

## **This is the teaching regarding a man who would die in his tent. (19:14)**

*Chazal* (*Berachos* 63b) render the above *pasuk* homiletically, “This is the Torah – a man who dies in a tent. The Torah is not acquired only (unless) a person kills himself over it.” Obviously, such a compelling statement warrants considerable commentary. Simply, it teaches that in order for one to succeed in Torah study, he must view it as the essence of his life – without which he cannot survive. One must be prepared to devote himself totally to Torah study. The Torah is the life source of the Jew. The *Vishnitzer Rebbe*, *Horav Moshe Hager, zl*, offers a profound, but practical, explanation of *Chazal’s* statement.

Shlomo *HaMelech* says (*Koheles* 9:12), *Ki imlo yada ha’adam es ito*, “For man knows not his time (when he will pass from this world).” Nothing eludes one more than the day of his death. David *HaMelech* asked to be informed of his end of days (*Tehillim* 39:5), *Hodeini Hashem kitzi u’midas yamai mah hi*, “Hashem, let me know my end, and the measure of my days, what it is.” All David was able to know was the day (*Shabbos*) of the week that he would die, but, when and how, he would not know. What did David do? He did not waste one minute on *Shabbos*. He devoted every waking moment to Torah study. How else could he best prepare himself to meet his Maker?

Having said this, let us ask ourselves; if an individual were to be informed that today is his designated day of departure from this world, what would his immediate reaction be? Would he: run to the bank and withdraw his savings? sell his securities? check his cupboard to see how much food there is? Obviously, these are not appropriate activities for one’s last day of life. The most appropriate and rational activity would be to take out a *Gemorah* and sit himself down in a quiet corner and learn like there was no tomorrow – because there would be no tomorrow! He certainly should not waste a moment of his time. Every moment that he has left should be viewed as utterly precious. He should take breaks only to *daven* and recite *Tehillim*. Food should be eaten only if necessary, just enough to give him the energy to continue learning.

“This,” explains the *Rebbe*, “is the idea behind *meimis atzmo aleha*, ‘to kill oneself for it.’” One should view today as the last day of his life. As such, he would never waste a moment, because every moment is precious, and, when it is gone, it is gone. Torah is sustained by one who values his time, realizing that this could be “it,” so that spending “today” on anything but Torah would be absurd.

I remember hearing from *Horav Yitzchak Sorotzkin, Shlita*, a telling dialogue that he had with his father, *Telshe Rosh Yeshivah, Horav Baruch Sorotzkin, zl*, shortly before his passing. They were in the hospital, and the *Rosh Yeshivah* was sitting in a wheelchair, a *sefer* in his hands, as he waited to be transported to his next round of therapy. *Rav Baruch* was terribly weak, his weight having decreased to double digits. His eyes glanced up furtively to see if he could steal a few more minutes to learn. *Rav Yitzchak* looked at his father and asked, “How could you learn now?”

The *Rosh Yeshivah* grimaced in pain and replied, “And, when else, if not now, will I be able to learn?”

This is how the *Rosh Yeshivah* lived. As his *talmid*, I saw daily how Torah was his life. Sadly, many people do not understand what it is that makes life meaningful. In an excellent article entitled, “How to Find Meaning in the Face of Death,” the author records lessons she heard from the Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. I will use some of these lessons as a springboard to explain how a Jew should live his life, and, especially in the context of the above Torah thought, learn Torah as if today were to be the last day of your life.

The article begins with the premise, “The period of time between diagnosis and death presents an opportunity for extraordinary growth.” The most pressing questions confronting the patients are not: “when”? and “how”? or “how much pain will I have?” Rather, their primary question is: “What makes life meaningful?” They are in search of a meaning that cannot be erased by death. Conclusion: While the spectre of death leads people to conclude that their lives are meaningless, it can also be a catalyst for them to work out, as they have never before, the meaning of their lives.

Psychologists posit that when people believe their lives have meaning, it is because three criteria have been satisfied: they feel that their existence is valued by others; they are driven by a sense of purpose or significant life goals; and they understand their lives to be coherent and integrated. In other words: my life has value to someone other than myself; I do not live solely for myself, but to serve a Higher purpose; my life is logical; it makes sense.

No one lives forever. On the other hand, to have lived and achieved nothing is truly a waste of G-d's greatest gift to man. Simply, each of us has to justify our presence in this world. This is not a fun trip. It is filled with purpose. How we relate to – and achieve – that purpose establishes our legacy to those who have valued our presence. The search for meaning, the ability to experience meaning, is a basic motivating force of human behavior. Once a person discovers the meaning in his life his spiritual well-being increases, while his feelings of anxiety, depression and whatever else plagues us decrease and really should dissipate.

A Jew has purpose in life. It revolves around Torah and *mitzvos*. Their observance lend meaning to his life, and their achievement establish one's legacy for the future. Thus, while we should always plan for the future, we should also serve Hashem “today” as if we will have no tomorrow.