

## The Partnership of Zebulun and Issachar

### Introduction

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayechi*, the patriarch Jacob is on his deathbed and proceeds to bless his children one by one and say a few words about each one of them. Of his sons Zebulun and Issachar, he says:

Zebulun shall dwell by the seashore. He shall be a haven for ships and his flank shall rest on Sidon. [Genesis 49:13]

Issachar is a strong-boned ass, crouching among the sheepfolds. When he saw how good was tranquility and how pleasant was the country, he bent his shoulder to the burden, and became a toiling serf. [Genesis 49:14-15]

Tradition tells us that the tribes of Zebulun and Issachar complemented each other: Zebulun would make money in trade and Issachar would study Torah. Zebulun would support Issachar to allow it to spend their time learning Torah. On the map, the two tribes were side by side and shared a border.

This tradition continued through the centuries, and to this day rich observant Jews want their daughters to marry scholars, will happily support them so they can study Torah all the time and not worry about earning a living, and look forward to having lots of scholarly grandsons. The Mishnaic Sage Shimon is referred to in unusual fashion: “Shimon brother of Azariah” because his brother provided for him while he studied Torah. [Zevachim 1:2, Bartenura] The Rambam had a similar partnership with his brother, up until his brother died at sea. Sometimes these agreements are formalized in documents that bear the title: “Agreement of Issachar and Zebulun”.

### How did the Sages derive this arrangement from the Torah?

The Torah does not mention this tradition explicitly. So how was it derived?  
The Midrash says:

-Zebulun brings his wares in ships, as the Torah says, “And he shall be a haven for ships”... whereas it says “Issachar is a strong-boned ass... [who] bent his shoulders to the burden”, meaning that as an ass bears burdens, so Issachar bears the heavy load of the Torah. [Genesis Rabbah 99:10]

-[When the Torah calls] Issachar “crouching among the sheepfolds”, it alludes to the two rows of disciples who sat before them in the Sanhedrin. The phrase “He became a toiling serf” alludes to the 200 heads of the Sanhedrin who were of the tribe of Issachar. As it says in Chronicles [when describing who King David was taking advice from]:

And the children of Issachar were men who knew how to interpret the signs of the times, to determine how Israel should act. Their chiefs were 200, and all their kinsmen followed them. [1 Chron. 12:33]  
[Genesis Rabbah 98:12]

This arrangement is confirmed indirectly by Moses in the Torah, when he blessed the tribes:

Rejoice, O Zebulun, on your journeys; and Issachar, in your tents. [Deuteronomy 33:18]

Indeed, Zebulun traveled for trade (whence “rejoice on your journeys”) and Issachar stayed at home to study (whence “rejoice in your tents”). Ibn Ezra notes that the earlier quote (Issachar “saw how good was tranquility”) indicates that their men did not want to leave their homes. Kli Yakar adds:

Unlike the pursuit of material wealth, the acquisition of Torah knowledge involves toil of the soul but quiescence of the body. This is why the Torah was given on Shabbat.

Note that in these quotes Zebulun is mentioned before Issachar, even though Issachar is the older of the two. Why? The Midrash explains:

It is because Zebulun engaged in commerce, and Issachar engaged in Torah. Zebulun came to feed Issachar. Therefore, Zebulun was given precedence, as the verse [in Proverbs] says:

It is a tree of life for those who uphold it. [Proverbs 3:18]

Issachar would gather merchandise, and Zebulun would transport it on ships, sell it, and bring Issachar all his needs. [Genesis Rabbah 99:9]

Food comes before study and makes study possible. Zebulun made Issachar’s work possible and so is mentioned first. That’s why the Talmud considers them full partners, deserving equal rewards in the World to Come:

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Anyone who casts merchandise into the purse of Torah scholars is rewarded and sits in the Heavenly Academy, as it is stated [in Ecclesiastes]:

For in the shadow of wisdom is the shadow of money. [Ecclesiastes 7:12]  
[Pesachim 53b]

Rabbenu Baḥya (13<sup>th</sup>-century Spain) comments at length:

[When the Torah says that Issachar] “saw how good was tranquility”, it means that he realized that... Torah study can flourish only when the body is as physically inactive as possible, because the mental strain of studying drains the body of its strength. Torah study engages energies opposite of those required to pursue vocations involving physical activity. The latter engage the body fully while leaving mental faculties relatively uninvolved. The former makes great demands on mental faculties while leaving the body relatively at rest. It is quite impossible for true Torah study to be successfully carried on by someone whose body has been worn out by physical labor, or even mental anguish and the like.

He says it's a zero-sum game: The more time you spend in physical labor, the less successful you will be in studying.

## **Does everybody agree with this arrangement?**

No. Maimonides, in particular, strongly rejected even the notion that Jews must financially help other Jews study Torah:

All this is wrong. There is not a single word, either in the Torah or in the sayings of the Sages, to lend credence to it... As we look into the sayings of the Talmudic sages, we do not find that they ask people for money, nor did they collect money for the honorable and cherished academies.

He was commenting on what Hillel said in Pirkei Avot:

Anyone who derives worldly benefit from the words of the Torah removes his life from the world. [Avot 4:5]

For him, depending on the charity of others to study Torah is a form of benefitting from Torah, and so is prohibited. He lost that battle.

## **Should Torah scholars be exempt from doing anything else?**

Rashi said that when the Torah says: “When Issachar saw how pleasant was the country”, it means that Issachar's portion of land was blessed and produced much fruit, so that they did not need to engage in business too much. (But note that they still had to do *some* work for a living.)

The Talmud says that Ben Azzai did not get married because he wanted to study Torah all the time. He said:

What shall I do, as my soul yearns for Torah? It is possible for the world to be maintained by others. [Yevamot 63b]

His colleagues did not approve, because the Torah enjoins men to “be fruitful and multiply”. However, the Rambam approved:

When a person's soul desires [to study] Torah at all times and is obsessed with its [study] as was ben Azzai, and clings to it throughout his life, without marrying, he is not considered to have transgressed. [Mishneh Torah, Marriage 15:3]

But the Mishnah says that everyone must do some work for a living:

All Torah study which is not combined with some work [for a living] must at the end fail and will cause sin. [Avot 2:2]

Maimonides felt very strongly that one should earn a living by practicing a trade, rather than studying Torah all the time and be dependent on the community:

Anyone... who makes up his mind to study Torah and not work, but live on charity, profanes the name of God, disgraces the Torah, obscures the light of religion, causes harm to himself, and deprives himself of life in the World to Come; for it is forbidden to derive temporal advantage from the words of the Torah.

The sages said: “Whoever makes selfish use of the teachings of the Torah takes his own life.”

They further told us: “Do not make of them a crown with which to magnify yourself or a spade with which to dig.”

They urged us strongly, moreover, to: “Love work, and hate arrogance.” “All Torah study which is not combined with some work [for a living] must at the end fail and will cause sin.” [Pirkei Avot 2:2].

The end of such a person will be that he will rob his fellow man.

Anyone who maintains himself by the work of his hands possesses a great virtue, a virtue of the early saints, whereby he will attain all the glory and happiness of both this and the future world, as it is written [by the psalmist]:

When you eat the fruit of the labor of your hands, you shall be happy and it shall be well with you. [Psalms 128:2]

“You shall be happy” means “in this world”, “and it shall be well with you” means “in the future world”, which will be altogether good. [Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ha-mada (Book of Knowledge) 10-11]

He adds:

It is better to earn a drachma as a weaver, or a tailor, or a carpenter than to [accept a paid position as a rabbi]. [Letter to Yosef ibn Sham'un, 1191]

All the rabbis of old had ordinary professions to support themselves. Here are some examples:

**In Talmudic days:**

Hillel: woodchopper, well-digger

Shammai: builder, contractor

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai: businessman  
Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiah: blacksmith  
Rabbis Meir and Chananel: scribes  
Rabbi Chanina: Bees' honey dealer  
Rabbis Chiyya the Elder, Shim'on ben Rabbi and Shim'on ben Gamliel: silk traders [Gen. R. 77:2]  
Rabbi Yoḥanan HaSandlar: shoemaker  
Rabbi Yehudah the Baker: guess what  
Rabbi Yosi ben Chalafta: tanner  
Rabbi Yehudah ben Isaiah: perfume-maker  
Rabbi Yehoshua: grit-Dealer  
Rabbi Shim'on P'kuli: cotton dealer  
Rabbi Shmuel ben Shilas: schoolteacher  
Rabbis Safra and Dimi of Nehardea: merchants  
Rabbi Abba ben Zavina: tailor  
Rabbis Yosef ben Chiya and Yannai: vintners  
Rabbi Huna: farmer, rancher  
Rabbis Chisda and Papa: beer brewers  
Abba Chilkiyah: field laborer  
Abba Shaul: gravedigger  
Abba Hoshiya: launderer  
Rabbi Chiyya the Elder: olive stomper  
Karna: wine smeller (determined how long wine could last before going bad)  
Rabbi Chiya ben Yosef: salt dealer  
Rabbis Eleazar ben Rabbi Zadoq and Shaul ben Botnit: storekeepers in Jerusalem  
Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah: oil and wine dealer  
Abba Bar Abba: silk merchant  
Mar Shmuel: physician  
Many were in the textile industry  
Some had inherited wealth

#### **In post-Talmudic days:**

Rashi: vintner  
Rambam and Ramban: physicians  
Rabbi Hayyim Douek (Chief Rabbi of Egypt and my rabbi when I was growing up): businessman with non-Jewish partners

## **Should anybody be exempted from studying Torah?**

In spite of Zebulun-Issachar arrangements, the Sources, in numerous strong quotes, tell us that everybody must make time to study Torah, and that doing so is more important than all other commandments. For example, the Mishnah says:

The following are the things for which a man enjoys the fruits in this world while the principal remains for him in the World to Come: Honoring father and mother; performing righteous deeds; and making peace between people. And the study of the Torah is equal to them all put together. [*V'Talmud Torah k'neged kullam*] [Peah 1:1]

The Mishnah also says:

Rabbi Meir said: Whoever occupies himself with the Torah for its own sake... is worth the whole world. He is called beloved friend, one who loves God and humankind, and gladdens them. [Avot 6:1]

The Talmud tells us how sad God is when people don't study Torah:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, cries every day for those who are able to engage in Torah study, but do not do it. [Hagigah 5b]

And even:

During the first three hours of the day, the Holy One, Blessed be He, sits and studies Torah. [Avodah Zara 3b]

So, are rich scholar-supporters exempt from studying Torah? Or maybe not as intensely as others? What is the extent of their obligation to study?

Shammai taught that everyone should set aside a fixed time to study Torah.

[Avot 1:15] The Code of Jewish Law adds:

If a person lacks the knowledge to study Torah or it is impossible for him to do so because he is burdened with too many concerns, then he should support others who do study Torah, and it will be considered as though he himself had studied... Even so, every person should do his utmost to study Torah, even just a little, every day and every night... If you must attend to a very important matter, you should first study at least one verse or one law, and then take care of your affairs. [Kitzur Shulhan Arukh 27]

There is no "official" hard minimum.

## **Haredim in Israel**

At the time of the creation of Israel, Ben Gurion assured the ultra-Orthodox that Torah students would not have to serve in the military. He had two reasons:

- (1) Torah scholars were nearly wiped out in the Holocaust and their ranks had to be replenished, and
- (2) There were only 400 Torah scholars in Israel at the time, so the cost and the loss of manpower were acceptable.

However, neither reason applies today. The Haredim are up to about 1.3 million in 2023, or 13.5% of the population, projected to rise to 16% by 2030. Most spend all their time studying, have no profession, depend on

state subsidies, and do not share in defending the country. This causes tension with the less-Orthodox who subsidize them. Here is a relevant joke:

A scantily-clad young woman goes on a bus in Jerusalem and makes it a point to sit next to an ultra-Orthodox man. Without looking at her, he hands her an apple. She asks: "What is the apple for?" He says: "It's only after Eve ate the apple that she realized she was naked."

She goes home and thinks about it. The next day she dresses very conservatively, goes on the same bus, and sits next to the same ultra-Orthodox man. This time *she* hands *him* an apple. He asks: "What is the apple for?" She says: "It's only after Adam ate the apple that he realized he had to work for a living!"

## Conclusion

It is difficult to object to private arrangements within a community to support scholars. Whether the state should do so, when many less observant Jews are unwilling to pay for it, is still an open question. It is also highly desirable for the scholars to learn a trade and do *some* work to support themselves partially, in order to connect themselves to the real world.

Shabbat shalom.