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Born to Toil

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1.

WHY DID AVRAHAM LOVE WORK?

In connection with the promise that Hashem made to Avraham,¹ “To your descendents I will give this land,” the Midrash says:²

When Avraham was traveling through Aram Naharaim... he saw the people eating, drinking and acting foolishly. He said, “I hope my portion will not be in this land.” When he reached the high ground of Tzur and saw the people busy weeding... and hoeing..., he said, “If only my portion were to be in this land.” Hashem said to him, “To your descendants, I will give this land.”

The Midrash connects Hashem’s promise (“to your descendants I will give this land”) to the reason for Avraham’s wish (“if only my portion were to be in this land”) — that the inhabitants were busy working the land. Understandably, the land of Israel was given to **Avraham’s descendents** because of the virtue of work (and not only because of **Avraham’s** desire for the land).

The question arises: When Avraham said, “If only **my portion** were to be in this land,” it can (also) be explained that he wanted a **portion** amongst those other inhabitants, because they busied themselves working. So, it stands to reason that Avraham would want to live among people who conducted themselves appropriately (and not among those who ate, drank and acted foolishly.)

However, the promise “To your descendents I will give this land” means that Hashem will completely give “this land” to the Jews **alone** (by them inheriting and conquering it). So why should the promise be connected with the moral conduct of the land’s inhabitants? Furthermore, why should it be connected with those who lived in the days of Avraham? {The Jews only entered the land hundreds of years later.}

¹ Bereishis 12:7.

² Bereishis Rabbah 39:8.

2.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE LAND

Seemingly, we could answer that the conduct of the inhabitants was indicative of the character and fortune of “**this land**” **itself**, as our Sages say:³ “There is a land that produces....”

We need, however, to clarify: Our Sages say that⁴ “the deeds of the Canaanites were more corrupt than those of all other nations, and the region where the Jews lived was the worst of all.” Since the actions of the Canaanites were “**more corrupt** than... other nations,” (even worse than those in Aram Naharaim), how is it possible to say that this single virtue — those living in Canaan occupied themselves with work (and by extension, this single virtue of the land itself) — should override all their other faults to the extent that because of this {one quality}, this land specifically was deemed worthy to host the Jews?

3.

THREE TYPES OF WORK

Regarding the importance and value of work, our Sages say:⁵

Rabbi Elazar said, “Every person is created to toil, as it says,⁶ ‘Man is born to toil.’ I do not know whether he was created for verbal toil — or whether he was created for physical toil. Since it says,⁷ ‘When his mouth forces him,’ you must say that he was created for verbal toil. And still I do not know whether it is for the toil of Torah or for conversational toil. When it says,⁸ ‘This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth,’ you must say that he was created for the toil of Torah.”

³ *Bamidbar Rabbah* 16:12; Rashi on *Bamidbar* 13:18 {“There is a land that produces strong people, and there is a land that produces weak [people]; a land that produces large populations and a land that produces small populations.”}

⁴ *Toras Kohanim*, “*Vayikra*,” 18:3.

⁵ *Sanhedrin* 99b.

⁶ *Iyov* 5:7.

⁷ *Mishlei* 16:26.

⁸ *Yehoshua* 1:8.

It is unclear:⁹ How could one consider that man was created for “physical toil”? What virtue is in physical toil for us to think that it fulfills a person’s *raison d’être*?

Similarly, the second supposition {in the Talmud} — that man was created for conversational toil — is unclear, especially according to Rambam’s¹⁰ lengthy explanation that most talk is extremely undesirable.

The question is even stronger according to the famous principle that even a supposition in Torah is considered Torah.¹¹ This is illustrated by the halachah that someone who studies a question or a supposition in Torah (without the resolution or conclusion) must first recite the blessing over Torah study.

Furthermore, in the formula of that blessing, it says that {He gave us} “His Torah” — “the Torah of truth.” This means that the question, the supposition, etc., {of Torah} contains some detail and rationale that is valid (except in that case, it wasn’t appropriate,¹² or the like).

Similarly, it is understood regarding our subject: The virtue of “physical toil” and “conversational toil” (for which there was a supposition that this is why man was created) is not completely dismissed, even after the Gemara’s conclusion that “{man} was created for the toil of Torah.” It is just that the physical toil and conversational toil are not enough to justify the entire purpose of man’s creation.

In other words, there is an order to the back-and-forth in the Gemara: The first supposition, that “{man was} created for physical toil”; the second, that he was created for “conversational toil”; and the conclusion that “he was created for the toil of Torah” (“This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth”) are all valid, and remain so even after the conclusion. In order for a person to

⁹ See *Or HaTorah*, “*Shemini*,” p. 56.

¹⁰ Rambam’s *Commentary on Mishnah*, on *Avos* 1:17, on the words “I have found nothing better for a person than silence.”

¹¹ See *Likkutei Levi Yitzchak*, “*Igros Kodesh*,” p. 266.

¹² Similar to the episode found in our *parshah* (*Bereishis* 16:4, and Rashi, ad loc): “...she regarded her mistress with disdain.”

reach his ultimate purpose — “He was created for the toil of Torah” — he must first gain the qualities associated with “physical toil” and “conversational toil.” When he then connects these two qualities with “the toil of Torah,” he achieves the totality of the purpose of his creation.

4.

WHY WORK AT ALL?

To understand, we need to first explain the importance of “toil,” in general. In fact, toil is even tied up with man’s *raison d’être* (“Man **was born to toil**”). Since Hashem is the essence of good, and the nature of good is to do good, why did He create the world such that humans have to toil and labor?

We cannot answer that by nature, a person gets pleasure (mainly) from something for which he worked, as our Sages said,¹³ “A man prefers one measure of his own, over nine measures of his fellow’s.” After all, this “nature” itself is not a necessity, since it is **Hashem** who instilled this nature in people. So our original question returns: Why did Hashem create people with the nature to have pleasure only from things that come through toil and labor, which entail suffering, rather than give people gifts that are **free**?

The explanation: The true and ultimate good is that a person reaches (not only the highest perfection within the category of creation but also) a level on which he becomes, so to speak, **similar to his Creator**, as our Sages put it,¹⁴ “**A Hashem’s partner** in the process of Creation.”

Therefore, Hashem established the order of Creation such that a person’s needs do not come easily but through hard work and toil. This is in order that this way he will be elevated (not only to the perfection of a worthy “recipient” — the perfection of a **created being** — but even) to the level of being a “giver”

¹³ *Bava Metzia* 38a.

¹⁴ *Shabbos* 10a, 119b.

(and bring something into existence), similar **to his Creator**. This is achieved when a person toils and creates by **his own effort**.

This itself is the reason for this nature mentioned above — that a person derives no pleasure from things he receives gratuitously. On the contrary, such gifts shame him, being referred to as “the bread of shame.”¹⁵ This is because a person is ingrained with the imperative to reach his purpose and summum bonum not only by being a “recipient,” but by (also) being a “giver,” similar to his Creator.

5.

WORK IS PARTNERING WITH G-D

On this basis, we can understand why the first supposition recorded in the Gemara is that a person was created “for physical toil.”

Since the virtue of “toil” is that it lifts a person to the level of being a “giver” (“creator”) — “Hashem’s partner in the process of Creation” — it makes sense that the effort has to be mainly (**not** in things which are associated with the person and **his** level, but) in things that allow him to have an **influence** on the **Creations**, viz., the inanimate, plants, and animals in the **world**. This is the only way that he can be a partner **in the process of Creation**.

Therefore, the **first** supposition of the verse, “man is born to toil,” is that it refers (not to “conversational toil” or “the toil of Torah,” which do not involve worldly things, but) to “physical toil.” Meaning, when a person toils in his work in a desirable way according to Torah [which is the meaning of “physical labor,” as discussed below in Section 7], he affects and influences Creation to be proper. Then he becomes a partner **in the process of Creation**.

¹⁵ See *Jerusalem Talmud*, Orlah 1:3; *Likkutei Torah*, “Tzav,” 7d.

6.

INNOVATIVE TOIL

On the basis that the purpose of hard work is for a person to become a Hashem's partner in Creation — it makes sense that one cannot reach the pinnacle of perfection in this partnership through “physical toil” alone; he must also engage in “conversational toil.”

This is because “partnership” in Creation is feasible only when a person is “**similar to his Creator.**” Since Hashem not only “influences” Creation, but creates it **anew**, understandably, a person’s “partnership” in the Creative process is also complete only when a person introduces an **innovation** in Creation.

Therefore, “physical toil” alone is not enough [even though work done properly **elevates** Creation.] This is because the faculty of action used in “physical toil” doesn’t express man’s advantage over other created beings (because animals are also active). Consequently, a person’s beneficial influence on the world, in this respect, will only excel relative to Creation (viz., animals), but it won’t be an incomparable elevation, i.e., an **innovation** in Creation.

However, when “physical toil” is linked with “conversational toil” — work and influence in the world that evinces the advantage of beings that **speak** {i.e., humans} (who are “verbal” and who are “conversational”) — a person introduces a novelty into Creation, a virtue that surpasses the innate level of Creation prior to the creation of humans and the person’s own existence.

This, however, is also not a genuine, real partnership, as a person contributes nothing to his own creation, in general; nor to his faculty of speech, in particular. However, when **he** connects it {his work in the world} with Torah, which is the Torah of the Creator (and Hashem and His wisdom are one),¹⁶ and a person **toils** in Torah, so that it becomes “his Torah” (the Torah of the one who

¹⁶ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 2, par. 10; *Tanya*, “*Shaar HaYichud VahaEmunah*,” ch. 8.

toils in Torah),¹⁷ then **he affects**, connects, and unites the Creator with creation, so to speak. Then, the person becomes similar to his **Creator** — Hashem's partner in the process of Creation.

7.

WORKING AT PRAYER

The explanation according to the deeper dimension {in Torah}:

The Previous Rebbe¹⁸ explains that the underlying idea of “physical toil” is for a person “to perform his work with faith... believing that Hashem provides and sustains. {A person is then confident that having done all that he can} Hashem will complete {the matter} on his behalf¹⁹ for blessing.” The idea of “conversational toil,” the Previous Rebbe explains, is “preoccupation in prayer” (as our Sages say,²⁰ “*Conversation* always implies prayer”).

This is the foundation of the above explanation that “physical toil” is a quality relative to Creation, and “conversational toil” is higher than Creation:

With faith “that Hashem provides and sustains” alone, a person will not achieve an elevation to {the level of} G-dliness that is **higher** than the world. For the very fact the person needs to act and use natural mechanisms springs from the world’s limitations. Therefore, even though his “physical toil” is undertaken with the faith in Hashem, “**that He** provides and sustains” (and it is not nature itself), a person, nevertheless, can reach only a level in G-dliness that is clothed in the world.

The service of prayer (“conversational toil”), however, is described as “a ladder [was] standing on the earth and its top reached heavenward.”²¹ This

¹⁷ *Avodah Zarah* 19a.

¹⁸ *Maamar* “*Amar Rabbi Elazar: Kol Adam LeAmal Nivra*,” 5689, sec. 3, 6.

¹⁹ {Stylistic citation of *Tehillim* 138:8.}

²⁰ *Berachos* 26b; *Avodah Zarah* 7b.

²¹ *Bereishis* 28:12; *Zohar*, vol. 1, 266b; *Zohar*, vol. 3, 306b; *Tikunei Zohar*, “*Tikun*” 45.

symbolizes a person's ascent from below to Above, until he reaches "heavenward" — higher than Creation.

Therefore, when we combine "physical toil" with "conversational toil," we elevate creation, raising it to a level **higher** than it stands on its own. This is the meaning of "a ladder was standing on the earth and its top reached heavenward." Through prayer, not only is the person praying elevated but also the "earthly" matters ("on the earth") are elevated — "heavenward," to a state beyond the world.²²

8.

TORAH WORK IS THE HIGHEST

Even though "conversational toil" — the service of prayer — elevates the world to a plane that is higher than Creation in its own right, prayer, nevertheless, does not introduce a true **novelty** in Creation. Since by the elevation of prayer, a person lifts himself up through his **own effort**, and he himself is, after all, measurable and limited, his elevation is also measurable and limited. Therefore, through this {sort of toil}, he only creates in the world an elevation that is still relative to Creation. Consequently, this elevation does not constitute a real change and novelty (which is the case specifically with an elevation that lifts the subject to an incomparably high state).

Therefore, the **conclusion** of the Gemara is that "he was created for the toil of Torah": Torah, even as it descends below {into this world}, is the Torah of **Hashem** — it is unlimited. Since the Torah is completely higher than Creation, it has the power to effect a change in the world's reality to the extent that it can become an actual **new** reality.

However, in order to raise the world by "the toil of Torah" to a level which is completely higher (and "outside" of) Creation — a new reality — worldly matters must first be perfectly refined intrinsically.

²² *Maamar "Zeh HaYom"* 5694, end of sec. 2; beg. of *Maamar "VaYachalom,"* 5708, et al.

Therefore, the order is that first there must be “physical toil” — dealing with matters of the world in a way that conforms with Torah standards. Through this, a person rectifies the world, giving it a holy makeup.²³ However, “physical toil” alone is not enough — the intent is that the world should not remain in its current state (even with a makeup of holiness). Rather, we must add the idea of “the toil of conversation” — elevating the world to a level in G-dliness that is higher than the world, however much the person can achieve by **his own** effort, with the service of prayer.

After the preparations of “physical toil” and “conversational toil” comes the idea of “the toil of Torah.” This has the capacity (since it is rooted in the Essence of Hashem) to introduce a **novelty** in Creation, and to bring about the ultimate purpose of Creation — to make a home for Hashem in the lowest of worlds {our physical universe}, so that the lowest of worlds should really become a new reality.

In this context, it is understood that specifically having all three types of “toil,” and in this order — “physical toil,” “conversational toil,” and “the toil of Torah” — clarifies the idea that “man was born to toil.” Through (all three types of) toil, a person can effect something **new** in the **process** of Creation. He thus becomes Hashem's partner in the process of Creation — similar to **his Creator**. This is the purpose of Creation.

²³ {In the Hebrew original, “*tziur*.”}

9.

BACK TO THE LAND

Similar to the above discussion regarding a person's service of Hashem in general — that the ultimate purpose of Creation is to transform the world through “the toil of Torah” (which is higher than Creation) and in order to do this, there first must be “physical toil” and “the toil of conversation” — we can say the same regarding the land of Israel, the Jewish land.

The land of Israel was first given to the Seven Nations²⁴ with the intention that Jews should conquer and **transform it** from a land of nations to the land of Israel, a **holy** land — a land where the light of Torah, which is higher than the world, shines openly.

This began in the days of Avraham, which was the start of the “two-thousand years of Torah,”²⁵ when {the light of} “Avraham began to **illuminate**”²⁶ {his environment} — with the G-dly light that is higher than the world.

Avraham's contemplation of Divinity began, as our Sages say,²⁷ by pondering the “castle” (the world). (And while pondering, Avraham did so **as this task demanded**, i.e., he toiled. Because “if a person claims he didn't work hard but succeeded, don't believe it.”)²⁸ Subsequently {he contemplated} the sun, etc., by which bounty, and so forth, comes to the world. Finally, Avraham understood that “this ‘castle’ has a Master,” and that no comparison could be drawn between the Master and his castle. As our Sages explain that the principal aspect of G-dliness is not that the worlds are vivified by Him.²⁹

²⁴ Rashi on *Bereishis* 1:1.

²⁵ *Avodah Zarah* 9a.

²⁶ *Shemos Rabbah* 15:26.

²⁷ *Bereishis Rabbah*, ch. 39; *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Avodah Zarah*,” ch. 1, par. 3.

²⁸ *Megillah* 6b.

²⁹ *Torah Or*, “*Megillas Esther*,” 99b. Referenced and explained in *Likkutei Torah*, “*Shir Hashirim*,” 8a; and *Or HaTorah*, “*Yisro*,” p. 842; *Maamar*, s.v., “*Ki Imcha*,” 5701.

10.

WORK IS A PREPARATION FOR PRAYER

In order for the “land” to absorb³⁰ the light of Torah elicited by Avraham, which is higher than the world (and through which the world will be transformed to become the land of Israel – the holy land), first there needed to be “physical toil” (and “conversational toil”).

Therefore, specifically because the people in the land were “**engaged** in weeding... and hoeing...,” physical toil, a preparation was made. So (after Avraham first pleaded and **prayed** [“conversation”], “If only my portion would be in this land”), could the “land” be given to Avraham “and to his descendents after him.”³¹ They transformed the land to one which was illuminated with the light of the Torah that transcends Creation.

— Based on talks delivered on Yud Shevat, 5728 (1968) and the 11th of Nissan, 5732 (1972)

³⁰ {In the original Yiddish, “*zol zein a kli tzum....*”; more literally, “to be a vessel for...”}

³¹ {Stylistic citation of *Shemos* 25:13; *Bamidbar* 28:43.}