

TORAH VA'AVODAH

By Mordechai Schwat

Our motto in Bnei Akiva is Torah Va'Avodah. What is the meaning behind these words? Without a deep understanding, our motto becomes nothing more than an empty slogan. On the other hand, if understood properly, internalized, and adopted as a way of life, this ideology has the power to transform an exiled shell of a nation, into a vibrant, living, leader, among nations.

In the next chapter we will try to put on paper a definitive formulation of Torah Va'Avodah. But first an historical insight: The last time that the idea of TVA (Torah Va'Vodah) was officially formulated and accepted in the movement by vote was in Krakov , Poland, in the year 1933!! Needless to say that Jewish history, and society in general, has changed immensely in the last 70 years. Jewish demography; the establishment of the State of Israel and the ingathering of millions of exiles; paralleled with extraordinary technological and scientific advances; have placed challenges before modern Zionists that the Zionist forefathers could not possibly foresee.

The questions must be asked: Is it really possible to put the Torah on par with the Avodah? Do we believe that the two are equal? Are we not limiting and reducing the ideal of Torah by equating it to Avodah? Aren't we inflating a bit the value of labor by putting it on such a high pedestal? These questions and others will be dealt with in this chapter.

The simplest definition, but lowest level of understanding, of TORAH VA'AVODAH (TVA), is by translating TORAH to mean STUDY OF TORAH (Limud Torah) and AVODAH would be translated as KEEPING THE TORAH (Avodat Hatorah) or keeping the mitzvot. This interpretation of TVA addresses the apparent contradiction between the two terms by an "unorthodox" translation of the word AVODAH as related to TORAH, instead of the regular translation of labor or work. The former is theoretical in nature, and the latter being basically practical.

The difficulty of accepting this interpretation of TVA is that it very much limits the idea of AVODAH to the realm of the 613 mitzvot. After all, there is much more in this world than the 613 mitzvot. Jewish culture, and even Jewish morals, are definitely a part of Judaism, yet are not included among the 613 mitzvot. "And you shall do what is right and good..."

(י'יעשית הישר והטוב בעיני ה' " -דברים ו',יח) is not one of the mitzvot, although it

sums up the general spirit of the Torah. If this were the proper definition of TVA, would it not suffice on our emblem and in our motto the word Torah? For the word Torah would obviously include keeping the mitzvot! And what would be the novelty of our ideology? This has been the classical understanding of Judaism for generations! And why would this understanding be so objectionable to the Agudat Yisrael youth? What new challenges would be encapsulated in TVA, if this were to be the interpretation? Apparently, there is more to TVA than this simplistic understanding.

Torah and Labor

Another direction in understanding the term Avodah is the common literal translation – labor or work. Why is work so important? Why did we add Avodah to the all-encompassing Torah? Is something lacking in the Torah?

To answer these questions we will start off with the adage -"הבטלה היא אם כל חטא"-,"the mother of all sin is wasting time." As all understandings of our ideology, this idea is well grounded in Rabbinic thought. In Pirkei Avot (2,2) we learn "Study of Torah along with a worldly occupation is seemly, for labor in them both makes sin forgotten. And all Torah without work ends in failure and occasions sin..."

This understanding of the value of labor does not see the Torah as lacking anything. Rather the deficiency is in man. Labor in and of itself does not have an intrinsic value. It is more like a necessary evil, condoned because of man's weak character. A person who doesn't work, in order to keep himself occupied and busy, will inevitably find himself in the middle of sin.

Can this be the ideal interpretation of Avodah? Are all of mankind's inventions and discoveries worthless? Man's weak character, and the Evil Inclination, are also part of G-D's creation. Rather than fighting against them maybe one should harness them, to be also in the service of G-D.

Another proposed explanation of the Torah Va'avodah (TVA) combination is that without working, man couldn't exist. Practically speaking, "Im ain kemach –ain Torah," or, without flour (the basic physical staple) there can be no Torah. Labor is a means of making a livelihood and nothing more.

This explanation, as all of the other explanations we've put forth until now, is of course correct and acceptable. Work is necessary for human existence, like other bodily functions such as eating and sleeping, etc. In fact, one acquires with his compensation for his labor the necessities of life. But if this is the main explanation of our ideal, should one inherit a large sum of money, (enough for his physical existence) would he be "freed" from the ideal of work? Is an arrangement where you receive food, clothing, etc., thus exempting you from labor, ideal?

DEFINITELY NOT!! The mishna (Avot De'rabi Natan, 11,1) states; "Rabbi Yehuda ben Betaira says- if a man has no work, what should he do? If his yard or field are run down, he should go and occupy himself with it." His source is the passuk (Shmot 20,9) "Six days shall you labor and do all your work." What is learned from the redundant addition "and do all your work"? We learn that one should occupy himself productively, even if he has no work to do. Work, in our ideology, is part of the ideal way of life-not only a means for survival.

The relation between Torah and Avodah is also an extension of the relationship between the physical and spiritual, the tension between them and the necessary connection between them.

We must also remember the historical context, which gave rise to the TVA movement. There were serious difficulties in the Jewish community. Much of the adult population worked in non-productive labor. In contrast, much of Europe was in the middle of an industrial revolution, which was transforming society. Factories and their products were springing up in the cities, bypassing much of the Jewish community who were left behind either in the country or in non-productive business which made money from other peoples' money. TVA came to return the value of productivity to the Jewish nation; to become a self-sustaining nation in our land on the physical and spiritual level, as one. The national rebirth became the source as well as the objective of Torah and Avodah. On the individual level each person must find the balance between the two.

TORAH VA'AVODAH- CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

What was G-D's will for Adam? What was Adam's crime, or sin, and what was his punishment? Is avodah(work) a punishment for a transgression, or was it part of the ideal existence in Gan Eden from the beginning of creation?

In Bereshit 1,28 we read: "And G-D blessed them (Man) and G-D said to them: be fruitful, and multiply,, replenish the earth and subdue it..." This passage was said before Man's sin and it includes a blessing which is said as a command, to "subdue" the earth. What on earth is this "subduing"? Who was there to conquer? Man was alone in the world, and the earth was a pretty desolate place! In Bereshit (2,5) we read "And no plant of the field was yet in the earth, and no herb of the field had yet grown, for the L-rd G-d had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground." Nechama Lebowitz explains in the way of the Ramban, that this conquest wasn't a battle between men; what we see here wasn't a charge of destruction, but rather a fight against the desolation; to civilize the world. Man was given a Divine imperative (well before his sin) to harness nature, tame the wildlife, and build society. All of this is encapsulated in the command "subdue it" (the earth). Indeed man was created to fulfil a void, and complete the rest of creation. There were no plants, herbs, even no rain, because it would have all been for naught, because "there was not a man to till the ground." And to this end we read (verse 15, still before the sin) "And the L-rd G-D took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to till it and to keep it." Le'ovdah U'Ishomrah.

Le'ovdah U'Ishomrah, to work and keep it (Garden of Eden), was the primary Divine commandment to Adam upon entering the Garden of Eden, well before his sin and subsequent punishment. Yet one can find in the midrash and in many commentaries, an explanation of these words quite contrary to their literal meaning. There is an attempt to understand this phrase in a totally spiritual fashion, for example- **le'ovdah** these are positive commandments; **leshomra**- these are the negative commandments. And although it is obvious that the Rabbis wanted to teach us something unique, (for after all, the mitzvot were given only to Am Yisrael, and about 2000 years later!) "For the text always retains it's simple meaning, (Yevamot 24.)" we must still search the text in order to discern this simple meaning. Is the "pshat" of "le'ovdah" physical labor, or spiritual labor? (Maybe Tephila, prayer, which is also defined as "labor of the heart"?)

Upon continuing, (Berashit 3, 23-24) we read, “Therefor the L-rd G-D sent him out of the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man, and he placed the keruvim (angels) to the east of the Garden of Eden, and the bright blade of a revolving sword to guard the way to the tree of life.” We understand from here that the sh’mirah(guard) was taken away from mankind and given over to the kruvim. Guardianship symbolizes dominance and ownership (over the earth) and this part of the Divine commandment and blessing was taken from man as punishment for his sin. But the imperative of labor, of working the land, remained. For this is part and parcel of the ideal of creation.