

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion: *Va-Era*

ARE STUDY AND SERVICE IN CONFLICT?

כִּי הַעֲשֶׂק יְהוֹלֵל חָכָם וַיֵּאבֵד אֶת־לֵב מִתְּנָה:

*Oppression (oshek) may distract the wise person and destroy the mind of the cautious (matanah).
Ki ha-oshek yehollel hakham, vi-abed lev matanah. (Ecclesiastes 7:7)*

First commentary –

[We learn from the first part of the verse that] when a wise person spreads himself thin by becoming involved (*osek*) in a great number of things, this distracts him from wisdom.

(AVODAH commentary on the first commentary – There are no vowels in the original text, so the rabbis are reading the verse as if it said *esek* (busyness/involvement) rather than *oshek* (oppression). In stead of *ha-oshek yehollel hakham*, which means “oppression distracts the wise,” they read *ha-osek yehollel hakham*, which means “busyness distracts the wise.”

Bonus fact: Some Bible scholars suggest that the correct reading is neither *oshek* nor *esek*, but *osher* (riches). They suggest the verse teaches that *wealth* distracts the wise.)

[We learn from the second part of the verse that] this means that the wise person is distracted from Torah, which is called *matanah b'libo shel adam* (a gift in a person's heart).

(AVODAH commentary on the first commentary – What is destroyed by this distraction? Not caution, which is the literal meaning of the word *matanah* in this verse, but Torah-wisdom, which is a gift in our hearts)

Second commentary –

Busyness/involvements (esek) distract the wise.

A sage who involves herself in the needs of the community forgets her learning. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: Rabbi Yehudah ben Padai taught me 60 laws concerning the marking of a grave, and I forgot them all because I was attending to the needs of the community. [*Midrash Tanhuma, Va-era* #5]

QUESTION: This source suggests that there are conflicts between seeking wisdom from the Torah and engaging in public service. What are these conflicts? How can we resolve them? Consider the source below as you think about these issues:

“One who is engaged in tending to the needs of the community is just like one who is engaged in Torah study.” This means: it is appropriate to arise from this activity for prayer, for it is a joy to be engaged in meeting the community's needs. Others say: This means that one need not interrupt [this type of activity] in order to pray. [*Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 93:4]