YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**TALMUD TORAH: THE MITZVA OF TORAH STUDY**

**By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for Refuah Shelemah for all who require healing, comfort and peace –

those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately.

May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage and compassion.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**01: Introduction**

The centrality of Torah study to the rabbinical worldview is axiomatic. Quantitatively, as committed Jews, *talmud Torah* is meant to occupy much of our time. Qualitatively, Torah study is the central axis upon which our *avodat Hashem*, divine worship, rotates. Indeed, the identity between Jews and study is widely recognized well beyond the Jewish community; it is no coincidence that Jews are known as “the people of the book.” Our focus on cultivating critical thinking and reading skills became evident to me a few years ago, when a Christian academy contacted our school, inquiring if they might send teachers to sit in on our classes to gain insight into how we successfully impart these skills to our students. It is no coincidence that even among the most assimilated of families, literacy and higher education are highly valued, to the point that Jews have won Nobel prizes and influenced Western thought to a strikingly disproportionate degree.

Accordingly, this series will seek to sketch the contours of this paramount mitzva. Among other questions, we will explore the gravity, goals, methods and scope of *talmud Torah*, the relationship between learning and teaching, and rabbinic views concerning best pedagogic practices. Along the way, we'll examine subjects such as *Torah lishmah* (Torah for its own sake), the emotional world of the learner (reverence, joy, toil, etc.), breadth versus depth, *Torat Eretz Yisrael*, studying from disgraced Torah scholars, and the *rebbe-talmid* relationship. By the end, we will hopefully emerge with a fairly comprehensive picture concerning many aspects of this multi-faceted, foundational halakhic category. In today’s *shiur*, we will begin to introduce our series by surveying a wide range of rabbinic sources that underscore the foundational importance of *talmud Torah*.

**The Gravity of *Talmud Torah* (Part 1)**

*Chazal*’s emphasis on the centrality of Torah study is manifest in countless sources. *Bereishit Rabba* (1:1) establishes that the Torah is the telos of creation, reading “*Bereishit*,” “in the beginning” as “for the sake of the Torah,” which precedes existence. Later, the *Zohar* (3, 178a) develops this theme, suggesting that God “looked at the Torah and created the world” on its basis.

**Rabbinical History**

Turning to the narratives of Tanakh, the Rabbis strikingly suggest that countless prominent personalities were deeply engaged in Torah study of some variety. We will elaborate these to demonstrate the pervasiveness of this phenomenon.

First, Noach is described as having “studied Torah,” as otherwise he would not have been able to know how to distinguish kosher and non-kosher animals (Rashi, *Bereishit* 7:2, s.v. *Ha-tehora*). Along these lines, *Yoma* 28a characterizes Avraham as “elderly and studying in yeshiva.” Rashi (*Bereishit* 37:2) writes that Ya’akov taught Yosef all the Torah he knew. Targum Yonatan (*Bereishit* 24:62), based on various *midrashim*, asserts that Yitzchak was returning from *yeshiva* study when he encountered his bride-to-be Rivka. Shortly after his birth, Ya’akov is described as “*ish tam, yoshev ohalim* (a simple man, a tent-dweller),” which *Chazal* (*Bereishit Rabba* 63:27) see as a reference to his youthful study in the *yeshivot* of Shem and Ever. In a classic comment popularized by Rashi (*Bereishit* 45:27, s.v. *Et*), the Rabbis interpret Yosef’s decision to send wagons to Ya’akov as an allusion to the topic of *egla arufa*, the decapitated heifer, a subject they had been studying jointly prior to Yosef’s kidnapping. Finally, prior to his descent to Egypt, Ya’akov sends Yehuda ahead to “show him the way to Goshen” (*Bereishit* 46:28), which the Rabbis (*Bereishit Rabba* 95:46) understand to mean that Yehuda established a *yeshiva*. In this spirit, *Yoma* 28b attests that no matter where they went, our forefathers never interrupted their study.

The Rabbis adopt a similar exegetical approach regarding numerous post-Patriarchal biblical personalities. *Eruvin* 54a elaborately describes an intricate process by which Moshe and Aharon study and convey the Torah to the elders and entire nation. Taking for granted that Yehoshua studied Torah regularly, *Megilla* 3a criticizes him for having neglected Torah study at night, even while he was in the battlefield. (Indeed, *Yehoshua* 1:8, “Let not this Torah cease from your lips; recite it day and night, so that you may observe faithfully all that is written in it,” is understood by the Rabbis to be a primary source for the daily obligation of Torah study.) Some of the judges, including Devora, Ivtzan and Otniel ben Kenaz are portrayed as having played key roles in the transmission of Torah. Sifrei (*Devarim* 352) suggests that Otniel taught Torah to his entire generation. Even more remarkably, *Temura* 16a claims that 1700 laws were forgotten during Moshe’s mourning period, all of which were restored by Otniel ben Kenaz.

The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 94b) states that during the generation of Chizkiya, “they searched from Gevat to Antipatris and could not find a male child or a female child or a man or a woman who was not expert even in the complex *halakhot* of ritual purity and impurity.” Indeed, the Gemara says that when Chizkiyahu fell ill, Yeshayahu set up a yeshiva near his grave (*Eruvin* 26a; see also *Bava Kama* 17a).

Mordekhai is portrayed as an outstanding Torah scholar and member of the Sanhedrin. In a classic comment, the Rabbis suggest that the hero was critiqued by some of his colleagues for his decision to abandon his study and join the Persian royal court (*Megilla* 16b, cited by Rashi to *Esther* 10:3). Chaggai, Zekharya and Malakhi, the final prophets, are also seen as members of that august body. Multiple Talmudic passages (*Yevamot* 16a, 43a) suggest that Chaggai preserved certain laws. *Zevachim* 62a claims that three prophets preserved certain laws associated with the sacrificial service; Rashi identifies these prophets as Chaggai, Zekharya and Malakhi. Chaggai is even directly quoted by Shammai the Elder (*Kiddushin* 43a) as having held that one who sends an agent to perform homicide is liable for the sin.

Perhaps above all, at least concerning the transitional years of the Second Temple period, Ezra is imputed a central role in the preservation of the tradition. Here, the Rabbis pick up on clear textual cues. Ezra is described as a *sofer*, scholar, by the Persian monarch. He is given the right to decide all matters of law for the people, and he leads a *teshuva* revolution whose centerpiece is a mass Torah reading, a form of public study. The term *sekhel* (analysis) figures heavily in his book. The Rabbis go so far as to suggest that had he lived at the time of Moshe, Ezra would have been fit to receive the Torah at Sinai (*Sanhedrin* 21b). That the Rabbis see a thread of Torah study extending through much of the biblical period underscores just how much weight they assign *talmud Torah* not just as a technical halakhic requirement, but as a fundamental part of Jewish living.

**Equal to All Mitzvot**

Given this background, it comes as no surprise that the Rabbis portray Torah study as critically important. In particular, the Mishna (*Pei’a* 1:1; see also *Shabbat* 127a) declares that “Torah study is equal to all other *mitzvot*,” and the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Pei’a*, ibid.) goes so far as to claim that Torah study is the equivalent of not just any other single mitzva*,* but all the *mitzvot* combined.

An interesting comment of the Vilna Gaon (*Pei’a* 1:1) underscores the point. The *Rishonim* dispute the meaning of the ruling that the *mitzvot* listed in the *mishna* “have no amount.” Does this mean that they have no minimum amount or no maximum amount? In other words, does this *mishna* mean to teach that one may fulfill each of these requirements by performing even a small amount, or that one may endlessly fulfill each of these *mitzvot*? Strikingly, the Vilna Gaon suggests that both are true in regard to Torah study. On one hand, even a small amount of study is of great import. At the same time, one can receive endless reward for greater study.

This motif is echoed elsewhere. *Megilla* 16a surprisingly insists that Torah study is greater than saving a life. Rather than seeing this as a literal halakhic ruling, we should understand the Gemara to mean that among the purposes of life is engagement in Torah study; in this sense, saving a life is merely a means to the greater end of Torah study. *Shabbat* 30a claims that a single day of Torah study is more substantial in the eyes of God than 1,000 days of sacrificial offerings. *Megilla* 3b argues that Torah study is greater than the *tamid* sacrifice. *Menachot* 110a goes so far as to claim that one who studies has no need to offer sacrifices.

Not only is study described as a crucial activity for human beings, but even God Himself is portrayed as studying Torah. The Gemara (*Gittin* 6b) suggests that God studied the book of *Shoftim*, and *Avoda Zara* 3b asserts that Torah study comprises the first three hours of God’s day. A host of sources portray God and the angels as wrangling over *halakhot* in the heavenly academy (see, for example, *Bava Metzia* 86a).

Children’s study, as we shall explore in greater depth in a future *shiur*, is deemed to be of cosmic significance. The Gemara insists that “the world only exists due to the breath (Torah study) of schoolchildren,” and that we do not even interrupt their study for the construction of the Temple (*Shabbat* 119b).

Because of its importance, one must be willing to make significant sacrifices for the sake of Torah study. “This is the way of [toiling in] Torah,” *Avot* 6:4 teaches:

Eat bread with salt and drink a small amount of water and sleep on the ground and live a life [whose conditions will cause you] pain, but in Torah you must toil; if you do so, happy shall you be, and it shall be well with you - happy shall you be in this world, and it shall be well with you in the World to Come.”

No one can excuse himself from Torah study by claiming that he is poor, wealthy (and therefore distracted) or wicked (*Yoma* 35b), as the Tanna’im struggled with all three yet fully committed themselves to the study of Torah. In Rambam’s classic formulation (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:8):

Every Jew is obligated to learn Torah: whether he is poor or rich; whether he has a full and healthy body or whether he is a person who is suffering; whether he is young or whether he is very old and his strength is weak; even if he is a poor man who supports himself from charity and knocks on each door; and even if he is a husband and father. He is obligated to have a set time to learn Torah during the day and the night as it is written, “Recite it day and night.”

The location of the mitzva of Torah study within the Torah itself underscores its importance. Tellingly, the mitzva of *talmud Torah* appears in both the first and second sections of *Keriat Shema*, one of the most central texts in Jewish liturgy. This location speaks to *talmud Torah*’s centrality. Rambam similarly places the mitzva of Torah at the front and center of his halakhic works: it is eleventh out of the 248 positive commandments, and is specifically situated in *Sefer Ha-madda*, the first of the fourteen volumes of *Mishneh Torah*.

Having established in this opening *shiur* the inestimable value *Chazal* place on *talmud Torah*, next week’s *shiur* will explore the intriguing ways in which *talmud Torah* is integrally related to a host of other, apparently unrelated, *mitzvot* in the Torah.