

“You shall observe My decrees and My laws, which man shall carry out and by which he shall live.” (18:5)

Targum Onkelos explains the words, *V'chai bahem*, “by which he shall live,” as referring to *chayei alma*, eternal life. In other words, as the *Chafetz Chaim*, z.l., explains in his preface to the *Mishnah Berurah*, the Torah is the spiritual food of the *neshamah*, soul. By studying Torah in this world, we are preparing ourselves for *chayei olam*, eternal life in *Olam Haba*. This is the meaning of the phrase, *V'chayei olam nota b'socheinu*, “He planted eternal life within us.” With the study of Torah, we plant the seeds from which we will one day subsist in the eternal world.

We neither have any idea of the value of every minute of Torah study nor can we even begin to grasp the meaning of the word “eternal.” For every moment of Torah study, we earn a portion of eternity – a concept which is incomprehensible to us. To demonstrate the incredible value of even one moment of Torah study, *Horav Yaakov Beifus*, *Shlita*, relates a story concerning the *Chafetz Chaim*. When *Horav Naftali Tropp*, z.l., the *Rosh Yeshivah* of Radin, was gravely ill, the *yeshivah* students decided that each of them would donate a certain amount of their time studying Torah as a merit for a *refuah sheleimah*, speedy, complete recovery. They decided to include the *Chafetz Chaim*, whose love for *Rav Naftali* was overwhelming. They approached the great sage and asked if he would contribute a portion of time for *Rav Naftali*’s benefit. The *Chafetz Chaim* listened to them intently before responding, “I will contribute one minute of my time for a *refuah sheleimah* for *Rav Naftali*.” The students who heard this could not conceal their incredulous reactions to the revered sage’s donation. The *Chafetz Chaim* could not help noticing their surprise. He said, “You have no idea of the infinite value of one minute of Torah study. I dedicate the incredible reward achieved for one minute of Torah study to *Rav Naftali*’s *refuah*!”

Rav Beifus writes that he heard this story from *Horav Shlomo Zalmen Aurbach*, zl, who added that the *Chafetz Chaim*’s remarks left an overwhelming impression on the *yeshivah*. We may add that, now that we have some idea of the vast reward earned for one minute of Torah learning, we should shudder to think of the other side of the coin – the negative aspect of wasting a minute of time.

Living a life of Torah is more than a motto, it is as Jewish life should be lived. *Chazal* have a phrase that aptly describes that which should **not** be a Jew’s focus in life: *Manichin chayei olam v’oskin b’chayei shaah*, “They leave the eternal life, and are involved with temporary life” (*Shabbos* 10a). While we certainly live in this temporary world, it should **not** be the focus and thrust of our existence. Our lives should have a deeper meaning, a more profound set of values. *Horav Shalom Schwadron*, z.l., would often cite the following story which is written in *The Maggid Speaks* by *Rabbi Peysach Krohn*. *Rav Beifus* cites the episode, adding an ethical perspective to it.

Ten years after the passing of the *Gaon M’Vilna*, many of his disciples decided to leave Europe to settle in *Eretz Yisrael*. Indeed, this was the beginning of the *Ashkenazic Yishuv*, settlement, in *Eretz Yisrael*. The voyage was a dangerous one. The hazards were life-threatening. Yet, it would

be worth it, if it would bring them to the Holy Land. It was 1809, and *Horav Yisrael, z.l., m'Shklov*, one of the *Gaon's* greatest students, led a group of one hundred fifty men, women and children to *Eretz Yisrael*.

After a month at sea, the frail ship was besieged by torrential rain and gale force winds. Wave after wave slammed the ship, as it was wildly thrown about in the churning sea. After two days of this ceaseless misery, it became clear that the objective of reaching *Eretz Yisrael* was unrealistic. The hope now centered on staying alive. People were ordered to throw overboard whatever belongings they could, since every extra bit of weight added to the ship's burden. The people were left with their barest necessities. Even this measure seemed to no avail. The ship was still in grave danger.

The captain approached *Rav Yisrael* and, in the simplest terms, explained that they were at the end of the rope. In the captain's thirty years of seafaring, he had never come across such a storm. He felt that he must warn the passengers to be prepared for the worst. *Rav Yisrael* was heartbroken as he turned to his fellow travelers. They had dreamt of settling in *Eretz Yisrael* for years. Now, they were to prepare for their deaths instead. Could he give them some hope, something for which to aspire, a miracle? No. He had to prepare them to depart this world as a Jew, with *Vidduy*, confession, and *teshuvah*, repentance.

The *Rav* could hardly bear to look at the shocked faces of the passengers, as he began what would probably be his last few words to them.

Restraining his tears, he said, "Soon we will be in the *Olam HaEmes*, world of truth. Prior to leaving this world, one should recite *Vidduy*. While we usually do so quietly in order not to embarrass anyone, in this instance – since we are going to perish – it makes no difference. Moreover, the embarrassment will in itself serve as an atonement for us.

The students of the *Gaon* were not simple people. Each in his own right was an accomplished Torah scholar. Piety and virtue were their essence. They decided that the youngest student should begin with his *Vidduy*. The one chosen for the "honor" was a young man who lived near Vilna.

The wind howled, the rain slammed down on the ship, as the young man came forward. Overcome with emotion, trembling with fear, he burst into tears as he said, "For two years, I violated the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av v'Eim*, honoring my parents. I lied and deceived my mother daily. While I am sorry for my sin, I wish to explain the circumstances that led to it.

"I was thirteen-years-old when my parents moved to Vilna. We became next-door neighbors to the *Gaon*. In fact, we shared a common wall. One night, my father – who had just returned from a hard-day's work in his grocery store – heard the *Gaon* repeat the phrase, *Manichin chayeit olam v'oskim b'chayeit shaah* a number of times. The intensity and fervor, coupled with the repetition made such an indelible impression on my father that he immediately decided to leave his job and study Torah exclusively. He felt this was his life's mission. He must learn Torah – incessantly.

“My mother took the responsibility of supporting the family. It was too difficult to take care of nine children and run a store, so she sold the store. She supported the family by selling some bread and cleaning people’s houses.

“One day, my mother gathered together the family and told us, ‘I can no longer feed you twice each day. There is no money. We will have to make do with one meal a day.’ It was so difficult to watch her divide the meal into eleven portions that I could not tolerate to see my brothers and sisters live like this. I decided that I would no longer take a portion. I invented a story that the *cheder*, school, where I studied served lunch every day. For two years, I lived on the scraps that some of the boys left over. Every time my mother asked me if I had eaten, I lied. I now beg Hashem’s forgiveness for this terrible sin.”

The young man completed his story and a solemn hush fell over all those assembled. Rav Yisrael was visibly moved by what he had just heard. Despite his travail, the young man had developed into a great scholar. His piety was now clearly undisputed.

Rav Yisrael turned his head Heavenward, stretched out his hands and cried out, “*Hashem Yisborach!* In the first *Selichos* before *Rosh Hashanah* we entreat You saying, *Pnei na el ha’telaos v’al la’chataos*, “Turn to our travails and not to our sins.” We beg You to look at our afflictions, – the *tzaros*, pain and anguish that we have endured – and not to look at our sins. Now I plead with You, Hashem, to look at our sins! Look at what this young man considers his eternal sin. These are the sins of Your children. In his merit, have mercy on us.”

Rav Yisrael’s supplication made a powerful point. He had barely finished his plea, when the rains subsided. Sunlight soon shone through, as a *Kiddush Hashem* had been witnessed by all of those on board.

This story is incredible. Its messages are powerful, valuable and very meaningful. Rav Beifus emphasizes one important lesson: the underlying cause of the family’s transformation. It was the *Gaon*’s repetition of *Chazal*’s statement rejecting materialism at the expense of spirituality. The *Gaon* was so inspired with *Chazal*’s maxim that he kept reiterating it over and over with such fervency that it left a stirring impression upon his neighbor and his entire family! He was acutely aware of the significance of *chayei olam* over *chayei shaah*.