

TORAH AND CAREERS: A PRACTICAL APPROACH¹

by Ben-Tzion Spitz

The question whether a Torah-observant Jew may or ought to pursue a secular career has been debated since, at latest, the time of the Mishna. In this article we will look at some sources for the debate, focusing mainly on *Pirkei Avot* and the Rambam, analyze the prevalent approaches today, and develop some practical tools to help guide an individual toward his own solution to the issue.

The Mishnaic Tractate *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of our Fathers*), is a compilation of moral advice dictating what daily behavior ought to be like for everyone.² It also represents the ideal that all should aim to achieve.³ However, in carefully reviewing the various statements in the Mishna, it becomes apparent that there is a dispute about the issue of making a livelihood:

Do not say, "When I am free I will study;" perhaps you will not become free.⁴

Anyone excessively involved in business cannot become a scholar.⁵

¹ This article is dedicated to the memory of my grandparents: Tzvi Dov Rosenthal and Eta Spitz.

Special thanks to Rav Doniel Schreiber, Rav Menachem Weinberg, and Rav Ronnie Ziegler for their help. Extra special thanks to my wife and parents for their constant support. Comments can be directed to bentzis@aol.com.

² Rashi, last Mishna of *Ethics of our Fathers*, Chapter 6, Mishna 11.

³ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Baba Kama*, page 30a.

⁴ Hillel, *Ethics of our Fathers*, Chapter 2, Mishna 5.

⁵ *Ibid*, Chapter 2, Mishna 6.

Whoever takes upon himself the yoke of Torah, the yoke of government and the yoke of worldly responsibilities are removed from him. But whoever throws off the yoke of Torah from himself, the yoke of government and the yoke of worldly responsibilities are placed upon him.⁶

Reduce your business activities and occupy yourself with Torah. Be of humble spirit before every man. If you should neglect the Torah, there will be many other neglectors opposite you; but if you labor in Torah, He has ample reward to give you.⁷

On the other hand:

Beautiful is the study of Torah, together with an occupation, for the exertion of them both makes sin forgotten.⁸

If there is no Torah, there is no worldly occupation; if there is no worldly occupation, there is no Torah. If there is no wisdom, there is no fear of God; if there is no fear of God, there is no wisdom. If there is no knowledge, there is no understanding; if there is no understanding, there is no knowledge. If there is no flour (sustenance), there is no Torah; if there is no Torah, there is no flour (sustenance).⁹

The sages who composed these sources lived as they taught; whereas many sages earned a livelihood in non-clerical professions, others distanced themselves as much as possible from the secular world. On one hand, there are many examples of Torah giants and leaders throughout the generations that pursued careers alongside their Torah life:¹⁰ Among Talmudic sages, Rav Huna was a water drawer,¹¹ Rabbi

⁶ Rabbi Nachuniah Ben Hakana, Ibid, Chapter 3, Mishna 6.

⁷ Rabbi Meir, Ibid, Chapter 4, Mishna 12.

⁸ Rabban Gamliel, son of Rabbi Judah the Prince, Ibid, Chapter 2, Mishna 2.

⁹ Rabbi Elazar Ben Azariah, Ibid, Chapter 3, Mishna 21.

¹⁰ Maimonides states in his Laws of Torah Study, Chapter 1, Law 9: "The great sages of Israel included wood choppers, water drawers, and blind men; and even so, they were occupied in Torah study day and night, and were among those who transmitted the Torah's teachings from master to student in the chain stretching back to Moses, our

Meir a barber,¹² Rabbi Yehuda a porter,¹³ Rav Yosef a miller, and Rav Sheshet a porter.¹⁴ Among later sages, Rav Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi, the famous commentator on *Chumash* and Talmud) was a wine maker, and never accepted any position or payment for his Torah activities. Even in modern times, Rav Baruch Halevi Epstein, the author of the *Torah Temima*, was a banker. Rambam is perhaps the best known secular career person and we will discuss him in more detail below.

On the other hand, a paradigm of non-secular existence is represented by Rav Shimon Bar Yochai. The Talmud relates that he lived as he preached – in a cave, immersed completely in his Torah meditations, totally divorced from the world around him.¹⁵ Thus, one group contends that men¹⁶ should shun worldly pursuits for the exclusive study of Torah, whereas the other group seems to say that there must be a balance, a coexistence, between making a livelihood and studying Torah. This debate has continued, and one can identify the different views throughout the Talmud, *Geonim*, *Rishonim*, *Acharonim* and modern-day *poskim*.

At first glance, it appears that this dispute involves clearly defined and inflexible positions, i.e., a halakhic dispute. However, it may be more accurate to say that this debate is about philosophical preference and not about normative practice, i.e., each side emphasizes one opinion from among several, but does not decide between them.¹⁷

teacher."

¹¹ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Ketubot*, page 105a. The list of Talmudic names as well as some of the translations and insights on Maimonides are from Rabbi Eliyahu Touger's excellent translation and commentary on *The Laws of Torah Study*, by Moznaim Publishing Corp. 1989. Permission to use received from publisher, Moshe Shternlicht, 12/13/98.

¹² *Ibid*, Tractate *Eruvin*, page 13a.

¹³ *Ibid*, Tractate *Nedarim*, page 49b.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, Tractate *Gittin*, page 67b.

¹⁵ Tractate *Shabbat* 33b.

¹⁶ There are other issues related to women. The focus here is on men and the issues surrounding their obligations and directives.

¹⁷ In the spirit of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (*The Lonely Man of Faith*, page 9): "...in modern theological and philosophical categories. My interpretive gesture is completely subjective and lays no claim to representing a definitive Halakhic philosophy."

As opposed to other areas of *halakha* where unequivocal decisions are rendered, no authoritative *decision* has ever been recorded for this debate. Yes, there are many suggestions and views; but that is all they are, and should only be taken as such. Furthermore, sages from both ends of this philosophical debate very much respected each other's positions, views, and ways of life. However, while most might agree with the above positions, some do not – especially in our generation.

It seems that the sages realized that one's approach to secular activity is a highly personal issue, and offered encouragement and specific guidance as to the best resolution of this life-defining concern.

Some Qualifications

From the days of the Mishna to our own time, many people have become overly concerned with the pursuit of their career and material wealth. This trend is frowned upon in no uncertain terms by the full spectrum of Jewish thinkers.¹⁸ All agree that learning Torah and thereby becoming closer to God is of prime importance. Anything that detracts from this goal is against the Jewish ideal. Beyond this, however, there are various opinions as to the best way to proceed with one's activities on the practical level, and it is this debate we wish to address.

To my mind, it is inconceivable that the **entire** Jewish people was meant to exclusively learn Torah (at least at this stage of our history¹⁹). It is otherwise difficult to explain the reason behind all of the materialistic laws and commandments. Someone has to work the fields. Someone has to heal the sick and wounded. Someone has to build the homes, provide the food, generate the electricity, make the clothing, manufacture goods and do everything else that a society needs done. The majority of the population is expected to have some type of gainful employment. In ancient times, the *Kohanim* and *Levi'im* were designated from among Israel to provide guidance, while the rest of Israel was expected to make a living.²⁰ In our times, Orthodox Jewry has spawned a community with an ideology that promotes full-time Torah learning for all men. In this

¹⁸ For example, see R. Dessler in *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*, Section 1, Chapter 1.

¹⁹ There are a number of sources that indicate that after the coming of the Messiah all of Israel will be exclusively involved in Torah and will provide spiritual leadership to the nations of the world. See, for example, Maimonides' Laws of Kings, Chapter 12, Law 5.

²⁰ Laws of *Shemita* and *Yovel*, Chapter 13, Law 12.

essay, we are concerned with helping the individual to choose between the Torah-only lifestyle and an integrated lifestyle, and providing some tools to help him decide.

Avoiding the Problem Creates New Ones

Some people do not have to confront the choice directly because they work in a Torah-oriented field. Not that their intention is to avoid tackling the issue; on the contrary, usually for the most idealistic and noble of reasons they become pulpit Rabbis or Torah educators. They are constantly learning and disseminating words of Torah. This is a great solution to the dilemma, for the Rabbi does not have to leave the world of Torah even while earning a living. However, this only works for the select few that take that route – not everyone can be a teacher.

Additionally, this route is not without its price. Rambam prohibits Torah being taught for pay:

It is forbidden to take a wage for teaching the Oral Law, as it is stated (*Deuteronomy* 4:5): "Behold, I have taught you laws and statutes, as God commanded me." Just as I (Moses) learned at no cost, so too, you have been taught from me at no cost. Teach the coming generations in a like manner. Teach them at no cost as you have learned from me.²¹

Unfortunately, such a guideline could very well destroy today's entire Orthodox educational system. Thus, Halakhic authorities allow Torah educators to be compensated for their time. However, this is far from the ideal way to teach Torah.

Another reason why this may be problematic is that the educator or Rabbi is at the mercy of his financial supporters. He must be careful not to upset or alienate them too much or he will lose his job and, hence, his livelihood. This would, at times, tie the hands of such people when it is most important for them to take a stand. This weakens the Torah in the eyes of the community. Sometimes, Rabbis may give in to financial expediency rather than stand on principle, especially in borderline cases.

²¹ Laws of Torah Study, Chapter 1, Law 7.

The Torah-Only Choice

For the purposes of our discussion and to avoid blanket statements, we will refer to communities that frown upon non-Torah livelihood as "*Anti-work*" communities.²² Unfortunately, among non-religious Jews, members of these communities, have often been labeled "parasites." They are seen as pure consumers, contributing nothing to society except for progeny, and that at an alarming rate.

Torah followers, however, believe that a person dedicated to Torah is on a high spiritual level, and although they may not be contributing to society in a material sense, they are contributing to the spiritual entity of the entire people of Israel. This is a fundamental belief of Judaism.²³

Nevertheless, every community has some people of low moral character, and the anti-work communities are no exception. There are members of these communities who do contribute to society, neither materially nor spiritually. Their low character magnifies an existing problem because the community in question represents a higher moral ideal. Such rotten apples besmirch the name of the entire community.²⁴ For example, there have been incidents both in Israel and in the U.S. of members of the an anti-work community falsifying records in order to embezzle government funds. Other more crude and terrible incidents have occurred recently but do not bear repeating. These horrible "*chilulei Hashem*" (desecrations of the God's name), are perpetrated by slackers, but defame the entire community. These wayward members may appear highly spiritual, praying with special intensity and keeping the ritualistic *halakhot* beyond the letter of the law, but it would be difficult to say that they are followers of Torah.

²² The whole topic of social classification, labeling and the problems with different communities and groups will just be touched upon briefly here. No offense of any group is meant. While the use of labels is distasteful, it has become a popular and convenient handle and is employed here just to illustrate the point.

²³ Nefesh Ha'Chayim, Rav Chayim Volozhin, Part 4, Chapter 10, "If Torah study were to stop, Heaven and Earth would cease to exist." Also Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Nedarim*, page 32a. The spiritual has a direct effect on the material (i.e. doing the *mitzvot* leads to God providing rain as we affirm in the *Shema*).

²⁴ Rav S. Groineman in his book *Chazon Ish: Belief & Faith* (published by Sifraiti Ltd., Bnei Brak, 5757 (1997), Chapter 2, Section 4, complains about what he calls "fakers": "people will say: so-and-so that learned ethics, how disgraceful are his actions, and how disgusting are his schemes."

Another sad phenomenon involves relationship of some institutions, their representatives, and students, towards their financial contributors. When the time comes to fundraise, the contributing laymen are honored as great righteous leaders and scholars, called "*tzadikim*," and given a variety of honors. The rest of the time, though, they are considered "*amaratzim*" (boors) and contacted only to keep the money flowing. This manipulative, elitist, and cynical attitude is a dangerous message for the students and for the community at large. Unfortunately, a number of "bad apples" are guilty of such thinking to some extent or another. Leaders and institutions would be well served by exorcising any hint of this attitude from their midst.

The Rambam's Approach

Rambam had strong words to say about people not interested in working:

Whoever decides to engage in Torah studies, and not work, and plans to support himself from charity – he desecrates (God's) Name, abuses the Torah, extinguishes the light of Faith, causes evil to himself, and removes himself from the life of the World to Come. Because it is forbidden to derive benefit from words of Torah in this world.

Our sages declared: "Whoever benefits from the words of Torah forfeits his life in the world." Also, they commanded and declared: "Do not make them a crown to magnify oneself, nor an ax to chop with." Also, they commanded and declared: "Love work and despise Rabbinic positions." "And all Torah study that is not joined by work, the outcome is that it will be negated and leads to sin." Ultimately such a person will steal from others.²⁵

It is a great attribute for a person to derive his livelihood from his own efforts, and a trait of the pious of the early

²⁵ Laws of Torah Study, Chapter 3, Law 10. The source for the last statement is given as Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Kiddushin*, page 29a: "Whoever does not teach his son a profession is as if he taught him to steal."

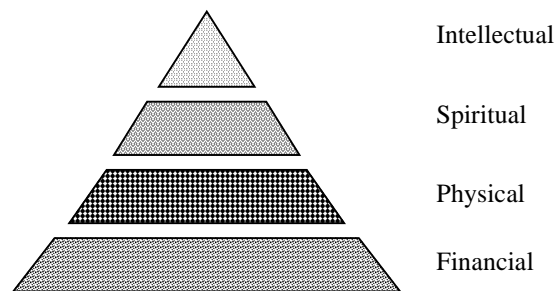
generations. In this manner, he will merit all honor and good in this world, and in the world to come, as it (*Psalms* 128:2) states: "If you eat the toil of your hands, you will be happy and it will be good for you." "You will be happy" – in this world. "It will be good for you" – in the world to come, which is entirely good.²⁶

Who is Complete?

The Rambam²⁷ defines four areas where man should develop himself in order to achieve "*Shleimut*" (Perfection/Wholeness):²⁸

1. Perfection in one's possessions;
2. Perfection of one's physical attributes or health;
3. Perfection of one's moral and spiritual character;
4. Perfection of one's intellect.

The Rambam felt that the quest for perfection should correspond to a pyramid structure, with one level forming a natural foundation for the next. This can be illustrated by the graphic below:



He felt that one's first responsibility is to ensure financial stability. After that to improve one's health. Without the proper funds, it is logical that a person will not be able to feed himself properly or improve one's physical condition. Once these basic elements have been addressed, one can develop religiously. Finally, after all of these areas are in proper

²⁶ Laws of Torah Study, Chapter 3, Law 11.

²⁷ This section draws heavily from concepts in the book, *Torah Umadda* – The Encounter of Religious Learning and Worldly Knowledge in the Jewish Tradition, by Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm (President of Yeshiva University), Jason Aronson Inc., NJ 1990.

²⁸ As discussed in the last chapter of his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Part III, Chapter 54, and his *Introduction to the Mishna*, Section 6, Chapter 2.

order, one should develop and perfect one's intellect. To quote Rabbi Lamm:

The final *shleimut* is that of intellectual perfection, which expresses itself in the grasping of truth, especially the true perception or knowledge of God. It is this last *shleimut*, the rational or cognitive one, that represents the highest state of ideal man.²⁹

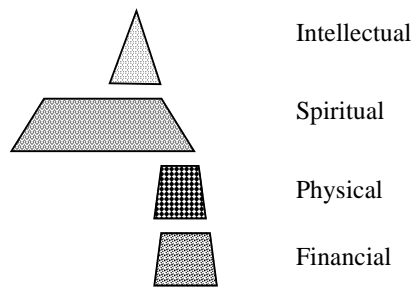
Obviously the arrangement described is oversimplified – life cannot be lived one compartment at a time. All of the areas are generally dealt with contemporaneously. However, the above illustration does point to a certain logical precedence. After all, it would be foolish to investigate esoteric musings before investigating where the next meal is coming from.

The Rambam sees the ideal combination of activity in a holistic manner and not as merely a focus on the spiritual. Dealing exclusively with the spiritual is seen not as a neutral position, but as a negative activity; we are humans, not angels.

The following diagram illustrates what Rambam's pyramid might look like from the eyes of some in the anti-work world:³⁰

²⁹ Ibid, page 213.

³⁰ Ibid, page 214: "The lowest of Maimonides' four types, that of possessions, was, of course, dropped – both because of economic conditions throughout much of Jewish history, and, even more, because this was posited as a form of *shleimut* for analytic or morphological reasons only, and certainly had little else to commend it. The second, physical perfection, similarly fell into desuetude. Whether this happened because conditions in exile made good nutrition inaccessible and hence ignored, or because of the medieval and mystical penchant for seeing the spiritual and the physical as fundamentally antagonistic, its omission was most unfortunate. The third, moral perfection, was both intensified and broadened, with piety ("fear of Heaven") and punctiliousness in the performance of the *mitzvot* included along with refinement of character as a most desirable level of human-Jewish perfection. The highest level, that of intellectual perfection, was narrowed to the knowledge and understanding of Torah, with a concomitant downgrading of the knowledge of God and the philosophical, and especially metaphysical, infrastructure that such knowledge presupposed. Hence, the conventional concept of *shleimut* and religious growth to which we are heir today consists largely of piety, moral character, and the study of Torah."



This world-view is incomplete, unstable, and far from ideal.

Rabbi Lamm reiterates what *shleimut* should be:

Shleimut thus implies a wide net: the amassing of all one's attributes – intellectual and psychological, spiritual and esthetic, practical and moral – and all one's experiences – sacred and profane, profound and superficial, positive and negative – and their actualization and elevation toward the Holy One, as we worship Him both through our spirituality and our corporeality.³¹

The *Yeshiva* Experience

The emphasis on the spiritual is appropriate when applied as a balance for those that may be overly materialistic. However, in our opinion, being entirely spiritual and disregarding the material should never be mistaken for a **complete** philosophy that can guide people through every facet of their complex lives. If we once again turn to the contemporary scene, this is the message that, unfortunately, some *yeshivot* give over, either consciously or unconsciously. This may not be a problem for those who remain in a pure Torah or *yeshiva* environment. However, for the rest of the world, which does not live within the four walls of the *yeshiva*, it is an insufficient guiding philosophy and ideal. Instead of infusing students with feelings of guilt, *yeshivot* should encourage students to excel in their secular careers while remaining strong in their devotion to Torah.

The classical structure and curriculum of *yeshivot* contribute significantly to the predominant educational message. Many *yeshivot*

³¹ Ibid, page 219.

spend the majority of the day studying Talmud, certainly a fundamental area of study. The Rambam himself states that an advanced student should spend the majority of his time delving into the Talmud. However, he assumes that a basic foundation in Jewish law and literature should precede the almost exclusive commitment to Talmud. It is becoming apparent that a growing number of *yeshiva* high-school graduates lack a solid foundation in *Tanakh*, *Halakha*, Ethics, and preparation for real-life issues that will confront them when they leave *yeshiva*. Unfortunately, these students are not well versed in these basics while they strive to become great Talmudic analysts. For most of them, the great intellectual Talmudic exercises will not continue after *yeshiva*, and they will be sorely lacking in the basics. This is an issue that would benefit by being addressed in many *yeshivot*. But the problem is especially acute for students who will not remain lifelong in *yeshiva*, rather one, two, or even five years. Perhaps their time can be more efficiently spent, and the philosophical message imparted can better reflect the integrative approach that they espouse.³²

The Rambam has some thoughts that relate to a poor educational structure and its relationship to poor character:

Torah should only be taught to a proper student – one whose deeds are pleasant – or to a simpleton. However, if the student follows a bad path, he should first be influenced to correct his behavior and follow a straight path. After he repents, his deeds are examined and only

³² Established *yeshivot* are responding slowly to this problem. The need is growing, the vacuum is expanding and if the *yeshivot* do not take concrete steps to remedy the situation "salvation shall come from elsewhere" [Paraphrase of *Megillat Esther*: "For if you remain silent during this time, then relief and salvation shall arise to the Jews from elsewhere, and you and your father's house shall perish; and who knows if you have not come to this royal position for such an occasion?"] – most probably new *yeshivot* and programs that will cater more to the true needs of such clientele.

Rabbi Berel Wein (renowned Torah scholar, historian and orator) had this to say in a recent interview: "We need a revolution in Jewish education. I see it. There has to be 100 *yeshiva* high schools and each one of them has to be different." [Voices, Vol. 2 Issue 12, 15 *Kislev* 5759 / Dec. 4, 1998.]

New and more "lines of communication" [this phrase, as well as many of the ideas in this article, stem from my father and teacher, Mr. Elliot Spitz] need to be established between the various groups involved in the providing and receiving of Jewish education. Institutions need to adapt and grow within the acceptable boundaries to better serve the community. This is true for our issue specifically as well as for many of the challenges facing the Jewish community. Good communication is essential.

then is he allowed to enter the house of study to be instructed.³³

The above is not always the case in today's schools. Educators continue teaching advanced Talmudic concepts to students whose moral fiber requires much strengthening. The intricacies of Talmudic debates are being taught to students that have no problem stealing, lying, cheating, or committing other ethical crimes. If half the time that these students spent on Talmud were spent on ethical improvement, perhaps institutions could justify teaching Talmud to such students. It is clear, however, that the Rambam would not allow such students to attend his Torah classes – not because of a lack of background or poor analytical skills, but because of poor character. Improvement of character is sorely lacking from many curricula. This failing, coupled with a general lack of other basic knowledge, leaves a major educational gap for many students.³⁴

The classical *yeshivot* are good for students that wish to remain predominantly in that world and have a solid educational and philosophical foundation. We need to cultivate such people that will be immersed in such an environment with few worldly distractions. They are our spiritual leaders and should be as close as possible to the spiritual ideal. For those that will interact and engage the world more fully, an adapted program is needed – one that will give them a solid foundation in the basics of Jewish tradition, law, history, and ethics, and prepare them to be *Bnei Torah* in our increasingly challenging times.

A Practical Approach – Definitions

Let us now try to approach the issue of integrating Torah and careers, by first defining what appears to be the acceptable range of activity. The limits of the range are set by the extreme approaches at each end of the following spectrum:

³³ Laws of Torah Study, Chapter 4, Law 1.

³⁴ My brother, Mr. Kalman Spitz, told over to me a "*vort*" by the Admor of the Shomer Emunim: "Some people, if they are learning 100% of the time, don't have time or room for God."

No concern for
the material

No concern for
the spiritual

On one end you have a person that is wholly materialistic and has divorced himself from preoccupation with Torah and Godly matters. At the other end stands a person that does not give enough concern to material concerns such as food, clothing, and shelter. Seeing the lack of consensus or clear definition by our sages, it is fair to say that no particular point on our spectrum represents the ideal that all people should strive towards. Our spectrum is not necessarily a gauge of one's religious dedication. It may be an indication of the *quantity* of time made available for learning as opposed to working. Perhaps quantity is often correlated to the *quality* and seriousness of the learning, but it is not necessarily so.

From personal conversations, I understood that Rav Yehuda Amital (*Rosh Yeshiva* of *Yeshivat Har Etzion*) and Rav Adin Steinsalz (world-renowned Torah scholar and author) believe that the 15 minutes that a career-person learns daily may be of more meaningful than many hours that full-time students learn. The self-sacrifice involved makes all the difference. In addition, career-people strive that their livelihood be made "*le-sheim Shamayim*" (for the sake of Heaven),³⁵ thereby sanctifying one's entire day.³⁶ Of course, they stressed that Torah is the "*ikar*" (of prime importance); however, *Ikar* is defined qualitatively and not quantitatively.

Rambam as a Model?

The Rambam is unique in many respects. His monumental legal work (*Mishneh Torah*) forms much of the basis for subsequent halakhic literature. He was a pioneer in refining and formulating Jewish philosophy, both in the *Mishneh Torah* and in his *Guide to the Perplexed*. His "Thirteen Principles of Faith" signal a turning point in the history of Jewish thought and has served to anchor the faith of the Jewish ever since. It is worthwhile to remember that initially his works were

³⁵ Rabbi Yossi, *Ethics of our Fathers*, Chapter 2, Mishna 17: "Let all your actions be for the sake of Heaven."

³⁶ See Rav Ronnie Ziegler's adaptation of a *shiur* by HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein on the subject of one's secular career activity being more in sync with Divine service/purpose. The article can be found on the Internet at: <http://www.vbm-torah.org> .

blacklisted and even burned by many leading sages. Eventually, though, the brilliance of the Rambam's works shone through and they were universally accepted.

The Rambam also pursued a secular career. He was considered one of the premier physicians of his time, and was appointed personal physician to the Sultan of Egypt.³⁷ It is clear that, even in the Rambam's time, to become a doctor required many years of studying and training.³⁸ The Rambam was also well versed in other secular areas such as philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, physics, and literature.³⁹

The Rambam suggested what he considered a good balance between the study of Torah and the pursuit of a livelihood: work three hours a day and learn nine hours a day.⁴⁰ The Rambam himself did not keep these schedules. We know from autobiographical records he both worked as a doctor and was involved in Torah much more than the hours he suggested; he barely slept.⁴¹

In most professions it is extremely difficult to work only three hours a day. It is difficult both to find such a job and to support one's self from what one might earn in so few hours. However, there is a small and growing movement of individuals that are pursuing this ideal – and achieving it. In the age of computers, Internet, flex-time and telecommuting, such opportunities are growing. I personally know a graphic artist who learns Torah for a major part of his day and makes a successful living during his limited business hours. I likewise know a highly dedicated *Kollel* student who in his few available afternoon hours built up his own Internet services company. There are many other stories of people who have managed to live the Rambam's ideal. However, these examples are few and far between, and are not easily imitated.

Livelihood versus Career

Careers in fields such as medicine, law, engineering, and accounting require years of specialized training during which time

³⁷ It should be noted that Rambam did start his career solely learning while being supported by his brother. When that ceased, he was forced to make a living as a doctor.

³⁸ *A Maimonides Reader*, Isadore Twersky, Behrman House, Inc. 1972. Page 1.

³⁹ *Ibid*, page 8.

⁴⁰ *Laws of Torah Study*, Chapter 1, Law 12.

⁴¹ Letter from Rambam to Yosef Ben Yehuda Ibn Tibbon, 1191.

otherwise available for Torah study will be limited. Similarly, when the time comes to enter the workforce, the hours open for Torah study will probably be diminished further. How can one justify this apparent "*Bittul Torah*" (stoppage of Torah study) when one could earn a livelihood with less training and, therefore, have more time for Torah study? In other words, should one invest time preparing for a full-time career that one may have an inclination for, or should one only pursue work that requires little training? Additionally, should one only do enough work to live from hand to mouth, as some sources advise, or can one, to a greater or lesser degree, plan ahead?

These are not simple or trivial questions. Just as there is no consensus regarding the "learning versus working" question,⁴² there is no consensus as to the "livelihood versus career" question.⁴³ However, the search for an answer leads to the most critical element of the puzzle – the person himself.

Halakhot do not always distinguish between different people's personalities, characteristics and desires. In our questions, however, individual qualities play an essential role in determining the proper path for each person.

Maximizing Personal *Tikun Olam*

"*Tikun Olam*" (fixing of the world) is Judaism's way of expressing the universal idea that we are placed on this Earth to improve it. Rav Soloveitchik was quoted as saying: "Man is enjoined to leave his imprint on this world, to go beyond nature and transcend it, not simply imitating it."⁴⁴ This applies on a national as well as individual level.⁴⁵ Keeping

⁴² This poignant problem is illustrated by the Talmud: "Over three the Holy One, blessed be He, weeps every day: over him who is able to occupy himself with the study of Torah and does not; and over him that is unable to occupy himself with the study of Torah and does..." Tractate *Chagiga* 5b.

⁴³ One side of the argument is taken up in the last Mishna of *Kiddushin*, that a father should only teach his son an easy and clean trade, while the last Mishna of *Avot* is interpreted that every inclination in a person is for a purpose and they should be directed towards positive activities and goals (i.e. a bloodthirsty person should become a *Shochet* or a *Mohel*, Tractate *Shabbat* 156a).

⁴⁴ *Shiur* by HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein, Nov. 24, 1986, "The Growth of a Ben-Torah."

⁴⁵ This is a recurring theme among our sages. Rav Kook gives deep insight into the idea, especially as it relates to the concept of repentance, in the fourth chapter of *Orot Ha-teshuva*.

this idea in mind can help steer us right in answering some of the questions that were raised. To reiterate these questions:

- How does one choose between full-time learning and full-time work?
- Does one pursue a professional career or just try to make a living?
- How far ahead should one be concerned about their finances?

The answer is not only based on one's strengths and abilities vis-a-vis learning Torah, but revolves around what type of impact one can have on both the world at large and one's immediate circle.

Part of the answer will depend on the individual's capabilities, inclinations, and circumstances. There is a tale about Rav Zusha: R' Zusha stated that when he dies and ascends to Heaven, he will not be asked why he was not Abraham, but why he wasn't Zusha. Every person has his own unique personality and potential and must seek to fulfill that destiny – not somebody else's. No formula applies to all.

Rav Yehuda Halevi, in his book "*Ha-Kuzari*," describes how a prince ruling a city must make use of all of his talents, leanings and interests. All parts and strengths must be used in a cooperative fashion. None must be allowed to overextend. Each must assist the others in order for the entire organism to function efficiently. Similarly, on an individual level, the same type of balance must be achieved.

If a person is particularly suited for a Torah career and circumstances allow him to pursue it in a dignified manner, he should certainly pursue it. However, if a person has other leanings, he may justifiably pursue a secular career. Not that, God forbid, he should neglect Torah. Torah is always primary. Torah must be a part of every single day. However, it need not occupy the whole day. It is equally legitimate to serve God through one's work and profession, keeping in mind that one's activities should be "for the sake of Heaven," an example of what a God-fearing Jew should be like, and a "light unto the nations."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ *Isaiah* 49:6

Faith

The extent that one advances a career or is involved in one's work is related to the strength of one's faith. Logically, the more one invests in a profession and in work, the higher the chances of success. Mathematically, the more hours one works, the more money one can make. For a person seeking to secure oneself financially, this thinking can leave little time for Torah. What's the proper balance?

There are stories of people of tremendous faith, whose physical needs are taken care of miraculously. On the other hand, there are plenty of people who expend tremendous effort and barely make ends meet. Some would argue that the amount of money that one makes is not in proportion to the amount of effort,⁴⁷ and that therefore minimum effort is required.⁴⁸ However, it is also a well-known tenet that one cannot rely on miracles.⁴⁹

Thus, should a person believe that wealth will just fall into his hand, or should he slave away, spending every waking moment insuring financial security? Ultimately, the question every person must ask himself is, "How much faith should I have?"

I received a satisfying answer from Rabbi Shimon Green (of *Yeshivat Bircat Hatorah* in the Old City of Jerusalem). He said, "You should have just a little more faith than you currently have." This answer has tremendous practical appeal and would seem to be in sync with a solid approach to improving one's character, devotion, and efforts. Instead of traumatically jumping to a new way of life, one should gradually work on one's self. A person should constantly reflect upon and analyze their present condition and its direction.⁵⁰ Always seeking to

⁴⁷ "On Rosh Hashana, God establishes how much every person will earn for the year." Tractate *Beitza* 16a. Also, last Mishna of *Kiddushin*.

⁴⁸ See Rav Dessler in *Michtav Me-Eliyahu*, Vol 1, Five levels of Torah and *Derekh Eretz*, pp. 197-203.

⁴⁹ *Ein Somkhin al ha-neis. Pesachim* 64b.

⁵⁰ This philosophy is highly relevant in *Ba'al Teshuva* movements. There are some people that preach a rapid change of life – taking on all of the components of what may be a totally alien lifestyle in a very short period of time. Experience has shown that the majority of people adopting such a course bounce right back to their previous lifestyle, or take on their new one in a very shallow fashion. Groups with more long-term success push for a more deliberate and gradual change of lifestyle. This thinking can be adopted for the daily improvements and repentance obligated by all.

improve a little bit is one of the most successful and long-lasting methods of character development.

Dynamic Process

The answer to many of our questions is a frustrating "it depends" – not only on the unique qualities of the person, but also on his stage of life. The answer can and does change over time. If a person is at a stage of his life where it is socially and financially acceptable for him to be engrossed in Torah, as many pre-college men are, it would be foolhardy to pass up the opportunity. It would also be a shame not to extend it for as long as possible. On the other hand, for an older man, supporting a family, to suddenly quit his job and take up full-time learning without the means to provide for himself and his family would be irresponsible. It may be hazardous (to health and career) for a sleep-deprived medical resident to have a four-hour Torah study session every single day. But for someone in a less intense liberal arts program it may be more practical.

What remains constant, however, is the requirement to reflect and take personal inventory. On a regular basis, people should examine their activities and see what needs adjustment to maximize what they are doing, including the time they can spend on Torah.

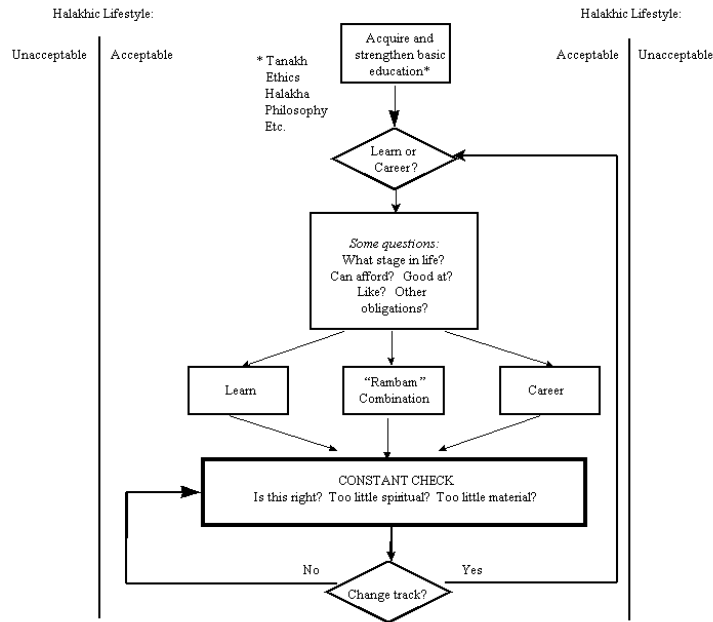
One of the most acclaimed books on choosing a career and what to do with one's life is *What Color is Your Parachute?* by Richard Nelson Bolles.⁵¹ He claims that even career choice is a dynamic process, and that nowadays, on average, people change to a totally different career every 10 years.

This would imply that, throughout life, people are questioning what they are doing and moving toward more interesting activity. One needs to take into account one's constantly growing and changing experience, skill set, religious commitment, community involvement, and financial, family and social obligations. An honest look at these factors is crucial in the attempt to be self-aware, and the self-knowledge achieved will be the key to determine each individual's path.

⁵¹ "What Color Is Your Parachute: A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career-Changers," Richard Nelson Bolles, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, California.

Decision Logic

The following graphic is an attempt to illustrate the thinking and parameters involved in the decision-making process:



In the above diagram, "Learn" refers to full-time Torah learning, "Career" to the full-time pursuit of a career (with as much free time as possible devoted to Torah). The "Rambam Combination" is a combination of less-than-full-time work with several hours of Torah learning each day. All of these options are legitimate and do not close off excelling in Torah. I know someone that works full-time, is one of the top people in his profession and manages not only to learn Torah extensively and at a high level, but also to give a daily *Daf Yomi* class. There are many examples of this in our own day and throughout our history. Obviously, the entire range should be within an "Acceptable Halakhic Lifestyle." One unacceptable extreme is to pursue a career and forget Torah. On the other extreme, someone can pursue the study of Torah, but be lacking in certain minimum aspects of proper halakhic behavior.

Ideally, before a decision can be made, a basic level of Torah learning should be attained. If it has not, then efforts should be made to strengthen the areas that are lacking.

The self-examination process should be a regular one. Circumstances change. People get into a pattern and don't think whether it's the right one. One needs to ask the right questions to start seeing the answers. Only by constantly pushing and exerting oneself can one's potential be approached.

In summary, the pursuit of a career is certainly a positive, legitimate and "*lekhatchila*" option for an observant Jew. One should seek to follow a reasonable and practical course that fits one as an individual. However, to do it properly and successfully requires a rigorous and regular process of self-assessment and – evaluation.

Such questioning is a highly personal activity and demands extensive self-understanding. Goals, ideals and dreams must be defined and redefined. One's individuality must be discovered. All of these things can be extremely difficult, and made worse by the fact that the process is constant. Every single moment of every single day, a person has the opportunity to redefine himself. For some it is a horrifying burden. For many it is an issue that doesn't even rise to their consciousness and they go through life taking the path of least resistance. But for some, it is a blessing; and those that make and grab the opportunities – they light up the world.