



Published on www.bilvavi.net

[Home](#) > Ellul - 018 The American Exile: Obsessed With Work

Ellul - 018 The American Exile: Obsessed With Work

[This is a 10-minute clip adapted about 20 min. onward till the end of the derasha
אלול 018 לדוד ה' אורי]

The Depth of the 'American Exile'

We must know that there is such a thing as an “American exile”, and what it is.

Rav Shamshon Refoel Hirsh zt”l succeeded in what he did in America. Someone remarked to Reb Chaim Soloveitchik zt”l, “Why don’t we also do what he did?” Reb Chaim responded, “The problems he dealt with are a different problem than ours; the illnesses he had to treat were of a different kind of illness than what we face. What heals one kind of illness doesn’t necessarily heal another kind of illness.”

...Rav Shteinman shlit”a was here in America a few years ago. Someone remarked to him, “Ah! Look how much Torah is in America.” It is true – there is a lot of Torah here. Rav Shteinman said, “Yes, but equal to the amount of Torah that is here, is an equal amount of *gashmiyus* (materialism).”

This is because there is a rule, "זה לעומת זה עשה אלוקים" - that for every amount of good there is, there is always an equal amount of evil to counter it. But here [in America] the problem is not simply that there are equally warring forces of good and bad against each other. Here, the good and bad are mixed *with* each other.

It’s not simply “the *kelipah* (peel) that comes before the *pri* (fruit)^[1] – it’s a *kelipah* that’s already in the *pri*. You can remove a peel before you eat a fruit and then eat the fruit, but if you see the peel of a fruit inside a fruit, it is dangerous to eat it like this.

First we need to realize what the situation is here, and then we can see what to do about it. The truth is that not every illness can be healed; there is not always a remedy. But if we think that the illness can become our way of life, that is a far larger issue, which affects our very “*hilchos de’os*” (way of thinking).

Working To Make A Living: Then and Now

We will try to explain what we mean. Let us give a simple example. In Europe, there were many people who worked from day until night in order to have livelihood, so that they could feed themselves and their families. There were many jobs where Jews couldn’t work in, due to all the decrees made on Jews back then. It was very difficult for Jews then to make a livelihood. Their houses

also did not have that much space; if you visit Europe you can still see the kind of modest homes they lived in.

But now there is “a new generation, which does not know Yosef”; a generation which does not know of the previous generation, which has developed an entirely different attitude towards life than how the previous generations lived. The new generation thinks that it is a very important part of life to make money - way more than is actually needed in order to have sufficient *parnassah*.

If a pauper was previously used to more comfortable kind of lifestyle, the *halacha* is that we must make sure he has his comforts met. If he is used to having a horse ride in front of him, we must give him enough money so that he can have his horse. However, just because we must make sure he has comforts doesn't mean he is living normally. These luxuries have become his needs, but the fact that he has come to need luxuries is something not normal, and it is not the ideal way to live.

Adam was cursed with, “*With the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread.*” The idea of having to go work was always viewed as a *kelipah* that was found only the outside, like the shell of a nut, which is not on the inside of the nut. But slowly with time, this *kelipah* began to penetrate even more and more into our inside, and now it is in found in the center.

The fact that we people have to go to work is really a curse placed on mankind. Of course, people will say, “We are living after the sin of Adam, so we have to go to work. We are obligated to make *hishtadlus* (effort) to make *parnassah* (livelihood).” This is certainly true, and indeed, there were only rare individuals who have tremendous *emunah* and *bitachon* are exempt from having to go to work. Most people in *Klal Yisrael* had to make effort in order to have a *parnassah*, as the Torah commands.

However, there was a big difference between today and previous times. In previous generations, people were always aware that having to go to work is a curse. They always viewed work as an outside thing. They knew that work is a *kelipah* and that it must remain outside in the world and not brought into our inner circles. But nowadays, a whole new depth to the curse is going on: people want to go to work, and they don't realize it's a curse.

This is the depth of what is called the “American exile”: people here don't realize that work is really a curse placed on mankind. Work here is not viewed as an outside thing we need to take care of, but rather as something that's part of our inner being - this is a whole new kind of curse that was never here until now! This is a *kelipah* “in” the *pri*, not a *kelipah* “outside” of the *pri*.

The Mishnah teaches us that “Torah is good with *derech erez* (work) because it helps one forget sin.” The Mishnah says openly that going to work is only good if it helps you forget about sin.

An Exile Upon Our “Hilchos De'os”

Rav Yitzchok Hutner zt”l wrote a series of sefarim called *Pachad Yitzchok*, which are essays on that deal with matters of deep *machshavah* (Jewish thought). In the introduction to *sefer Pachad Yitzchok*, he writes that all *machshavah* (Jewish thought) must lead to acting upon it, or else it is not called *machshavah*. Some people are only interested in intellectual changes, not in actual changes. But change means that one must change how he acts, not just how he thinks and views matters. (If someone doesn't act upon his thinking, on a deep note, he's not really thinking).

The American exile is not an exile upon how we *act* - it is rather an exile on our “*hilchos de'os*” (ways of sacred thinking).

The Influences That Have Penetrated Into Our Society

Chazal say, "A dead person cannot feel." When a person doesn't understand what the problem is, it shows that his feelings toward spirituality have become deadened, similar to how a dead person cannot feel anything.

This week I met someone here and as I was conversing with him, I asked him, "How many hours do you work each day?" He told me, "I work 10 hours a day." I asked him, "How did you come to such a situation that you are working for so many hours a day?" He told me, "That's what my Rabbi advised." I asked him, "Where does this rabbi come from - is he from Eretz Yisrael, is he from Europe, or is he from America? Where is he from?" He said to me, "He is a rabbi from here (America)".

I told him, "According to the *halacha* stated in the Rambam, this rabbi cannot answer your queries. The Rambam says that one is influenced by his country." There might be rabbis here who come from other countries and they are here to help influence the community, but to say that they are not affected here by the surroundings is improbable!

When the Satmar Rabbe came to Eretz Yisrael, the Chazon Ish asked him how he was able to live in America, for the Rambam says that one is affected by one's influences. The Satmar Rebbe said to him, "The *beis midrash* can be its own country." This could apply 50 years ago, but in today's times, the *beis midrash* is not so sheltered from the world to be considered its own country. That being the case, the outside influences enter the inside. And even more so, a person found on the inside today can really be found on the outside.[\[2\]](#)

The 'Minhag Shtus' of America

There was once a town where there was a *minhag* that everyone had to bow their head when they passed by a certain place. One day a new Rav came one day and he asked the people, "Where does this *minhag* come from?" They said to him, "It's an old, old *minhag* here, so it is very holy." They could not explain the reason for the *minhag*, and all they could recall was that there was a *mekubal* who had once told them the reason.

Then an old man came and said, "I'll tell you how it started. It's simple. When the shul here was built, they didn't build it sensibly, and there was a beam hanging by the entrance which they couldn't take down. The only way to get into the entrance was to bow your head a little bit in order to get by the entrance." Ever since then, people have been copying this act, and that was how it became the town "*minhag*."

That is just a parable, but the lesson is clear. If everyone is 'bowing their heads', there must be a good reason for this, or else it has no validity to it. The fact that everyone else is doing something is not proof doesn't mean that it is correct. The fact that the entire country has the "*minhag*" to go to work does not mean it is correct; after all, there is such a thing as a "*minhag shtus*".[\[3\]](#)

Only someone who is outside of all of this can see the truth. Someone found on the inside of this problem cannot see the truth; he has grown up this way and he has gotten so used to it that this all he sees and breathes, and he has come to accept that this is the way that all people live. Only someone who comes from the outside of all of this can see and notice the problem here, and wonder to himself, "What is *going on* over here?"

I am already coming to America for the last 2 or 3 years (*Baruch Hashem* that I didn't come here only until recently). I spoke to someone here who told me that he gets up early each day so he can get to his job; he *davens* every day before he goes to work. Not only that - but he even *davens* on the train sometimes. There is even a *minyán* on the train. He comes home at night to help his kids with

homework and then again runs back to work. Then he runs to daven *Maariv*. It's not possible for him to concentrate whenever he *davens*.

Even the angel Gavriel can't concentrate on *davening* with such a kind of lifestyle! It is not possible for a person to function normally, if he works 10 hours a day.

People are getting up in the morning when they are overtired yet they force themselves to get up anyway, and sometimes they are half asleep by the time they get to *davening*. They mean well. I have met many people who mean very well and they have wonderful hearts, but they are making a terrible mistake. They have accustomed themselves to a kind of life in which work is the center. These people mean well, they have good hearts, but they are living life with a very mistaken mentality. It has become acceptable and "normal" to live this way.

Why am I speaking to you about this? Because you are before that stage of life right now, and you can decide that you can change this trend.

I met a man in his forties who is at the stage of marrying off his children, and he works for a living. He complained to me that he can't concentrate by *davening*, just like the man in the above story. I said to him, "What do you expect? If you are living a chaotic kind of life like this, of course you can't concentrate by *davening*."

In the past, people would wait an hour before *davening* in order to have *kavanah* by *davening*; this person expects to accomplish this in a few seconds, and after a day of working 10 hours.

I said to him, "Do you wish to raise your children like this too?" He shook his head sheepishly and didn't know what to answer me.

Two years later, I met this man's son. His son complained to me just as his father did: "I can't get myself to concentrate on my *davening*."

I said to him, "Look at your father, at the way he lives. Do you want to live your life like that, to continue this way of living? Or do you have a different option of how you will live?"

He burst out into tears - like a little child. He said to me, "I know that it is all false! I know!!" So I asked him, "If you *know*, then how you can live like this? Do you really think that a life like this can work??"

I met a person who admitted to me that his entire job is all falsity, and that he spends his entire day with partners who are immersed in falsity. I said to him, "*Nu*, so what are you thinking? You know it's all false. If you would think it's okay, that would be an altogether different problem. But you know it's all false; you admitted it to me. So what are you thinking??"

I am happy that people are realizing that they are not living truthfully. But what about after that, after you have come to that conclusion? It is not enough to know the truth - one has to *act* upon the truth that he realizes.

In the past, 2 or 3 generations ago, there were people who made mistakes, and *Baruch Hashem*, they

have rectified their mistakes, and today they are Torah scholars. But in today's times, where people are making the mistake of thinking that work is the center of life – must this mistake continue on for the generations, until Mashiach comes?? Is there anyone who thinks that this is a truthful way to live?

I asked someone, “Why do you need to make so much money that you have to go to work so much?” He told me, “It's not so much money, for how much I'm working.” I asked him, “Where's all the money going that you're making? What's the issue?” He said to me, “I have to pay 500 dollars [a month] for my child's tuition.” I said to him, “I am paying 50 dollars [a month], in Eretz Yisrael, for my child's tuition. Who said you need to work for so many hours so that you can make so much money in order to pay for tuition like this? Come to Eretz Yisrael instead. It is holier than this place. You will work a lot less hours there. You will live simpler. You will be calmer, and you will have more time to learn. You will be able to live like a person here and not like a horse. You can *live*.”

In Conclusion

We all have free choice on this world how we will live. We must decide what direction of life we want and then live by what we set for ourselves. We all have the choice to either live a life of confusion and chaos on this world, or we can live a life of truth.

It is written, “*L'Dovid, Hashem Ori*” – what kind of *ohr* (light) do we find? An *ohr* that is mixed with darkness, or an *ohr* that is the *ohr* of *emes*...?

It is my blessing to all of you, from the depths of my heart, that all of you merit to reach the truth, to leave America and come to *Eretz Yisrael*, where you will be work less here and learn more and become closer to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.^[4] A good year to all of you.

[1] “*kelipah kodemes l'pri* – “The peel (shell) comes before the fruit” – A rule stated in our *sefarim hakedoshim* that a *kelipah* (impure spiritual “husk”) must first be broken in order to arrive at the holiness that it contains.

[2] See ***Derashos #0103 - Surviving Spiritually***

[3] “foolish custom”; a false and invalid *minhag* that has no source in *Halacha*

[4] Editor's Note: On several occasions, the Rav has told people that it would be better to leave America and go to Eretz Yisrael. However, this was only in certain places; this was one of them. Based on a personal correspondence with the Rav, the Rav has made it clear that one should move to Eretz Yisrael only if: **(1)** If he has strong *bitachon* (trust in G-d), **(2)** and that he will find ample source of livelihood there, and **(3)** that there be proper *yeshivos* there for one's children. Without all of these three conditions, the Rav does not recommend moving to Eretz Yisrael.

Source: <http://bilvavi.net/english/ellul-018-american-exile-obsessed-work>