“It Is Not Up To You To Finish The Work”: On Striving For The Unattainable

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On Striving for the Unattainable

- What is the “work” that we must/should/may be engaged in?
- What about “work/life” balance?

Avot 2:15-16

> Rabbi Tarfon said: the day is short, and the work is plentiful, and the laborers are indolent, and the reward is great, and the master of the house is insistent.

> He used to say: It is not up to you to finish the work, but you are not free to neglect it. If you have studied much Torah, you will be given much reward. Your employer is reliable to pay you the fee for your labor. And know: payment for the righteous is for the age to come.

Samuel ben Isaac de Uçeda (Safed, 16th century), *Ben Shemuel* (first ed., Venice 1579)

He said, “and the laborers are indolent,” not because they were negligent of Torah and indolent idlers on street corners. Rather, even laborers who work diligently on Torah day and night are called “indolent” relative to what they ought to do. Later I found that Rabbeinu Yonah [Gerondi] interpreted “and the laborers are indolent” with reference to human indolence and blindness to “here today; gone [lit. ‘in the grave’] tomorrow.”
In his commentary on *Avot* 2:15, Rabbeinu Yonah (Spanish, ca. 1200-1263) adduces Moses as the consummate workaholic, paraphrasing the tradition in *Exodus Rabbah* 47:7 that Moses neither ate nor slept when he received the Torah. According to the midrash, Moses was fed by the “splendor of the Presence” or by the Torah herself. Concerning the lack of sleep:

For those 40 days that Moses abided on Mt. Sinai he did not sleep. A parable of a king who said to his servant, count out gold coins from now until tomorrow and everything that you count out will be yours. How can he sleep? Will he not lose very much at that time? Thus, Moses said, “If I sleep, how many pearls of Torah will I miss?”

How much more so for us! We should not give sleep to our eyes nor slumber to our eyelids (cf. Psalm 132:4; Prov 6:4).

On *Avodah* and *Melakhah*—two terms for “work”

Two excerpts from Abraham Bedersi (Provençal, 13th century), *Hotam tokhnit*

The meaning of *avodah* with respect to humans relates to difficulty and exertion, as it says, “they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years” (Gen 15:13) and “do not subject him to the treatment of a slave” (Lev 25:39).

*Melakhah* denotes an activity that is concrete and specific,¹ as it says, “you shall not do any work” (Exod 20:10); “you shall not do any work” (Lev 23:7). And the proof is, “On the seventh day God finished the work that He had been doing” (Gen 2:2).

¹ The word refers both to the process of production, executed with skill (workmanship) and craft, and to the finished product.

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"It is not up to you to finish the work" (Pirkei Avot 2:16)

**Malbim (1809-1879), Ayyelet ha-šaḥar §§542-543 (= Ha-karmel, p.197a)**

Any project in which people are engaged to make something necessary for a specific purpose is called melakhah. When it is particularly arduous and entails hard labor, it is called melekhet avodah. The compound refers mainly to the toil of agricultural work or the like, or melakhah that ordinarily would be accomplished by means of servants.

→ In Avot, *avodah* occurs twice, connoting religious activity in both cases:

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*Avot 1:2:* Shimon ha-tzaddiq ... used to say, "on three things the world stands: on the Torah, on the Temple service,² and on gratuitous kindness."

*Avot 5:9:* Exile occurs on account of idolators ...

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→ The term *melakhah* occurs four times in Avot, clearly connoting activity outside the sphere of religious observance in at least two cases:

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*Avot 1:10:* Shemaiah used to say: love work,³ hate [viz., shun] power, and steer clear of the authorities.

*Avot 2:2:* Rabban Gamliel, the son of Yehudah ha-nasi says, the study of Torah is fine when combined with worldly knowledge, for toiling in both keeps sin at bay. Torah that is not combined with worldly knowledge ends up being neglected and engenders sin....

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² Rambam (Córdoba->Egypt, 1138-1204): בשמירת מצות התורה הם הקרבנות, בין [avodah =] observance of the commandments, specifically the sacrifices.

³ Ovadiah Bertinoro (Italian, ca. 1445-1515): אפ"י, של בורם להקריב וייב ערומים במלאתך, אך בכלא ממקיאי, שים מלאתך, "Even one who has enough to live on is obligated to work, for idleness leads to boredom."

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The remaining two occurrences are in 2:15 and 2:16, respectively

- 2:15 • וַהַמְּלָאכָה מְרֻבָּה
- 2:16 • לֹא עֲלֵּךְ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמוֹר

Rambam on 2:15

This is a parable about the brevity of life, the copiousness of knowledge, and the negligence of people in seeking it despite the abundant reward for it, and despite the urgency of the Law and its commandments concerning the pursuit of learning.

Sefer musar, Joseph ben Judah ibn Aknin (Barcelona→Fes, ca.1150-1220; disciple of Rambam), ed. Wilhelm Bacher (Berlin, 1910), pp. 83-85

A person’s duration is short. The days are too few for the attainment of all the

 sciences and disciplines because they are immeasurably vast. Every science is as immense as the earth and as broad as the sea (cf. Job 11:9). If the pious Hippocrates said this about the work of medicine, how much more so Torah, the Act of Creation, and the Act of the Chariot!

[Ibn Aknin explains that the laborers seem lazy because they encounter the sciences in a complete state, replete with commentaries on every matter based on the inquiries and research of the ancients. We should

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4 The Arabic word ʿilm, accurately rendered in Hebrew as ḥokhmot, denotes learning in all “sciences” or “disciplines.”

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follow the example of the industrious ant in Prov 6:6ff., regarding the knowledge graciously transmitted to us by the ancients as a gift to us. They were saying, in effect, it is impossible that there will not be in succeeding generations seekers of wisdom and lovers of reason and knowledge (דורשי חכמה ואוהבי שכל ומדע). The wisdom they left behind is their divinely inspired legacy to us. Great reward is attainable by those who emulate them, engaging ethically in the study of the sciences (matesh מתחם, ב𝚕ומוד החכמות וומלך בדרכי היהוד), doing God’s work and seeking divine wisdom.

If the work is abundant as I have commanded you, saying to you that your days will be fleeting, do not say, I will press myself exceedingly in study like corvée workers with an assigned task to complete. If you do, in the end you will diminish your retention, become careless, and cease working. Those who exceed the limit of their capacity will end up detracting from it, exhausting their bodies, ruining their acuity, dowsing their flame, their souls becoming too careless to inquire, weakening and giving up.

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“But you are not free to neglect it”—While I have commanded you not to exhaust your soul or reduce your physical strength, it should not occur to you to neglect learning and spend most of your life eating and drinking with your spouse. This command disabuses you of the idea that you are “free” from obligatory study and action. Rather, follow the middle course between the two extremes, the excessive and the deficient: do not add and do not diminish. Devote most of your life to intellectual endeavor and relatively little to bodily needs of body and refreshment.

Ibn Aknin continues by arguing that the highest level of piety may be attained only by adhering to the mean:

| No one can attain this level, viz., the way of piety until attaining the prior level, namely the way of the mean | אין אדם יכול ליגע לזו המעלה ר"ל דרך החסידה עד שמיגע אל המעלה שלהלוכו שלפניה שילחם הדכר האמצעיות.

What is the underlying problem?

Matityahu ha-yitzhari (Spanish, 14th-15th cens.)

“...In other words, even though the sciences are intertwined with each other until arriving at supernal knowledge, may God be praised and blessed, it is not demanded of you that you arrive at their fulfillment. Do not think that what you have attained is vain and false. Not so! Rather, every inquiry is for your self-improvement, along with your good deeds. That is meaningful in itself, and you will receive a reward according to God’s reckoning.... In the Ethics of the Philosophers I saw, “the sage, said, ‘I do not seek wisdom in the hope that I will reach the end and attain its goal. Rather, I seek that of which I must not be ignorant; there is nothing more fitting for a maskil than that.”

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“It is not up to you to finish the work” (*Pirkei Avot* 2:16)

Isaac Abarbanel (Portuguese, 1437-1508), *Nahalat avot*

[Abarbanel offers two different ways of readings of the *mishnah*; this is the introduction to the first one:]

[Rabbi Tarfon’s] sayings were brought here by the editor of the *Mishnah* in order to decide between the respective opinions of Rabbi [Yohanan b. Zakka] and his son Rabban Gamliel. Rabbi’s opinion was all Jews require only exertion in Torah and mitzvot without any connection to the science of philosophical ethics. Rabban Gamliel’s opinion was that both paths were good: the study of Torah along with worldly knowledge….  

[The various statements by other sages on one side or the other lead to Rabbi Tarfon’s concluding sayings:]

After mentioning the supporting opinions, the editor brought the opinion of Rabbi Tarfon, viz., although “Torah with worldly knowledge is fine,” people’s days are short and few: they do not have the time to learn the entire Torah, especially if they spend their time on other disciplines and studies. In particular, the work of Torah is vast, more expansive than the sea, and the science of ethics is similarly huge. Given human indolence, there is no doubt that one cannot learn it all. [R. Tarfon] continued that for the study of Torah there is great reward, which is not so for the study of other sciences. The conclusion is that people should spend their few days only on what is useful for them for attaining reward, namely Torah and nothing else. This is decisive support for the opinion of Rabbi.