

No Sweat

- Basil Herring.

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Like it or not, the Labor Day weekend is here. With it, of course, the summer is officially over, with those familiar words “all our days we had fun, we had seasons in the sun... but now they are all gone,” echoing in our ears, and we contemplate resuming the familiar routines of work and study, office and school, the rounds of daily discipline and weekday work. Sans beach, sans pool, deprived for many months to come of the “lazy, hazy, crazy, days of summer.” I for one have always found it ironic that of all days, it is Labor Day, the day set aside by Congress in 1894 in honor of the working class, that should signal the end of summer. For if the first Monday of September salutes the virtues of dedicated labor, hard work, and the sweat of one’s brow, it should really follow the vigors of winter, and not the balmy days of August, when in factories and offices around the land, short days, casual dress, and Fridays off seem more the norm than the exception.

Be that as it may, however, the truth is that Americans in general more and more avoid rigorous hard work, long hours at the office, and the tough discipline that once was the norm in this country. Try calling businesses before 9.30am, and you’re more likely than not to get a voice mail message that signals a late arrival at the desk. Ride on the Long Island Railroad on any workday, and you will see how many commuters sleep their way into or out of the city because they stay up late every night watching the late show or David Letterman’s antics. People have so much leisure time available to them that they throng to the malls and mega stores to kill a few hours roaming the aisles, before going home to pass some more time watching a game, or soap, or court trial on the tube. And I’m not only talking about retirees or the unemployed. High School teens are set free in the early afternoon to spend the rest of the day roaming around and finding ways to keep themselves busy, college students are in class a few hours a week, and then sit around with huge chunks of time on their hands. Housewives and mothers, with all the labor saving devices to be had, seek out ways to fill their days with meaningful activity, but soon get their fill of volunteerism, and consequently find themselves bored and unchallenged.

Now social scientists have found that as people work less and less, and have more and more leisure time on their hands, they are less and less likely to find their lives satisfying and fulfilling. When they are given chunks of time on a regular basis, and are free to fill them with pattering around, doing essentially mindless “fun” activities, they tend to feel weak, dull and dissatisfied. Most people, when carefully surveyed, report that after they have watched television for hours, they feel depleted and depressed. Not everyone finds 2 months on the beach or at the pool an exhilarating experience—for some it is a time of deep ennui or boredom that, more than anything, lowers their sense of self-worth and purposeful activity. No wonder the Sages of the Talmud advise husbands of substantial means against hiring too many domestic servants, so as to prevent their wives from figuratively losing their minds, because they would have nothing to do with themselves all day long. How well they knew that even, or especially, the rich, cannot afford the high cost of idle hands, and idle minds.

Why should this be at all? The answer, clearly, is that we have here a paradox of human nature: people have a need to confront a challenge, use their skills creatively, and develop their potential in ever more ingenious ways. We get our most satisfying and lasting pleasures not from doing “nothing,” engaging in repeated “shop till you drop” excursions, or endlessly lying in the sun, but rather from engaging in creative, disciplined, and productive activity. When we acquire and put to sustained use particular disciplines and skills that we possess, such as those we invoke in activities involving exercise, sports, music, creative arts, computers, intellectual challenges and discoveries, solving challenging problems that reflect our life experiences, we come away from them feeling uplifted, positively charged. As one of the early Zionist intellectuals, A.D. Gordon, a profoundly religious man, who emigrated to Palestine and found work as a laborer in an orange grove, put it, “After a few weeks in the orchards, I feel like a child newborn. The labor tires the body, but it gives so much to the soul!” Or as he wrote in his later years, “the return to nature through labor will enable man to rediscover religion, and to regain a sense of cosmic unity and holiness.” Such labor of the body and of the mind, such self-discipline directed in ever more creative channels, rather than repetitive self-indulgence and passive entertainment, are the true keys to human happiness and personal fulfillment.

How America has suffered from this paradox, is today abundantly clear. I call it the “No Sweat Generation.” Look, for instance, at the terrible effects of the welfare society as it has come to be: how clearly we now recognize, in hindsight, what the architects of the Great Society of the 1960's and 70's and 80's never understood: that people who subsist on handouts, without being made to work for their daily subsistence, are people who have no self esteem, who resent their status, who despise the system that relegates them to such abject dependency, and who as a result resort to violence and all the varieties of perverted behavior. Or as the contemporary buzzword puts it, the answer is not welfare, but workfare. And the same is true of the enormous entitlements that so many Americans have come to expect from their government, such as Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. They have done nothing so much as create a society of low achievers, who depend on handouts, and for whom labor and hard work are dirty words. And what of our public schools and colleges? Study after study show that American students are unable to compete with their peers abroad: in 1 study at the University of Michigan in 1992, 90% of 5th graders in Japan outscored their American peers; at the 11th grade level, 92% of the Japanese did better than the American kids. Our high schools graduate young men and women who cannot read plain English; our colleges send forth into the workplace large numbers who cannot write or calculate or think analytically. How will such people become productive members of a society that increasingly depends on specialized skills, on disciplined effort. As we are reminded more and more, it is not just blue collar workers whose work is being sent to the cheap labor farms of Asia, but many highly specialized, high tech work as well. And the solution is not to raise our kids' self-esteem by telling them over and over how wonderful they are, irrespective of the quality of their performance. I don't care what the assorted gurus of the so-called self-esteem movement might say. Self-esteem, a sense of one's own inner worth and specialness, does not grow in the soil of indiscriminate praise, which is often unearned and pointless. Self-esteem comes much more assuredly when each of us, be we kids or professionals, housewives or retirees, have an awareness that we have mastered the requirements of a sought-after goal, with devotion, discipline, hard work, and deferred gratification.

Now it is against such a generalized “no sweat” backdrop, that I would like to raise an issue that is much closer to home for most of us Jewish overachiever, including many who are here this morning. I refer most pointedly to the effort expended, or the lack thereof, in the realm of the religious life. As with anything else, our sense of spiritual self-esteem, of positive identification with religious expression, is never divorced from the effort we invest in that religious realm. If, when it comes to your religious life, for lack of a better term, or your relationship with God, or your identification with tradition, or Torah mitzvos, you invest no particular effort or self-discipline, then as with everything else, that spiritual side loses its compelling validity and essential significance. If year after year, summer after summer, shabbas after shabbas, day after day, there is no real effort to work at it, to upgrade it, to improve it, to acquire new skills so as to do it better, it becomes an exercise, not in futility, but in habit and boredom. It reverts to no sweat religion. And when I look around, and I see men and women who show no growth, religiously speaking, who come to synagogue and go through the same motions as before, who have settled into the comfortable patterns of religious repetitiveness, whose knowledge of Torah remains mired in the mud where it was ten or twenty or thirty years ago, because they cannot summon up the courage or the determination or the self-discipline to work on this essential aspect of themselves as human beings, then I think to myself: here is another no sweat Jew. Why should we come week after week to repeat the same formulas and words and music, with the same level of devotional intensity, or lack thereof, essentially turning the prayer experience into a primarily social and fashion and gastronomic event? Where is the excitement, the thrill of communing with one’s soul, of self-discovery, of in-depth dialogue with Hashem Yisbarach, where the infectious “bren” of religious fervor?

Now it is this point, I believe, that is driven home by a rather curious commandment of the Torah, as it is encountered in this parshah. When the army of Israel goes forth to fight against its enemies, a special kohen addresses them with the following words:

Hear O Israel: today you approach your enemies in battle. Your heart is not to be soft. Experience no fear or anxiety. Experience no trepidation before them. For the Lord your God goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you. Deut. 19:3-4

Now it is important to understand that these are not just words of moral encouragement; this is an explicit, concrete commandment of the Torah: a Jewish soldier is not allowed to experience fear of the enemy. Now it is the words of Maimonides that are particularly instructive on this score. Allow me to quote Hilchot Melakhim 7:15

A soldier should put his reliance upon God, Who is the hope of Israel, their savior in time of trouble. He should know that he is fighting for the oneness of God, risk his life and neither fear nor be affrighted. Nor should he think of his wife or children, but forgetting them and all else, concentrate on the war. He who permits his attention to be diverted during a battle, and becomes disturbed, transgresses a negative commandment...and is accountable for all the lives of Israel. If he does not conquer because he did not fight with all his heart and soul, it is as though he has shed the blood of all.

What an amazing statement! A soldier who in the heat of battle experiences any fear transgresses the Torah. He is forbidden to even think of his loved ones and the rest of the world he left behind. And if he allows himself to be distracted, and as result there is no Israelite victory, says Maimonides, he is held accountable for the lives of all Israel, as though he shed the blood of all.

Now in truth this is a commandment that would appear to defy explanation. How can the Torah

make such an extreme demand upon a Jew, that he not even experience fear in the face of battle, and even more difficult, given the extreme circumstances of such an infraction, how can the Torah be so devoid of compassion as to hold an individual soldier responsible for the defeat of the entire army, as if he himself shed the blood of all his fellow Jews? The answer, I would say, has got to be that indeed a Jew is capable of rising above his emotional and personal limitations, through total and complete existential commitment. And because he is capable of it, if he fails to invest himself totally in that effort, if he allows himself to indulge his emotions, pandering to his impulses, allows his ego or his fear of death or injury to overcome him, then he is fully culpable before God. There are no excuses, even at that incredible level of stress. Just the Torah demands in the Ten Commandments that the Jew not allow himself to experience the emotion of jealousy at the success and wealth of his fellow Jew, but must absolutely quash any such feeling, so here, it is to a Jew to discipline himself, his mind, and his heart, to the nth degree.

Such is the glorious standard by which a Jew is held accountable, before God and before man. And in subscribing to it, it is that which allows the Jew know and experience a true and sublime sense of self worth, self-esteem, and inner peace. But without the effort, without the transcendence of self, such a blessing will be diminished proportionately. No sweat? No. Rather no excuses. Not for America, not for teenagers, not for the welfare class. And certainly not for the Torah true Jew. As Maimonides goes on to conclude, regarding the one who overcomes his emotions and weaknesses through hard work and discipline, he is assured that no harm will befall him and no evil will overtake him. He will build for himself a lasting house in Israel, acquiring it for himself and his children forever, and will prove worthy of life in the world to come.

May we, from this Labor Day and on, during this season of Elul that is set aside for spiritual introspection and inner stocktaking, at the conclusion of a wonderful summer in the sun, come to deserve no less.