

Date: 13 Iyar 5786 (April 30, 2026)

Torah Portion: Emor

Topic: Above and Beneath the Sun, Part 2

And yet, unlike purely material labor, such Torah study is never devoid of value. The Gemara teaches that a person should always engage in Torah and mitzvot, even not for their own sake (*shelo lishmah*), for from such engagement one ultimately arrives at proper intention (*lishmah*). This is not merely a concession to human weakness, but a profound statement about the nature of Torah itself. For Torah is not simply an intellectual pursuit or a moral discipline; it is imbued with divine vitality. As the Tanya explains, the words of Torah are expressions of the Divine Will and Wisdom, and therefore carry within them a כוח אלוקי (*koach Eloki*; Divine power or Divine force)—a transformative spiritual force that acts upon the soul of the one who studies them.

Accordingly, even when the individual's intent remains tied to self-interest—whether for honor, recognition, or personal advancement—the Torah itself is not reduced to that level. Rather, it retains its transcendent character and, in turn, exerts an elevating influence upon the person. The individual may approach the Torah from “beneath the sun,” but the Torah does not remain there with him. Instead, it begins to draw him upward, subtly reshaping his inner world. Over time, his מחשבה (*ma-cha-sha-vah*; thought), רצון (*ra-tzon*; will), and כוונה (*ka-va-nah*; intention) become increasingly aligned with the holiness inherent in the Torah he engages. What begins as an act conditioned by self gradually becomes an act oriented toward YHWH.

This dynamic introduces a critical refinement to the distinction between what is “beneath the sun” and what is “above the sun.” The categories are not fixed states in which a person is permanently situated, but rather axes along which he moves. As Rashi implies in his understanding of *yitron* (lasting gain), the question is not where one begins, but what ultimately endures. A person may begin his labor within the confines of natural limitation, driven by ordinary motives, yet through sustained engagement with Torah and mitzvot, he is gradually reoriented. The external action may appear unchanged—he studies, he works, he performs the same deeds—but internally, a quiet transformation unfolds. His efforts are no longer self-referential; they begin to point beyond themselves.

In this way, the Midrash's interpretation of Kohelet becomes not a statement of despair, but a structured pathway of ascent. The declaration that there is no profit in labor “beneath the sun” is not meant to negate action, but to strip it of illusion—to reveal that self-contained effort cannot yield permanence. Yet precisely in that recognition lies the possibility of redirection. When a person understands that his labor, left to itself, cannot endure, he becomes capable of lifting it beyond its natural limits. True profit, therefore, is not found in accumulation or output, but in elevation—in the capacity to attach one's actions to that which transcends time.

Thus, the question of Kohelet is ultimately resolved not by rejecting the world, but by redefining one's relationship to it. Human labor, in all its forms—whether material or spiritual—remains subject to limitation when it is directed solely toward the self. But when it is consciously offered in the service of YHWH, it is drawn into a different order of reality. It becomes part of a continuum that is not bound by the constraints of the natural world. In the language of the Sages, it moves from תחת השמש (*ta-chat ha-she-mesh*; beneath the sun) to למעלה מן השמש (*le-ma'-lah min ha-she-mesh*; above the sun), and in so doing, acquires a share in that which endures.

The mitzvah of the Omer, standing at the threshold of the harvest, embodies this transition with particular clarity. At the very moment when human effort might assert its independence—when the field yields its produce and the laborer stands ready to claim the fruit of his work—the Torah intervenes and redirects the process. The first portion is set aside and offered to YHWH. This act establishes the orientation of all that follows. It declares that the harvest is not self-generated, nor self-owned, but part of a larger divine reality. By sanctifying the ראשית (*re-sheet*; the beginning), the entirety of the labor is drawn upward with it.

This principle carries a broader implication. Transformation must occur not only at the level of outcome, but at the level of origin. It is not sufficient to dedicate the end result after the fact; the direction must be set from the outset. For it is not the magnitude of one's effort that determines its value, but its trajectory. When the beginning is aligned with YHWH, the process itself becomes sanctified, and the final result reflects that alignment.

In this light, the true “profit” of man is not measured by what he acquires, but by what he elevates. That which remains confined “beneath the sun” passes away with the sun itself, subject to the same cycles of rise and decline. But that which is lifted “above the sun”—through Torah, mitzvot, and the refinement of intention—becomes bound to the eternal. And it is in that binding, not in possession or achievement, that man finds his enduring worth.

Shalom.