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Author(s): David J. Schnall
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TORAH IS THEIR TRADE

David J. Schnall

In Israel today, the haredi world continues to condemn any recommendations to integrate into the army or the workforce and thus leave their religious studies. The non-haredi community, on the other hand, bears the brunt of military and reserve duty. This essay attempts to show that a balance between study and work values stands at the core of classic Jewish thought, and that it would be to the benefit of the haridim to become integrated into the broader Israeli society through military duty and assimilation into the workforce.

I

In his musical soliloquy, Tevye the milkman and hero of *Fiddler on the Roof* opines the fact that the Lord has chosen to make him a poor laborer, withholding from him the joys and comforts of affluence. "If I were a rich man," he fantasizes, he would own a fine home with servants and livestock, and he would be respected, honored, even fawned over, by the "most important men in town." Then a wistful look settles in his eyes and he sighs:
If I were rich I'd have the time that I lack,
To sit in the synagogue and pray,
And even have a seat by the Eastern Wall.
And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men,
Seven hours every day,
Ah, that would be the sweetest thing of all!

At the roots of Jewish tradition are similar dreams about a life devoted to the full-time study of Jewish texts and their commentaries, exclusive of the mundane and material responsibilities of the workaday world. One well-known Talmudic passage, used to open the daily prayers, suggests that the study of Torah is equal to all other commandments combined (Peah 1:1, Shabbat 127a). Over time, special provisions were made to accommodate those for whom “Torah is their trade,” including public support for their families so that they may pursue their studies unburdened by worldly concerns. Indeed, the Talmudic definition of a large city is one in which there were at least ten batlanim, or “free-riders, “who would spend their days in study and reflection, also performing various communal functions and assuring that there was always a minyan, a religious quorum for prayer (Megilah 5a).1

Today the question of gainful employment among such batlanim has become an explosive manifestation of the rift between Israel’s secular majority and its growing communities of pietists, known as haredim. Those who must appear at work each day are appalled that increasing numbers of able-bodied young men devote their most productive years to religious study at yeshivot and kollelim, comprehensive programs of higher Jewish education. Exempt from most civic obligations, they are supported by the dole and by philanthropic largess. Sons are generally raised to follow in the footsteps of their fathers, while daughters are groomed for husbands who will do the same.

For their part, members of these haredi communities believe that they protect and assure the Jewish future by devoting themselves to the study of Torah and by implanting that selfsame commitment in their children and grandchildren. Menial tasks and mundane details, among which most labor is included, are little more than bittul Torah, quite literally “Torah cancelled or wasted.” The Lord demands that Jews spend their every waking hour in study and prayer and they are living that ideal.2

The issue is linked to a series of parallel debates over draft deferments for able-bodied youth. Since the establishment of the state, military service has been a symbol of political and nationalist fidelity in defense of home and country. It also serves as a tool
for integrating a diverse population and as a proving ground for career success and upward mobility. Data gathered by the Israel Defense Forces suggest that about 30,000 young men, some 7.4 percent of the conscript pool, are currently exempt from the military as yeshiva students. Projections suggest that the figure will rise to over 10 percent or about 35,000 within two years. Under the current terms of their deferment, these students may not perform any work for pay, even if they leave their seminaries. As a result, they must depend upon public funds to support themselves and their growing families.

In December 1998, the Israel High Court of Justice rendered a decision giving the Knesset one year to draft legislation correcting this imbalance. Presumably such a plan would reduce the number of deferments issued and pave the way for these seminarians to enter some form of army service. During the national election that followed, Ehud Barak made such a plan a central part of his political platform. Upon his election, he empanelled a commission to study the issue and make recommendations toward its resolution.

In the meantime, experimental Nahal military units have been created to accommodate the special religious and social needs of haredi conscripts. The move has met resistance from both sides. Haredi advocates argue that the military can never be an appropriate place for pietist youth. For their part, secularists demand that all potential recruits be treated alike, without accommodation.

Nevertheless, the first platoon was inducted during the winter of 1999, a second the following autumn, and a third early the next year, for a total of approximately 200 recruits. Military authorities expect the effort eventually to grow to battalion size. They indicate that these new conscripts include haredi volunteers from Brooklyn and Los Angeles as well.

In the United States, the lines are not so sharply drawn, but strains are beginning to show. Expecting to fulfill their filial obligations upon the marriage of their children, a growing number of middle-aged parents within the Orthodox Jewish community find themselves called upon to continue supporting their married offspring. These young couples choose full-time commitments to the religious study hall, eschewing economic self-reliance in favor of parental largess and public support.

At the communal level, frequent public appeals are made on behalf of programs of higher Jewish study to help support these young kollel families in Israel and in the West. Often they are offshoots of already existing institutions, fueling the organizational
redundancy noted elsewhere in American Jewish life. By consequence, difficult decisions of priority ensue for individual philanthropy and for the allocation of dwindling community resources.

In truth, the issue has been debated for tens of centuries, with each side exhibiting notable passion, condemning and rebuking its adversaries in no uncertain terms. In this essay we will examine some of the classical sources that inform this debate in hope of clarifying the relationship between work and study in Jewish tradition. As we will show, there is ample precedent in Talmudic and rabbinic sources both for those who favor a balance between the workplace and the study hall, and for those who demand a life of Torah learning exclusively.

However, we also will demonstrate that the latter was generally reserved for the singular and exceptional scholar alone. By contrast, most authorities appear to favor a balance between work and study as the modal prescription for successful living, appropriate for the vast majority of the faithful. Indeed, even the exceptional scholar was encouraged to seek financial self-sufficiency, devoting himself to his exclusive studies only after securing material support privately from individual sponsors and patrons.

In this vein, it is worthwhile noting a unique attempt to evaluate quantitatively the relative valence accorded to employment and learning in Jewish sources. Using expert reviewers, Mannheim and Sela categorized some 900 “work-related statements” from the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud, the Tosefta, and 19 compendia of the Midrash. Included were those favoring a combination of work and study, those that favored study alone, and even a small handful that appeared to favor work over study.

After winnowing redundant and marginal examples, they labeled about half the final population of these dicta as “laws,” i.e., binding obligations. The rest were identified as “norms” or “values.” A systematic content analysis then was executed to determine the place of work in Jewish tradition as expressed in these texts. Among their findings, the following is most relevant to our purposes here.

The internal distribution of the “Work and Torah” category reveals that in 65% of the quotations it is prescribed that the learning of Torah and work should be pursued jointly. In 29% of the statements, the learning of Torah is prescribed and in 6% work is preferred over Torah.5

What follows is a qualitative exploration of this relationship along with the implications it holds for the direction and organi-
zation of the contemporary Jewish community and the allocation of its resources.

II

The Talmud records a lively debate (Brachot 35b) that speaks directly to our issue. It is based on a reading of the biblical verse “and I shall give you rain in its season, early and later, and you shall gather your grain” (Deuteronomy 11:14), as against, “and the words of the Torah shall not be absent from your mouth and you shall be immersed in them day and night so that you guard all that is written therein. For then your path shall be successful and you shall grow wise” (Joshua 1:8).

The interlocutors are bothered by the apparent contradiction. Can one gather grain, both literally and figuratively toiling at his work and yet still remain constantly immersed in the words of Torah? Rather, Rabbi Yishmael concludes, deal with these words in “the way of the world,” i.e., these obligations ought not to be understood literally. Work must be combined with study. Otherwise, to paraphrase Rashi’s commentary, one will become dependent upon the charity of others and neglect his study entirely.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai thinks otherwise:

Can it be that a person shall plow in season and plant in season and harvest in season and mill in season and plant in the wind? What shall become of Torah? Rather, when Israel fulfills the will of the Lord their work will be performed by others....When Israel does not fulfill the will of the Lord then they must perform their own labor...and more, the work of others must they also perform.

Several points are in order. Rabbi Shimon’s position evokes the plight of primordial Man in the Garden of Eden. As there, worldly toil is cast as a form of punishment heaped upon him for his sin. If Israel would only follow the ways of the Lord by devoting their time to the singular study of His holy books, they would be freed of such mundane obligations. Absent this commitment, menial labor emerges to fill the breach.

Evidently, Rabbi Shimon was unable to accept a merger of fealty to God’s will with what Rabbi Yishmael termed “the way of the world.” His unbending principle and strict demeanor is clear from anecdotes related elsewhere (see, e.g., Shabbat 33b). Yet, with no comment on the cogency of these sources, the editors of the Talmud draw conclusions grounded in common experience.
The sage Abaye declares that many have followed the advice of Rabbi Yishmael and succeeded. By contrast, of those who followed Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, many did not. As a practical matter, the Talmud seems to suggest that a balanced relationship between Torah study and gainful employment is a more likely recipe for personal success. At most, Rabbi Shimon’s strictures are reserved for the very few. One would be well advised not to pursue such a path, lest he be undone by his own presumptions (Berachot 35b).

By way of parallel, it is appropriate to cite one of several references in Pirkei Avot, an early Talmudic collection of ethical teachings and homilies. “Rabban Gamliel, son of Rabbi Yehuda the Prince, said, better is the study of Torah with derekh eretz, for the effort expended in the two will keep sin out of mind. All Torah that is not accompanied by work ultimately will be nullified and cause sin” (Avot 2:2).

As above, derekh eretz, literally the way of the world, is a euphemism for employment and the pursuit of livelihood. Here, Rabban Gamliel advises that, when pursued in tandem with study, each is strengthened. Unlike Rabbi Shimon above, there is no consideration even for the few that may succeed at a life of study alone. Work is necessary for religious fulfillment and study alone will be nullified. Ironically, it even may lead one astray.

Yet, the growing controversy over these alternative routes to successful living continued among later Jewish scholars. Throughout, however, those in the mainstream insisted that, for the bulk of the population, derekh eretz, i.e., the pursuit of livelihood in combination with religious study, was preferred. Maimonides minced few words in expressing his disdain for those who accept public support so that they may devote themselves exclusively to their learning.

Whomsoever has in his heart that he shall indulge in the study of Torah and do no work but rather be sustained from charity, defames the Lord’s name, cheapens the Torah, extinguishes the light of faith, causes himself ill and removes himself from the world to come. It is forbidden to benefit from words of Torah in this world.6

Moreover, in his commentary to the words of Rabbi Zadok, he enumerates the many scholars and sages who performed menial labor rather than accept philanthropic aid. They saw no difficulty suspending their study temporarily to labor on behalf of their families and households, always remembering that while work
was transitory in life, Torah was its foundation. Those who hold to the contrary, Maimonides concludes, are "insane and confused."

His argument and the passion with which it was declared raised a storm of protest. Rabbi Yosef Caro, in his *Kesef Mishneh* commentary to Maimonides, strained to refute the Master's claim, point by point. He closes his lengthy discourse by noting that practice and usage should serve as the arbiters of tradition, guiding our actions at every turn. Perhaps the sages of prior generations agreed in principle that students not reduce themselves to dependence upon charity and the dole. Yet, in contemporary times, a preoccupation with the demands of trade or profession would soon cause Torah learning to be abandoned. Consequently, they amended their thinking and made provisions to encourage those who spend their lives exclusively in study. Otherwise, why would there be so many examples, both before and since, of precisely that practice which Maimonides seeks to defame?7

Rabbi Caro was joined by Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemach Duran, a fifteenth-century scholar of Spain and North Africa. He was scandalized by the aspersions being cast upon generations of scholars properly maintained by communal funds. In his words, Maimonides:

Broke his good senses and miscast all the scholars and rabbis of his time and those who preceded him. And because he spoke in anger he came to err and to call them insane. Is a prophet insane, or is the man of God's spirit?

It was his [Maimonides'] good fortune to be close to royalty and honored in his generation, and because of his medical wisdom he was not required to accept fees from the communities he served. What shall rabbis and sages do if they have not reached this quality? Shall they die in hunger, demean their honor and remove the yoke of Torah from their backs?8

Notwithstanding the zealous indignation expressed on both sides, the less passionate rulings of their contemporaries generally reinforced the obligation of scholars to seek their own livelihood and avoid becoming wards of the community. Often, they entered the debate tangentially, in response to unrelated demands and petitions, however.

A representative example dating to the thirteenth century provides an insight into this pattern. It deals with a learned scholar who was libeled by a member of his community and who took his allegations to the non-Jewish authorities. Upon investigation, the claims made by this scoundrel were proven false and the sage was
sage was subsequently exonerated of any wrongdoing. In the action that followed, the scholar sought damages for his defamation.

The case came before Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel of Germany and Spain, who found for the claimant and substantiated the damages committed by the defendant against him. However, the matter of setting specific financial liability turned upon his status as a scholar, i.e., one who was fully devoted to his Torah studies. As if to forestall any further aspersion against him, Rabbi Asher provided the following definition of a scholar:

That his Torah is his craft and that he sets regular periods for Torah and cancels none of his studies, except for his maintenance. For it is impossible for him to learn without maintenance, for “if there is no flour there is no Torah,” and “all Torah that is not accompanied by work ultimately will be nullified and cause sin.” The rest of the day, when he is free and he is not required to seek after his maintenance, he returns to his books and studies and he never strolls in the markets and roadways but for his livelihood and that of his household. Nor should he labor to accumulate much money. This I call a scholar.9

Though afield of the petition, Rabbi Asher has provided us with a clear statement of the responsibilities of one who dons these exalted robes. Of course, he was expected to commit himself to Torah study, but not to the exclusion of his mandate to support himself and his family. If he wasted none of his time, nor did he allow such pursuits to overtake him, his status was secure and he deserved the financial redress appropriate to that station.10

III

Similar attitudes are reflected in normative codes of religious practice. For example, Rabbi Yacov ben Asher Ba‘al Haturim, in his code of religious laws and traditions, cites Maimonides almost verbatim, insisting upon financial self-sufficiency for scholars and students alike. Despite his vigorous defense of publicly supported scholarship, Rabbi Yosef Caro, writing in the Shulchan Arukh, provides a sharp contrast in his detail of the daily regimen of Jewish religious observance. He rules that after fulfilling the ritual obligations of prayer and supplication each morning, the believer is obliged to leave for the job. “Torah, which is not accompanied by work,” he writes, quoting from Avot cited above,
“will ultimately be nullified.” He closes with a stern warning that all one’s dealings must ever be honest and faithful.\textsuperscript{11}

The decision is a rather straightforward statement in support of gainful employment from one of the primary advocates of undistracted Torah study. Still, modern authorities have interpreted it in ways that allow the millennial debate to continue. On the one hand, Rabbi Yechiel Michael Epstein understands it in the simplest terms. Citing Rabbi Caro verbatim and quoting earlier sources, he adds:

And many have been mistaken in this and have said that a vocation is demeaning. Yet, many Talmudic sages were workmen and we have read in the \textit{Midrash} that work is more dear than distinguished lineage....Still, one must never allow his work to be primary and his Torah to be temporary, but rather, his Torah shall be primary and his work temporary and thus both will be sustained.

And it seems to me that this is only for a scholar whose main dealings are in Torah. But for an average householder this does not apply. For an average householder there is no obligation other than to establish periods for study... [but a scholar] is obliged to study Torah all the day and all the night except for what is necessary to seek his livelihood.\textsuperscript{12}

Notable is his differentiation between the life mission of the scholar who must enforce Torah study as the core of his existence, and the householder for whom there is no such obligation. Yet, even the scholar must take time from his studies to seek the material needs of his household. Elsewhere he argues that Maimonides himself would support a salary and financial emolument for those whose wisdom and skill merit their appointment as communal functionaries and religious leaders. In effect, this has become their trade.

However, Rabbi Yisrael Meyer Ha-Cohen understood Rabbi Caro’s ruling quite differently. In his \textit{Beur Halakha} commentary,\textsuperscript{13} he agrees that the workaday world is an appropriate venue for the large majority of otherwise pious and learned individuals. However, in each generation there are some few who stand on a spiritual and intellectual plane so exalted that they merit the right to devote themselves solely to Torah, depending upon the Lord for their material support and their livelihood. He adds an important caveat, however. Even those who reach for this exalted plane may pursue their path only if they find patrons and sponsors that agree in advance to support their exclusive commitment to Torah. To buttress his case, he adds a nuance not unknown but rarely invoked in prior decisions and arguments surrounding this issue. He
cites references to a similar relationship said to exist between Yissachar and Zevulun, sons of the biblical patriarch, Jacob.\textsuperscript{14} The analogy has become a popular rallying point in the contemporary debate over this issue.

A cursory glance at the text in which this famous relationship is rooted sheds light on our discussion. The rabbis appear troubled that in two separate biblical passages the tribes of Israel are enumerated out of their usual order. Both as they stand ready to receive father Jacob's deathbed blessing and as they hear Moses' final charge, the elder Yissachar is listed only after Zevulun the younger. They explain this as a function of the most unusual partnership carried on by these brothers and their families for many generations.

By prior arrangement, the descendants of Zevulun pursued commercial endeavors, largely related to shipping and export, given the proximity of their territories to the Mediterranean coast. All the while, the families of Yissachar committed themselves exclusively to Torah study, supported through the profits and income earned by their cousins of Zevulun. Thus, Yissachar was sustained materially while Zevulun was credited for a portion of the spiritual reward accrued through the Torah study he supported. Yet, the rabbis conclude, as a reflection of their relative importance to the success of this partnership, Scripture ignores their birth order and gives priority to Zevulun, the tradesman and merchant, over Yissachar the scholar. The point will be explored further below.

Finally, recent rabbinic authorities have introduced nuances to the discussion not invoked previously, even by those who supported their respective positions. For example, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein provides us with a spirited defense of Torah as an exclusive profession, in lengthy and far ranging discourses published posthumous to his distinguished career. Commenting about students whose skills may be insufficient to justify exclusive devotion to Torah study, he urges that they remain within the yeshiva all the same.

If only by memory they still may master the great works of Talmud and its commentaries, a notable feat in itself. Ultimately, this will lead to deeper and more profound study as well. Moreover, one with questionable intellectual abilities who enters a secular profession is liable to cause great damage and harm through his mistakes and misapprehensions. This is something "found quite often in medicine as a result of a lack of understanding and insufficient depth." If that occurs, he will have little option to call upon the Lord to aid in his success.
Rabbi Feinstein summarizes his thinking succinctly.

Thus: We consider no one a "child of the Torah" and a scholar except he who fulfills the obligation of Torah study properly... that he will not distract his mind by other things nor engage in labor and business except for his survival. And if it is not possible for him in this way, then he must be sustained by charity. In our time, for hundreds of years we have allowed license to serve as a rabbi for pay or as a lecturer in higher and primary religious schools for pay and he must accept such service.15

It bears note that in a much earlier ruling, obviously geared toward a lay public, the thrust of Rabbi Feinstein's thinking seems to go otherwise. There, he claims that even those Talmudic sages who raise questions about the need to train one's child for a trade (Kedushin 82a-b) would agree that once past his youth, "he must labor for his sustenance and for that of his wife and children."16

Still, another nuance inheres in the Jewish national renaissance that emerged with the advent of political Zionism and later, with the founding of the State of Israel. Now, claims for exclusive Torah study were pitted against yet another set of religious obligations related to rebuilding the Holy Land. In this, not only personal but also national considerations were given vent. It may have been appropriate for large numbers of scholars to commit themselves fully to their Torah studies during the long years of the diaspora. No other vocation could provide the requisite spiritual fulfillment. Transplanted to the ancestral homeland, however, and given the special mission of its renewal, alternative pathways for religious expression emerged. Each could contribute according to his talents.

Rabbi Moshe Sofer anticipated the line of thought early in this century. He argued that Rabbi Yishmael's exhortation to work the fields in search of one's livelihood was specific to the Land of Israel, whose development was a religious obligation of its own. Torah studies could no more exempt one from working to settle the land than from praying each day. Nor could the People of God tolerate the embarrassment of foreigners serving in critical professional or vocational capacities throughout the country.17 It is at least ironic that precisely in modern Israel we find the largest number of young pietists committed to Torah study exclusively, claiming it as an alternative means to fulfill their civic obligations.

Finally, there are empirical data that provide a unique test of these issues among the working laity in contemporary Israel. The
results take us full circle, evoking the sentiments with which we began this exploration. In a recent study of workplace attitudes, workers were asked:

Imagine that you won a lottery or inherited a large sum of money and could live comfortably for the rest of your life without working; what would you do about work—continue or stop working? In Israel, only 10.3% of the non-religious respondents said they would stop working, whereas 21% of the respondents with strong religious convictions show such a desire. When the latter were asked, “Why would you stop working?” their overwhelmingly prevalent reply was “to practice and study the Torah.”

The broad majority of all workers, whatever their religious sensibilities, report that should fortune smile upon them in this unexpected manner, they would continue on the job. Apparently, work values remain central for them, despite their ideological or spiritual differences. It is revealing, however, that more than twice as many “with strong religious convictions” say that like Teyye, if they were rich they would forgo their work in favor of religious study and practice.

IV

A summary of our discussion must begin with a point that is both obvious and necessary. It has been our intent to explore the place of Torah study within the framework of work values. We have demonstrated that the mainstream of Jewish thought appears to favor a life of balance, certainly for the large majority of its adherents, while questioning the legitimacy of those who would devote themselves exclusively to the study hall, only to depend upon public support for their sustenance. Yet, none of this should be interpreted as an attack on Torah study, per se. After all, almost everything that has been marshaled here is rooted in its sources, indicating, if nothing else, that the question of balance and priority has occupied interpreters of the tradition for tens of centuries.

Surely, alongside the texts and sources provided here stand counter texts that may be construed to the contrary—a trait that has given vitality to Judaism and Jewish thought over the ages. Moreover, every culture and civilization makes special provision for its pietists and sages. Those committed to Torah study exclusively have always had a unique place reserved for them by tradi-
tion. Under the limits and conditions described above, modern Israel and Jewish communities elsewhere should be no different.

Yet, that may be precisely the point. The mainstream of rabbinic thinking sharply differentiates between the broad majority of the population and a small and select handful of scholars. The former expresses its religious devotion and fulfills its spiritual obligations in large measure by working diligently and honestly, setting aside time for study and reflection as possible. Their commitment to honest and gainful employment is in no way demeaning nor does it undermine their status among the faithful of the Lord.

By the same token, the study hall as an exclusive domain is reserved for the very few. Even those who have made a spirited defense of this lifestyle over the years would hardly argue that it was intended as normative and a modal for the broad population. It is scarcely likely that they envisioned tens of thousands of such students entering this pursuit virtually as an entitlement, with little consideration for their abilities or predisposition, and with little to hold them accountable.

Indeed, in the minds of leading authorities over the generations, even one who claims the "Torah as his trade" is obliged to earn his keep and see to the material needs of his family. He is warned not to depend upon charity for his maintenance, nor to "thrust himself upon the public." Aside from a practical shield against poverty and the dole, this would safeguard and uphold Torah study, as well. Consequently, numerous rabbinic opinions, codes, and formal rulings define a scholar as one who allows himself no distraction from study, save for the time and toil required to earn his livelihood. Hardly a distraction, however, economic self-sufficiency, according to many, is a mitzvah, a religious obligation which embodies intrinsic spiritual value. Whether directly or by implication, they made it clear that gainful employment never undermined one's claim to Torah scholarship. Over this there was little debate.

The intellectual battle raged over the legitimacy of taking any financial benefit from Torah, whether in return for service as a teacher or religious leader, or as an outright grant in the pursuit of religious study. Even among those who supported the idea it was seen as a concession. Latter-day scholars, they opined, simply could not earn their keep as they attempted to master their texts. To place this added burden upon their shoulders was a sure formula for the abandonment of Torah.

They agreed that the better part of piety and religious valor was to refuse public support, and those with the means were
called upon to refrain from accepting any of it, even by many that found merit in the principle. It is a relatively recent claim that intensive Torah study was a contribution to communal well being and security or that it qualified per se for charitable support. In this vein, the words of Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaCohen, often invoked in support of exclusive Torah study at public expense, deserve one more look.

First, his gloss to Rabbi Caro’s ruling in favor of gainful employment is directed at the exclusive and exceptionally qualified few. It is hardly clear that he would countenance the emergence of communities, the bulk of whose male population enters a life of full-time study by right and whose female population will marry no one that toils for his bread. Nor might he agree that they should raise their children to expect the same, or that their sustenance be provided by involuntary taxpayers and unwitting philanthropists as a matter of public policy.

Moreover, he demands that even these exalted few, who may merit the pristine existence of the rabbinic study hall, seek out sponsors and patrons willing to underwrite their Torah study by prior arrangement, caring for the financial needs of their families on an individual and voluntary basis. Nowhere is life on the dole lauded or showcased as a model for the next generation. The midrash he cites, regarding the partnership between Yissachar and Zevulun, reinforces the point. Read carefully, it is no mandate for scholars to accept support as part of a service in which benefactors operating out of an obligation derive the greater benefit.

It must be recalled that Zevulun is given priority for his secular and material endeavors on behalf of pious Yissachar and his studies. Properly channeled, employment and commercial pursuit is held aloft here. Alongside those few groomed for exclusive study, perhaps well-intentioned yeshiva students should be flocking to follow this other model, even as their instructors work to develop a new generation of Zevuluns: highly successful business leaders and professionals with a special sensitivity for learning.

One practical consideration remains. The themes struck here may provide direction for contemporary public policy. In choosing a life of exclusive Torah study, young scholars in Israel may be seeking exemption from the armed services as much as from the workplace. Correctly or not, they fear that the substance and the circumstances of military service will be damaging to their religious observance and personal piety. As a byproduct of their exemption, however, they are legally proscribed from working. Under current legislation, to pursue a trade and earn an income might mean their immediate conscription.
The Israeli military and its civilian overseers would be well advised to follow the mainstream precedent of Jewish thought and modify this stance. Concern for shirkers notwithstanding, by excluding sincere young scholars from job training and business experience, they are not likely to eliminate the manipulative few. Those who choose to malinger can access a substantial underground economy within which they may earn their keep, sub rosa. Instead, the current policy merely insures that the large majority of sincere students willing to pursue even a meager livelihood will be severely hampered and forced to depend upon the dole. The growing number who seek positions in acceptable trades and vocations after the age of 30, the age at which their military eligibility expires, merely confirms the point.

In fact, small reflections of such change have recently emerged. Under discussion in Israel are the recommendations of the Tal Commission, empanelled in August 1999. The commission has called for a variety of alternatives to formal conscription that might allow haredi yeshiva students to fulfill their civic obligations and then enter the workforce by their mid-twenties. This includes: a) deferring military eligibility to age 24, b) four months of active duty at age 26, followed by reserve status, or c) performing a year of civilian service in communal and charitable institutions. A move to lower the eligibility ceiling to age 25 is also being considered. Such changes are matched by new programs for education and job training exclusively designed for haredi men and women, and operated under their auspices.

By the same token, opponents claim that such insular and segregated initiatives will further marginalize the haredi community and reinforce their exclusion from meaningful economic and vocational endeavor. Moreover, their continued special treatment reinforces an intolerable inequity, as non-haredim will still be expected to bear the brunt of civic obligation through years of military and reserve duty. The resultant backlash will do nothing to heal the social strains and ultimately operate against haredim in the form of job discrimination and bias.

For their part, haredi opposition condemns these recommendations as thinly veiled attempts to lure pious and saintly scholars from their study chambers and into a secular world of sin and corruption. Public protests have been mounted with calls for those involved to ignore these new initiatives and to continue their studies in force. Clearly, any such policies are tentative and will require tuning and modification as they are implemented. Nevertheless, they represent the first small steps in a broad mission to re-
assert the balance between study and work values that stands at the core of classic Jewish thought.  

Notes

* This essay was completed during the author’s tenure as J. William Fulbright Professor and Senior Scholar at the Baerwald School of Social Work of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and it is abstracted from his new book, By the Sweat of Your Brow: Reflections on Work and the Workplace in Classic Jewish Thought (New York: Michael Scharf Publication Trust, Yeshiva University.

1. See also Rabbi Yosef Caro, Beit Yosef: Orach Chaim, 388:1.
2. See, for example, the exchange between Jonathan Rosenbloom and Moshe Korda in The Jerusalem Post, 11 December 1998 and 14 December 1998.
6. Rabbi Moshe Maimonides (Rambam), Yad HaHazakah: Hilchat Talmud Torah, 3:10-11. See also his Perush HaMishnayot: Avot, 4:5.
10. The contemporaneous literature in support of this position is immense. For representative examples, interested readers might consult Rabbi Yisrael Isserlein, Shelot U’Teshuvot Terumat Hadeshen, item 342; Rabbi Moshe Al-Shakar, Shelot U’Teshuvot Maharam Al-Shakar, item 19; Rabbi Levi ben Yacov Ibn Haviv, Shelot U’Teshuvot MaHaRalBach, item 140; and Rabbi Mordechai HaLevi, Shelot U’Teshuvot Darkhei Noam: Choshen Mishpat, items 55-56.
14. See, for example, Bereshit Rabbah 99, s.v. Zevulun Lehof.


19. See, for example, *Jerusalem Post*, 14 April 2000.