is cut out to learn full time. But if someone has it in him to learn in *kollel* or to go into *chinuch* to be *marbitz Torah*, he should be praised and given *chizuk*, not criticized.

*Rabbi Moshe Shochet
Brooklyn, NY*

Learning Trumps All

There's no question that honest labor is a virtue promoted by the Torah. Nevertheless, Chananya Weissman errs in his explanation of the proper place of Torah study and work in Jewish society.

To support his theory, Rabbi Weissman cites the Rambam as his primary authority. But while Rambam emphasizes the importance of work, he unambiguously asserts that Torah study has *top priority* for the nation of Israel: "Make your Torah study primary and your work secondary" (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Talmud Torah* 3:7); "Minimize your business and occupy yourself with Torah" (*Hilchos Deos* 2:7, based on *Avos* 1:14 and 4:10).

With regard to the actual *halacha*, the *Shulchan Aruch* (156:1) unequivocally asserts that Torah study gets top priority; mundane labor is secondary. Thus, in order to understand *Chazal's* statements on the subject of *Torah im Derech Eretz*, it behooves us to remember what our priority is: Torah learning trumps all other activities (*Shabbos* 127a).

If Rabbi Weissman's point is that there are some individuals who are not suited for intensive Torah study, there would be no argument. By the same token, however, I can argue that there are some individuals who are not suited for college. Nevertheless, that should not lead us to conclude that we should do away with college.

Finally, instead of blaming Torah students for the lack of funds available to elementary and secondary yeshivas, I would suggest that more money would be available if people stopped spending so much on extravagant vacations at fancy hotels as advertised in *The Jewish Press*.

*Chaim Silver
(Via E-Mail)*

Screed Against Haredim

One hardly needed Chananya Weissman to tell the Jewish world of the importance of working to support one's family. Perhaps Rabbi Weissman, in writing this screed against haredim, might have added to our collective understanding of the issue if he'd have suggested a way to evaluate individuals in order to determine which of them are suited for long-term learning and which are not - and who would, or should, make that determination.

It would also have been helpful if he'd provided some hard numbers as to how many people are pursuing inappropriate choices.

*Avrum Overlander
Jerusalem*

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