YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

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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.

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**Shiur #02 - *Talmud Torah* as a Fundamental Component of Other *Mitzvot***

[Last week’s](http://etzion.org.il/en/01-introduction-0) *shiur* surveyed a range of rabbinical sources that convey the critical importance of Torah study. In this *shiur*, we will underscore *talmud Torah*’s importance from a different, far less obvious direction. As we will see, not only is *talmud Torah* important in its own right, it is also essential for one to achieve other halakhic aims.

On one level, *talmud Torah* is seen as a prerequisite for the acquisition of particular characteristics. For instance, *Avot* 2:5 teaches, “A boor cannot fear sin. An ignorant person cannot be pious.” Without prior study, in other words, one cannot achieve fear of God. Along similar lines, the Gemara recommends that if one feels an urge to sin, “he should drag [the evil inclination] to the study hall” (*Sukka* 52b, *Kiddushin* 30b).

On another level, *talmud Torah* is essential to the fulfillment of other *mitzvot*. Some, such as *Keriat Ha-Torah*, *Hakhel* (the septennial mass Torah reading), and the reading of *Megillat Esther*, are themselves forms of *talmud Torah*. Similarly, some commentaries understand that the obligation to write a *sefer Torah* is meant to facilitate Torah study; thus, Rosh (*Hilkhot Ketivat Sefer Torah* 1) maintains that one fulfills the obligation of writing a *sefer Torah* by purchasing *sefarim*. Here, *talmud Torah* is the ultimate goal of a particular commandment.

Many other obligations are closely tied to *talmud Torah*. Movingly, Rambam (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot* *Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:1-2; *Sefer Ha-mitzvot, Aseh* 3) suggests that Torah study fosters love of God. (We will return to this in a future *shiur.*)

In a different vein, a number of sources indicate that there is a unique obligation to study Torah on Shabbat and Yom Tov. *Parashat Vayakhel* opens by informing us that Moshe Rabbeinu gathers the entire community and conveys to them the laws of Shabbat. Noting that no other *parasha* in the Torah opens with the term “*Vayakhel*,” *Midrash Tanchuma* (408) relates:

God said: Make for yourself great throngs of people, and publicly expound before them the laws of Shabbat, so that future generations will learn from you to gather groups of people every Shabbat… to teach the laws of what is prohibited and permissible, so that My great name will be praised among my children.

Interestingly, this *midrash* is not the only source that links Shabbat and Torah study. As a punishment for having feasted during the community’s weekly *shiur*, *Gittin* 38b teaches, a wealthy family lost its entire fortune. Indeed, R. Yosef Karo codifies the obligation of Torah study on Shabbat in *Shulchan Arukh* (*OC* 290:1). In a remarkable passage, the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Shabbat* 15:3) cites a view that the reason God instituted the *mitzva* of Shabbat was to facilitate widespread Torah study. Similarly, Ramban (*Vayikra* 23:2) argues that public Torah reading is part of the prescribed manner in which one fulfills the obligation of “resting” on Yom Tov.

Elsewhere, the Yerushalmi (*Beitza* 2:3; cited by Tosafot, *Chagiga* 18a s.v. *Cholo*) explains that the prohibition of work on Chol Ha-mo’ed is designed to ensure that people “eat, drink and study Torah.” The obligation for one to visit one’s teacher on the holiday (*Rosh Hashana* 16b, *Sukka 27b*) may also reflect this theme, as may the Gemara’s opposing contention that Rabbi Eliezer praised one who “was lazy” and stayed home for the holiday (*Sukka* 27b; see *Yechaveh Da’at* 3:47).

Another *mitzva* unexpectedly linked to *talmud Torah* is *teshuva*, repentance. We find a number of sources suggesting that Torah study is a uniquely effective means for fulfilling this *mitzva*. Tellingly, in a passage in *Orot Ha-Torah* concerning Torah study, Rav Kook mentions *teshuva* no less than six times. In one instance he writes that “the highest repentance, which stems from great love and from clear recognition, elevates the entire [Torah] study session’s content” (6:3). Therefore, “in accordance with the clarity of repentance prior to study, the clarity of one’s understanding will increase.”

What is the basis for Rav Kook’s linking *teshuva* and *talmud Torah*? As many have noted,[[1]](#footnote-1) this conclusion emerges from a line in the Gemara and a comment by Ramban. The Gemara (*Eruvin* 55a) suggests that “*Lo va-shamayim hi*,” “It is not in the heavens” (*Devarim* 30:12) refers to Torah study, and indicates that Torah is accessible to anyone who desires. At the same time, Ramban (ad loc. v. 11) proposes that this verse refers to the *mitzva* of *teshuva*. How does Ramban reconcile his comment with the aforementioned Gemara, as well as the numerous other rabbinical sources that invoke “*Lo va-shamayim hi*” in relation to Torah study? (See, for example, *Bava Metzia* 59b.) Apparently, Ramban maintains that Torah study can be utilized as a vehicle toward repentance. Indeed, Netziv (*Ha’amek Davar*, ad loc. v. 10) notes that this suggestion dovetails with a classic passage in *Yoma* (86a) which suggests that if one repents due to love, his sins are elevated to the status of *mitzvot*. *Teshuva* motivated by love, in other words, refers to repentance effected by way of Torah study. Apparently, Torah study is of such tremendous import that the highest level of repentance is achieved through that medium.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Another intriguing instance in which *talmud Torah* effects a chameleon-like change in those who study it relates to the recitation of *Shema*. Intriguingly, Talmidei Rabbeinu Yona (12b, Rif, s.v. *Amar*) maintain that according to one Talmudic view, an individual may technically fulfill the biblical obligation of *Keriat Shema* by reciting any passage from the Torah. At first glance, this position is bewildering. How can one fulfill *Shema* by reciting, say, one of the verses concerning Eisav’s wives? Apparently, according to Talmidei Rabbeinu Yona, the core obligation of *Shema* is the acceptance of the yoke of heaven by way of reciting Scripture. Torah study, in other words, is the biblical method for fulfilling the biblical commandment of *Keriat* *Shema*.

This connection helps to account for a number of other curious features of the *mitzva* of *Keriat Shema*. For instance, the Gemara asserts that one who fails to recite *birkhot ha-Torah* in the morning fulfills his obligation by reciting the blessing immediately before *Shema*. This curious ruling is most easily understood if we view the recitation of *Shema* as a form of Torah study. In the words of Ramban (*Berakhot* 11b, s.v. *Kevar*), “it is a blessing over diligent Torah study (*birkat shinun Torah)*.” Accordingly, Ramban rules that this blessingis considered *birkat ha-mitzva*, to which one may not respond *Amen*, so as not to interrupt between the blessing and its associated *mitzva*.

In light of this thesis, we can also make better sense of *Menachot* 99b, which cites the view of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai that one may fulfill the daily obligation of Torah study by reciting *Shema* in the morning and at night. At first glance, this is curious. One can fulfill his obligation by reciting any passage from the Torah; why single out *Shema*? Furthermore, even at the time of the Gemara, it was customary to recite some verses from the Torah as part of one’s daily prayers. Why, then, does the Gemara single out *Shema*? If we understand that *Keriat Shema* is not just an independent obligation but rather a *mitzva* **to accept the yoke of heaven by way of Torah study**, the language of the Gemara can be better understood. *Shema* is indeed the quintessential, if not exclusive, manner in which one can fulfill one’s daily obligation of Torah study.

In light of the connection between Torah and *Shema*, we may appreciate more fully the aforementioned *midrash* regarding *talmud Torah* on Shabbat. As noted, the *Tanchuma* (beginning of *Vayakhel*) records that Moshe Rabbeinu gathers the Jewish people to publicly preach the laws of Shabbat. From this the *midrash* derives that each Shabbat, the rabbi ought to publicly lecture on the laws of Shabbat. This *midrash* goes on to cite a verse in *Yeshayahu*, “*Atem eidai ne’um Hashem*,” “You are my witnesses, says God” (43:10), in support of this practice of public Torah study. This verse (which also has an intriguing history in regard to medieval Jewish-Christian polemics) does not seem to be connected to the wider theme of the *midrash*. What connection is there between public Torah study and testifying that Hashem is God? Apparently, the *midrash* is suggesting that public Torah study is indeed one of the manners in which we are meant to recognize God’s role as creator. By taking time out of our schedules for learning on Shabbat, we indicate that we prioritize Torah because it was given to us by the Creator. This act of public Torah study, then, closely resembles the motif we have identified in regard to *talmud Torah* and *Shema*. Just as in *Shema* we declare God’s dominion by individually studying Torah, so too we testify as a community to God-as-Creator by studying Torah publicly on Shabbat.

Furthermore, there is much to suggest that, at the very least, Torah and *tefilla* are closely linked; indeed, in some instances, the mitzva of *tefilla* is best fulfilled through Torah study. Notably, the Sifrei (*Ekev* 41), cited by Rambam (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot, Aseh* 5), identifies both prayer and Torah study as applications of the mitzvato worship Hashem. The Gemara in *Berakhot* (8a) and *Megilla* (29a) recommends that one pray in the place in which he studies and vice versa. These are meaningful halakhic connections between *talmud Torah* and *tefilla*. What is more, in addition to the examples of *Keriat Shema* and public Torah reading noted earlier, there are at least two further indications that Torah study is part of our daily prayers. First, according to numerous commentaries (e.g. Rav Amram Gaon, cited by Tosafot, *Kiddushin* 30a, s.v. *Lo*), the section of the morning service which talks about the sacrifices, particularly the sections of *Parashat Ha-tamid*, “*Eizehu Mekoman”* and “*Rabbi Yishmael Omer”* are fulfillments of the Talmudic dictum (ad loc.) that one should study sections from Scripture, Mishna and Talmud each day. Second, Rashi (*Sota* 49a, s.v. *A-kedusha*), following a Geonic view, suggests that “*U-va Le-Tziyon*,” in particular the sections toward the beginning of that prayer known as *Kedusha De-sidra*, are a form of daily *talmud Torah* initially intended for workers who otherwise had no time for study. Once the recitation of this prayer became commonplace, it was enshrined in the morning service. In both these instances, expressions of Torah study have been interwoven into our daily prayers.

To take a final example of the integration of *talmud Torah* in other *mitzvot*, many have noted the central role played by the rabbinical exegesis of “*Arami Oved Avi”* during the *Maggid* portion of Haggada. Why do we spend so much time on these *derashot*, which seem to be secondary to the biblical retelling of the Exodus? Rav Soloveitchik suggests that Torah study plays an integral role in transmitting the legacy of this momentous event from parent to child. It is almost inconceivable to that the story of the Exodus could be transmitted in any other fashion. *Talmud Torah*, after all, is the classic means through which parents pass on the Jewish heritage to their children. Moreover, the question-answer format of the Haggada is perfectly aligned with *talmud Torah*, in which the exchange of ideas between teacher and student is paramount. On this basis, the Rav also proposes that the enigmatic paragraph “*Barukh Ha-makom*” is to be viewed as *birkat ha-Torah*. It is for this reason that we seemingly take a “detour” in the middle of *Maggid*, just before discussing the four sons and analyzing “*Arami Oved Avi*,” to thank Hashem for having given us the Torah.

The precise nature of the relationship between *talmud Torah* and the *mitzvot* bears further analysis, but a larger picture clearly emerges: *talmud Torah*’s centrality is manifest not only as an independent value, but also, intriguingly, as an integral element of many of the *mitzvot* we fulfill each and every day.

In concluding our remarks concerning the gravity of *talmud Torah*, two questions remain. First, was *talmud Torah* always considered so central in the Jewish tradition? After all, despite the prominence assigned to Torah study in rabbinical literature, we do not get the sense that the same value was assigned to *talmud Torah* during the biblical period. While this question requires discussion that is beyond the scope of our series, suffice it to say that an intermediate position may be struck. On the one hand, the passages of *Shema* prove the value of Torah study in the biblical period, especially as it concerns a father’s responsibility to educate his son. At the same time, it is also evident that in the wake of the destruction of the First Temple, the rabbis sought to shift the locus of religious experience in a geographically and experientially democratic direction. Thus, the renewed emphasis on Torah study and *tefilla* afforded opportunity for even far-flung exilic communities to worship. Indeed, this renewed emphasis on *talmud Torah* and *tefilla* partly helps to account for the linkage between the two that we identified earlier in this *shiur*.

An additional question concerns the relative importance of *talmud Torah* and other *mitzvot*. As paramount as Torah study is, the sages through the generations express different views concerning the precise relationship between *talmud Torah* and *tefilla*. In particular, this question was a significant point of dispute between early Chasidim and Mitnaggedim, with the former placing greater emphasis on prayer and the latter championing the primacy of Torah study.

An exchange cited in the Gemara (*Shabbat* 10a) shows that these two instincts go back millennia:

Rava observed Rav Hamnuna drawing out his prayer. He said, “You are putting aside eternal life and involving yourself with momentary life!”

And [Rav Hamnuna] explained, “Prayer has its time, and Torah study has its time.”

For Rava, whose view was echoed by the Lithuanian Mitnaggedim, allocating additional time to *tefilla* is an unjustifiable focus on ephemeral needs at the cost of the timeless value of Torah study. To borrow the words of Rambam, “Torah study is greater than prayer” (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 6:8). Rav Hamnuna, however, seems to allow more room for an emphasis on prayer. (See HaRav Lichtenstein’s “Prayer in the Teachings of Rav Soloveitchik,” <http://etzion.org.il/en/prayer-teachings-rav-soloveitchik-ztl>. (

Elsewhere, Rambam himself, drawing on his larger philosophical system, plays down the importance of Torah study relative to the study of metaphysics. In support of this view, he (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 4:13) points to *Sukka* 28b, which terms the mystical vision of the Chariot a “major matter” and the disputes of Abaye and Rava “a minor matter.”

Of course, Rambam’s view in this regard – along with numerous other elements of his Aristotelian philosophical system – have been subject to great dispute, including his interpretation of this phrase. In particular, Ritva and Meiri criticize his apparent elevation of metaphysics over Torah study. Ritva (ibid. s.v. *Davar*) insists that the Talmudic discussions are greater than the study of non-Jewish wisdom. The Gemara here refers specifically to aspects of Talmudic discussions that remain unresolved. Because they feature a lack of certainty, they are termed by the Gemara “a minor matter.” By contrast, settled Talmudic discussions are even greater than philosophical speculation. Ran (cited by the Kesef Mishneh, ad loc.) argues that the disputes of Abaye and Rava are only considered small matters relative to the more fundamental Tannaitic rulings which they had mastered.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The relationship between study and action provides another route to explore the centrality of *talmud Torah*. We will discuss this issue in upcoming *shiurim*.

1. For instance, Rav Michael Rosensweig notes this connection in a *shiur*. The recording is available at: <http://www.kby.org.il/hebrew/torat-yavneh/view.asp?id=6094>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a development of this theme, see Rabbi Daniel Feldman’s *shiur*, <http://www.yutorah.org/togo/5769/roshhashana/articles/Rosh_Hashanah_To-Go_-_5769_Rabbi_Daniel_Feldman.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See R. Haim Sabato, *Seeking His Presence: Conversations with Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)