

Memories of Rav Ahron Choosing a Career

■ Reading the article on Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik (“The Indomitable Spirit of Rav Ahron Soloveichik,” fall 2002) brought back good memories of my days as a high school student at Hebrew Theological College. At the time, Rav Ahron lived with his family in an apartment in a section of the dormitory. Often on Motzei Shabbos, while doing my laundry in the basement, I would read novels for school. With six dryers running simultaneously and no fan, it would get so hot that I would remove my shirt and *tzitzit* and remain in my T-shirt. One Motzei Shabbos I was wearing only a T-shirt, absorbed in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, when Rav Ahron and Rebbetzin Ella walked into the basement with their laundry. I turned all shades of red while trying to put my shirt back on. They put me at ease by discussing the book with me. After what seemed an eternity, my laundry was finished. I gathered my belongings, bid the *rosh yeshivah* and *rebbetzin shavuah tov* and went back to my room, relieved that Rav Ahron did not question me about the *sugyah* I was learning.

Years later, I have a more profound view of my chance encounter with the *rosh yeshivah*: Here was a *gadol hador*, yet on Motzei Shabbos he was not preparing *shiurim*; he was doing something, dare I say, as important—assisting his *rebbetzin* in household activities, ensuring that his young children would have clean clothes.

Abraham H. Shafran
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■ I read Rabbi Chaim Eisen’s article (“Is Yeshiva Education Accomplishing What It Should?” fall 2002) with great interest.

After studying *hilchos* Talmud Torah of the Ba’al HaTanya, I got the impression that one is obligated to choose a “light and clean” occupation in order to maximize one’s time for Torah study. This is true even if the individual feels that a more time-consuming career would be most suitable for him. However, my *rebbe*, Rav Hershel Schachter, *shlita*, told me that the first consideration in choosing a career must be what one feels cut out for even if that means having less time for Torah study.

While Rabbi Eisen’s article quotes additional sources buttressing Rabbi Schachter’s position, I am still troubled. Too often career decisions are based on parental pressure and the promise of lucrative salaries. Even one claiming that his decision is based on his God-given proclivities cannot be sure which voice inside him is talking. In *avodat Hashem* we oftentimes make decisions contrary to what we feel is right because we know that the will of God is otherwise. How can we be sure that when making a decision concerning a career choice, especially one that is extremely time consuming, it is not the *yetzer hara* talking?

Rabbi Eisen’s reply would be greatly appreciated.

Yakov Haber
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Rabbi Eisen responds

First, I thank Rabbi Haber for focusing on an especially pressing issue addressed in my essay. Counseling students in choosing a career for their *avodah*—in the sense of not only vocation but service of God—is undoubtedly critical in enabling them to actualize throughout their lives the Mishnah’s mandate that “*all* your deeds should be for the sake of heaven” (*Avot* 2:12). Rabbi Haber’s concern and dedication to provide his students with appropriate guidance in this domain eloquently testify to his role as not only their *melamed* but their *mechanech* as well.

Relating specifically to Rabbi Haber’s inquiry, I believe many Talmudic, Midrashic and rabbinical sources amply support my contentions. Concentrating in particular on the acceptability of so-called secular vocations, I reiterate the premise of the Mechilta: Engaging in “*melachah* [work] on the six [week] days” is as much a Divine command—and a religious imperative—as is “the positive mitzvah of Shabbat” (Mechilta DeRabbi Shimon Bar Yochai on Shemot 20:8). None of the various attendant statements extolling “how great is *melachah*” (ibid.) presume ecclesiastical contexts. Moreover, the Midrash portrays *melachah* in the same sense as the essence of God’s legacy to us: “Until now, I was engaging in *melachah*; from now on, you will engage in it...I built all the city [the world] and all that is in it...Thus, you shall build and do the *melachah* of the

world... *The Lord created man with His essence* (Bereshit 1:27), to provide for all the needs of the world and its institutions, as He did initially” (Midrash HaNe’elam, Bereshit 5a). Evidently, engaging in *melachah*, in the most mundane sense of providing materially “for all the needs of the world,” is a crucial element in our emulating God as He manifests Himself in this world, and thereby becoming Godly ourselves. Not incidentally, the Gemara lists “*derech erez*” (worldly occupation) together with “Torah, good deeds and prayer,” as the principal worthy endeavors that require perpetual “reinforcement” (*Berachot* 32b). In a similar sense, the Gemara concludes that “one who benefits from his own toil is greater than one who is God-fearing” (ibid. 8a). Likewise, the Midrash applies the appellation “holy assembly” specifically to those who divide their time among “Torah ... prayer ... [and] *melachah*” (Kohelet Rabbah 9:9), presupposing that these activities are all laudable and distinct—and holy.

In practical terms, from the Mishnah’s exhortation to “*love melachah*” (*Avot* 1:10)—not merely engage in it—Rabbi Ovadyah Bertinoro derives that “*even if one has with what to support oneself*, one is obligated to engage in *melachah*” (commentary, loc. cit.). Still more emphatically, the Maharal notes that the Mishnah’s promise that “study of Torah is good together with *derech erez*, for toil in *both* causes sin to be forgotten” (*Avot* 2:2) reckons toil in worldly endeavors—not only in Torah study—as critical: “It is fitting for a person to toil in these two aspects that exist in man, for a person has a body and a soul... *Even if one has abundant wealth and is not lacking*, if one does not engage in completing oneself [through *derech erez*, Torah study alone] does not cause sin to be forgotten” (*Derech HaChayim*, loc. cit.). Notwithstanding the religious significance of attaining financial autonomy and supporting one’s family articulated repeatedly in the Talmud and Midrash, these sources clearly negate

the attitude that one’s job is *only* a means to earning a livelihood.

Ultimately, I submit that belief in a purposeful Creator dictates our conviction that everyone enters this world with a unique mission, which each of us is ideally equipped to discharge. *Every* legitimate profession, which necessarily responds to some societal need and betters the quality of life, contributes vitally to the all-encompassing spiritual goal to refine and perfect the world. Granted, on the one hand, as Rabbi Haber notes, the Mishnah *recommends* teaching children “a trade that is clean and easy” (*Mishnah Kiddushin* 4:14). In the same context, the Gemara congratulates “one whose trade is a perfumer” and bemoans “one whose trade is a tanner” (*Kiddushin* 82b). Certainly, in the absence of additional considerations, it would be foolish to impose gratuitous difficulties on life. Yet, on the other hand, the Gemara also comments that “it is impossible for the world to be without perfumers *or* without tanners” (ibid.). An ideal society in which everyone strives to fulfill one’s Divine mission would still necessarily feature both. Thus, the Gemara’s congratulating perfumers and bemoaning tanners are *descriptive*—not *prescriptive*—declarations. The essential Torah *mandate*, stated elsewhere, is to teach one’s child “a trade” (Mechilta on Shemot 13:13), irrespective of which one. (Indeed, while Rabbi Nehorai objects to the requirement to teach a child any trade other than Torah [*Mishnah Kiddushin* 4:14], Rav Moshe Feinstein deduces that Rav Nehorai disents only concerning a childhood curriculum but not regarding the undisputed obligation to work in adulthood. See *Iggerot Moshe, Orach Chayim* 2:111.) In seeking our proper niche in this vein, we should mind the Talmud’s conclusion that, for “each and every one, the Holy One Blessed be He beautified one’s trade to him” (*Berachot* 43b). By predisposing each of us to a particular field of endeavor, God ensures that every requisite role in the world will be filled.

Furthermore, on a personal level, whatever career best harnesses all of one’s unique abilities, aptitudes and

talents necessarily should also maximize happiness and satisfaction. Solely by feeling thoroughly actualized can one fully achieve the exhilarating sense of complete fulfillment. Obviously, one of the greatest practical challenges in life is determining, for each of us, the employment that best satisfies these criteria. (Over the years, I have spent innumerable hours deliberating this question individually with countless students.) The principle, however, is straightforward. A student whose God-given faculties are best suited for a secular occupation will find only there both the wherewithal “to provide for all the needs of the world and its institutions” and maximum happiness and religious fulfillment. Guiding our charges on an appropriate professional course is among the most vital services that we, as spiritual mentors, can offer.

Finally, I reply in this light to Rabbi Haber’s cautionary observation that vocational decisions are often “based on parental pressure and the promise of lucrative salaries.” I can only agree completely. However, this concern impels me to affirm even more vehemently the responsibility of sincere educators to provide students with, or refer them to, fitting career counseling that truly reflects their God-given talents and capabilities. Our silence in this domain—or, worse, our proffering only unsuitable, stock advice that ignores individual inclinations and that, therefore, our students cannot tenably heed—merely drives them elsewhere, inducing them to submit to those ulterior considerations we should be steering them to avoid most. As in many areas, if we fail to lead effectively, we tacitly empower the gutter to hold sway in our stead.

The alternatives are clear and nowadays are especially striking. Several years ago a dedicated married student of mine structured his work schedule to enable him to spend half his day in Torah study. Yet, an internationally renowned *rosh yeshivah* informed him that he was not welcome in the study hall of the yeshivah; working invalidated him. I am aware of well-known

yeshivot in which students view any employment—even as yeshivah teachers—disdainfully. On the other hand, I recall the story of an acquaintance who, as a teenager in yeshivah, became an avid violin player. His *rebbe*, instead of automatically discouraging him, sought a professional evaluation of his student's talent and then sympathetically but decisively reported to him that he would probably not be able to succeed vocationally as a musician. Decades later, my acquaintance is still grateful to his *rebbe* for his dedication and concern in guiding him on his path. Today, having heeded the advice that so disappointed him as a youngster, he is a well-regarded, highly successful and dedicated endocrinologist. He still loves playing the violin as an avocation—and he still devotes his leisure time principally to his ongoing Talmudic studies.

In conclusion, I reiterate that we must encourage our students to pursue their individual callings by infusing every aspect of their worldly endeavors with a sense of dedication to Godliness and perfection of His world. This is the all-encompassing nature of true *avodah*—that “*all* your deeds should be for the sake of heaven.” Particularly, we must instruct our students to prepare for whatever careers can best harness their God-given abilities and aptitudes. Only thus can we enable them to attain maximum fulfillment, satisfaction and happiness, through advancing the ultimate goal: “to perfect the world through the reign of the Almighty” (Aleinu prayer).

Again, I thank Rabbi Haber for his constructive comments. I certainly appreciate the opportunity to discuss these issues with him on the pages of *Jewish Action*, and I look forward to continuing the dialogue between us in the future.

Chaim Eisen
Jerusalem, Israel

On Reb Shraga Feivel

Sidney Greenwald's review of *Reb Shraga Feivel* by Yonason Rosenblum (fall 2002) certainly cap-

sules the spirit of this great man. Torah Vodaath, however, was not founded by Reb Shraga Feivel but by a group of *ba'alei batim* in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. In my childhood, it was called the Ba'alei Batim's Yeshivah. The yeshivah floundered from its founding in 1918 until 1921 when Reb Shraga Feivel became its principal. His charismatic personality was central to the success of the yeshivah. In 1926, Reb Shraga Feivel was instrumental in the founding of the *mesifita*.

Reb Shraga Feivel was truly eclectic, as the reviewer mentioned, and included all segments of religious Jewry in his weltanschauung. He strived to expose his *talmidim* to all aspects of Jewish thinking and modes of *hanhagah* [conduct].

I was recently shocked to discover that an otherwise knowledgeable young yeshivah graduate did not know who Reb Yehudah Halevi was nor did he know of the existence of *The Kuzari*. Reb Shraga Feivel would never have countenanced such ignorance.

Joshua Frankel, MD
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While there is no question that Reb Shraga Feivel certainly earned the title, “Architect of Torah in America,” the actual founder of Torah Vodaath was Mr. Binyamin Wilhelm. In *Jewish Action* (summer 1998) the correct history of the founding of Torah Vodaath is recorded in the profile of Mr. Wilhelm.

I will also take this opportunity to applaud *Jewish Action* for living up to its policy of “providing a forum for diversity within the spectrum of Orthodox Judaism.” In the aforementioned issue where you profiled leaders who had no connection with Modern Orthodoxy, and in the issue under discussion where you highlight a group who likewise were not identified with the Orthodox Union, you demonstrate a desire to show that “that which unites us as Orthodox Jews is far greater than that which divides us.”

Abraham Dicker
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In 1918, the head of Torah Vodaath

was Rabbi Zev Gold, a leader of Mizrahi. The language of instruction was Hebrew. Why did Reb Shraga Feivel later change it to Yiddish, taking the school away from its Zionist leanings?

I acknowledge Reb Shraga Feivel's role as the architect of Torah in America. However, I don't understand his antagonism towards Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan. Yeshiva College and its seminary were also building Torah in America. There is not only one path to Torah. Yet, Reb Shraga Feivel felt that it was a great tragedy if any of his students went to Yeshiva College.

My last point regards the sin of omission. Why didn't the author of the book, Yonason Rosenblum, discuss Reb Shraga Feivel's plan to create the American Hebrew Theological University? In *The World of the Yeshiva*, William Helmreich states that the proposed college was to be formed by the merger of Torah Vodaath and Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin (p. 155). Its board of trustees included Reb Shraga Feivel, Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner and other prominent scholars and educators. According to the charter application, the school was to offer a basic liberal arts program, comparable to that of other junior colleges. Torah Vodaath and Chaim Berlin were granted a provisional charter on July 18, 1946. Almost one year later, on June 20, 1947, the application was withdrawn and the American Hebrew Theological University died without ever having gotten off the ground.

Is Rosenblum treading on the slippery slope of revisionist history?

Matthew Zizmor
Boston, Massachusetts

Sidney Greenwald responds

My article should have clarified that while Torah Vodaath's elementary school was founded by Binyamin Wilhelm in 1918, its high school, as Dr. Frankel points out, was founded by Reb Shraga Feivel in 1926.

As to why Reb Shraga Feivel

changed the language of instruction, Yiddish was simply the language most familiar to the students.

As one of Reb Shraga Feivel's close *talmidim* who was constantly in his presence, I can attest that he was certainly not against Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan, whose *roshei yeshivah* were all God-fearing. I never heard Reb Shraga Feivel use harsh language against any *mosad haTorah*; his only objection to RIETS was that it allowed for the study of Torah and secular studies under one roof.

In regard to the proposed college, Professor Shnayer Leiman, whose father Rabbi Harold Leiman did most of the legwork to obtain the charter, states that the purpose of the proposed school was “to retain the graduates of Torah Vodaath and Chaim Berlin and end the brain drain to the Jewish Theological Seminary, Yeshiva University and the CUNY colleges.” Reb Shraga Feivel sought the approval of Rabbi Aharon Kotler, but Reb Aharon said no. Thus, the college never came into being.

Sidney Greenwald, whose life embodied a total dedication to Klal Yisrael as exemplified by his *rebbe*, Reb Shraga Feivel, passed away on the 30th of Shevat. Ed. JA