

## **And to the sons of Kehas, he did not give; since the sacred service was upon them, they carried on the shoulder. (7:9)**

The **Chida, zl**, offers a compelling interpretation of this *pasuk*. *Shevet Kehas*, the Tribe of Kehas, was part of *Shevet Levi*, the tribe which represents the *lomdei Torah*, those who devote themselves to the study of Torah. As such, says the *Chida*, the *chiyuv*, obligation, to study Torah is never-ending. It is a ceaseless commitment on the part of the devoted to learn Torah literally until his last ounce of strength, until his very last breath. One cannot retire from Torah. One whose vocation is teaching Torah will, upon retirement, move on to studying Torah full time. This idea is alluded to in the *pasuk*. The work of *Bnei Kehas* is an *avodas ha'kodesh*, holy endeavor, which is on them until *b'kasef yisau*, they die and are carried out to the grave upon the shoulders of others. The work of the *lomeid Torah* is from cradle to grave – with no vacation in between.

When **Horav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, zl**, was thirty years old, he was stricken with a heart ailment for which the doctors claimed there was no cure or therapy. According to natural causes, he had but two weeks to live. When he heard the devastating news, he immediately sought a second opinion, which was consistent with that of the first physician. According to scientific precedent, his young life would be cut short within the next two weeks.

Rav Elyashiv returned home and related the news to his *rebbetzin*. He then bid her good day and prepared to leave for the *bais ha'medrash* to learn. The *rebbetzin* asked him, "What about the doctor's diagnosis?"

"What should I do? According to them, I have but a few weeks to live," he replied. "Better I should die in the tent of Torah than anywhere else." This is what *Chazal* mean when they say, "Torah is not acquired unless one gives up his life for it." (*Shabbos 83B*) As long as one lives, the Torah is his source of life, his fount of vitality from which he draws his strength.

When Rav Elyashiv was in the last years of his life he dealt with physical issues of a critical nature. A number of times, *Klal Yisrael* responded with *Tehillim*, *Tefillah*, prayer, and Torah study on his behalf. At one juncture, he was at a point that a very serious surgery stood between his life and death (according to science). It was a dangerous surgery with barely a twenty-five percent chance for success, and only one surgeon was willing to fly in from America to *Eretz Yisrael* to perform the surgery. Perhaps it might be best to leave the situation status quo and see what would happen. If the surgery were not to succeed, the risk was large that he might not survive. It was up to Rav Elyashiv to *pasken*, render a *halachic* decision, concerning the surgery.

Rav Elyashiv listened to the question and replied that he would render his decision in the morning. He went to sleep in his hospital bed in the ICU, as an entire world waited for his decision. Meanwhile, the surgeon was already in flight on his way to *Eretz Yisrael* to perform surgery on the *gadol ha'dor*, preeminent Torah leader of the generation. Rav Elyashiv asked to be woken at his

usual time of 3:00 a.m., so that he could learn. The Torah world is well aware that the surgery was successful, granting *Rav Elyashiv* more time to serve Hashem and guide *Klal Yisrael*.

In *L'Hisadein B'Ahavasecha*, Rav Meir Levi quotes **Horav Chaim Shmulevitz, zl**, who questions a statement made by *Chazal* in the *Talmud Yoma* 35B. *Chazal* state: *Hillel mechayeiv es ha'aniyim*, “Hillel obligates the poor people who do not study Torah.” The *Talmud* relates that, although he lived in abject poverty, Hillel spent part of his meager wages to pay the guard at the *bais ha'medrash* to allow him to enter. One day, he did not earn sufficient money to cover his entrance to the *bais ha'medrash*, so he suspended himself at the edge of the skylight of the roof to listen to the lecture. It was a bitter cold day, and snow was descending upon him. He was so engrossed in the lesson that he did not notice the freezing snow that had covered his entire body. Hillel teaches us that poverty is not an excuse for laxity in Torah study.

Rav Chaim wonders how *Chazal* could expect “us” to compare ourselves to the holy *Tanna*, Hillel. We have no idea of the sanctity of this unusual sage. Are we able to derive a lesson from him on how our Torah lives should be lived? The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that Hillel teaches us the significance of Torah study. We must feel that, without Torah, we are non-existent, dead to the world, of no value, our lives meaningless. Therefore, when Hillel was about to lose out on a Torah *shiur*, lecture, given by his *rebbeim*, Shmaya and Avtalyon, he was able to risk his health by being suspended from a skylight, not feeling the cold snow that was rapidly covering him.

Rav Elyashiv taught us very much the same lesson. One must maintain his *seder*, Torah lesson, at its designated time. One should not waste time, for it cannot ever be returned. Every minute of Rav Elyashiv’s life was accounted for. When one lives like this, impending surgery is no longer compelling. There are greater, more compelling things in life – like Torah-study.

I think another lesson can be derived from Hillel, based upon another practice, which was made famous by him. Annually, we sit at the *Pesach Seder*, surrounded by family and friends to share in a festive meal and relate the story of the Exodus. It is during this festive meal that we also eat bitter herbs, as a reminder of the bitter enslavement to which we were subjected in Egypt. We are told not to recline during the eating of the bitter herbs, despite the fact that we recline for all of the other traditional foods that we eat that night.

Hillel added a new dimension to eating *marror*, bitter herbs. He did not eat them separately. Instead, he made a sandwich, combining *matzah*, *marror* and *Korban Pesach*, and he ate the sandwich while reclining. I recently saw Hillel’s action explained as symbolic of his positive approach to life. *Matzah* and *Korban Pesach* are foods, which symbolize freedom, redemption. Within the two pieces of *matzoh* and next to the *matzo* of the *Korban Pesach*, Hillel placed his bitter herbs. He viewed the bitter aspects of his life as being part of G-d’s plan. Hashem does nothing bad. Hillel understood that Hashem made him poor, because poverty was beneficial for him.

Hillel’s life appeared difficult, since, to the average spectator who sees life from the “here and

now," poverty is not a good thing. He taught us that, if Hashem metes it out, it must be good – even if we find it difficult to accept. So, he placed the bitterness in between the *matzoh* of redemption, and he ate it while reclining like a free man, so that future generations would know that from G-d only comes good. This is a lesson that is applicable to all Jews, under all circumstances and situations. Serving Hashem brooks no excuses. Hillel taught us that poverty is no excuse, because Hashem is its Source. Therefore, it must be to our benefit. The sooner we get over it and accept this verity, the sooner we will serve Hashem with greater intensity.