YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

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**Shiur #04: The Purpose of *Talmud Torah*, Part 2**

Last week we began summarizing the different views concerning the goal of Torah study. After exploring the instrumentalist view, which sees *talmud Torah* as primarily a vehicle for attaining knowledge, as well as Chazon Ish’s view that Torah study refines our characters as commanded individuals, we noted that the Chasidic theology of panentheism, which maintains that God encompasses and supersedes the physical universe, inclines toward the view that the purpose of *talmud Torah* is to cultivate *deveikut*, clinging to the divine. We concluded by noting the position of R. Chayim Volozhin, who sees *talmud Torah* as essential to ensuring the universe’s ongoing existence. This week we will examine a few additional perspectives on the purpose of *talmud Torah*.

A fifth approach to the significance of Torah study links *talmud Torah* back to the revelation at Sinai: each time we study Torah, we reinforce our connection to that formative event. There are a variety of sources that lend support to this theory. For instance, the Gemara (*Berakhot* 22a, *Mo’ed Katan* 15a) seeks to account for the view of Rabbi Yehuda that one who experiences a seminal emission (*ba’al keri*) may not study Torah:

As it was taught in a *baraita*: It is written: “And you shall impart them to your children and your children’s children” (*Devarim* [4:9](https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.4.9)), and it is written thereafter: “The day that you stood before the Lord your God at Chorev” (*Devarim* [4:10](https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.4.10)). Just as below, the Revelation at Sinai was in reverence, fear, quaking, and trembling, so too here, in every generation, Torah must be studied with a sense of reverence, fear, quaking, and trembling.

This implies that, at least according to Rabbi Yehuda, the *halakhot* of daily engagement in Torah study, especially as concerns its emotional experience, are framed by that which was appropriate during *Matan Torah* proper. In particular, as we will see in future *shiurim*, public *talmud Torah*, such as Torah reading and *Hakhel*, exemplify this motif of Torah study particularly well.

**Additional Perspectives**

In addition to the reasons outlined above, we may note a number of additional benefits to be gained from Torah study. 17th-century proponents of *pilpul*, a style of Gemara study based on intense textual analysis, contended that Talmud study in particular helps to sharpen the intellectual abilities of its students. What is more, Torah study, especially compared to the previously dominant Temple-centric mode of worship, contains a democratic streak that helps to make religious experience available to a broader population. Thus, Rambam writes (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 3:1), based on *Yoma* 72b (see Rashi ibid. s.v. *Shelosha*): “Israel is crowned with three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of Priesthood, and the crown of Kingship... the crown of Torah stands ready for all of Israel [to take], as it says (*Devarim* 33:4), ‘The Torah was commanded by Moshe as an inheritance for the congregation of Yaakov.’ Anyone who desires can come and take it.” In modern times, when Torah is arguably being studied by more people and in greater quantity than at any previous point in history, we are witnesses to the fruit born of this opportunity.

**Complementary Approaches**

Of course, the different approaches we have outlined are far from mutually exclusive. Indeed, they may well be seen as complementary. For instance, R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady (*Shulchan Arukh Ha-rav* 3:4) maintains that there is a dual obligation: to study Torah and to know Torah. He derives this from the Gemara itself, which in one place (*Menachot* 99b) seems to rule that one need not study more than a minimal amount each morning and evening, and elsewhere (*Kiddushin* 30a) rules based on “*Ve-shinantam*” that one must know the entirety of the Torah. How can one come to know so much Torah by merely studying briefly twice a day? Apparently, he concludes, there is a dual obligation. It seems reasonable to suggest that these two views line up nicely with the different schools of thought we have surveyed. The obligation to **know** Torah correlates with the instrumentalist view; the obligation to **study**Torah is more easily understood according to the view that there is an intrinsic value of Torah study, such as *deveikut* (particularly apt for R. Shneur Zalman) or Chazon Ish’s ethic of submission. Indeed, reinforcing the theme of *deveikut*, R. Shneur Zalman writes elsewhere (*Tanya*, *Likutei Amarim* 34) that one creates for God an internal “tabernacle and habitation by engaging in the study of Torah.”

Another classical position in *Shulchan Arukh Ha-rav* may dovetail nicely with the suggestion that there are two aspects to Torah study. Earlier in his *Laws of Torah Study*, R. Shneur Zalman rules (2:12-13) that whereas one who studies the Oral Torah without understanding the words has fulfilled no mitzva, one who studies the Written Torah without understanding still fulfills the obligation of *talmud Torah*. We might explain the logic for this view as follows: the primary value of the Oral Torah is to understand the *halakhot* (i.e., the instrumentalist view). Thus, one who does not understand the words fails to fulfill one’s obligation. However, study of the written Torah is qualitatively different; the very encounter is significant, along the lines of the later interpretations we suggested.

Though there are various option for “bridging the gap” (as we will consider in upcoming *shiurim)*, the different approaches we have outlined underscore some of Torah study’s central dilemmas: the question of granting priority to practical versus theoretical study; the tension between clarifying the simple meaning of the law and innovation; the degree of freedom one is given in properly choosing a course of study; the importance of high-level Torah study for the masses and not just the intellectual elite; and the very legitimacy of analytical methods such as *derush* and *pilpul*. These and other crucial questions will drive our future discussions.

What is more, there is room to argue for evolution in the goals of Torah study throughout history. To take a relatively obvious example, Tanna’im and their predecessors assign great value to the ability to memorize accepted *halakhot*, simply to ensure the proper establishment of the halakhicbaseline for any analysis. Similarly, Rishonim place great stress upon the importance of studying to determine the practical halakha, while in more recent times, especially in 19th century Lithuanian *yeshiva* circles, theoretical analysis and study were paramount. Indeed, the various views we have discussed reflect this, as the medieval conception of *talmud Torah* tends to emphasize practical *halakhot*, while the theory of R. Chayim of Volozhin tends more toward the theoretical.[[1]](#footnote-1) Professor Isadore Twersky contrasts R. Yosef ibn Caspi’s utilitarian approach with later views:

This confrontation continues when we find the Maharal of Prague vehemently denouncing those who ridicule the study of Nezikin while revering the study of physics; he repeatedly exposes the fallacy of such argumentation. If we were to look ahead, we could see the Maharal's position as a historical fulcrum: on one hand reacting against the position established by Kaspi and on the other setting the stage for that position usually attributed to the two great contemporaries and antagonists of the beginning of the nineteenth century: R. Hayyim of Volohzin and R. Shneur Zalman of Ladi, the two great ideologues of pure Talmud study which is, in the final analysis, to be perceived as study of God's essence. All Talmud study is useful and perennially relevant; expending time and energy in order to understand even the discarded opinion in a debate or the wrong view in a controversy is unquestionably meritorious, for it is study of the word of God, it is thinking God's thoughts. Study per se is practical and need not seek to anchor itself in an external, self-transcending relevance. All Talmud study is self-validating and its universality should be the ideal for all. This, of course, is the absolute antithesis of Kaspi's restrictive attitude which would make Talmudic knowledge a purely professional concern nurtured by pragmatic or utilitarian criteria… (*Joseph ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual*, p. 246[[2]](#footnote-2))

Arguably, the turn toward conceptualization also reflects a new, expanded role for *talmud Torah* in the post-Enlightenment period. As Rabbi Meir Twersky astutely notes, “This caveat has become especially repercussive for post-Enlightenment Jewry. Increasingly, instruction in Torah has become necessary not only to teach proper *halakhic* observance, but also to inculcate enduring religious commitment and conviction.”[[3]](#footnote-3) While this argument was initially formulated in relation to women’s Torah study, it may also be relevant to the historical development of men’s study.

Although the picture is more complex than this space allows, it is a fair to say that the Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions about this differ. Already in the medieval period, whereas Sephardic scholars such as the Geonim and later the Rif sought to clarify the practical *halakha* as much as possible, Ashkenazim, particularly the Tosafists, placed a greater stress on dialectical study. (Rambam tends toward the Sephardic view in this regard, although his decision to include all his halakhic rulings in *Mishneh Torah* makes him something of an outlier.) In more recent times, it is no coincidence that the great Sephardic decisor R. Ovadya Yosef[[4]](#footnote-4) led the charge against the theoretical abstractions of the Lithuanian-style *yeshivot*, advocating for the prioritization of practical areas of study, such as *Berakhot* and *Mo’ed*, over more theoretical subjects such as *Nezikin*, *Zera’im* and *Kodashim*.

***Talmud Torah* as a Form of Self-Identification**

A final perspective on the nature of *talmud Torah* emerges from a consideration of the laws governing the mourner, who is prohibited from studying Torah. What is the basis of the mourner’s prohibition, and how might this rule reflect more broadly on the nature of *talmud Torah*?

The Gemara in *Mo’ed Katan* (15a) derives a series of prohibitions incumbent upon the mourner from a verse in *Yechezkel* (24:17), in which God instructs the prophet that although he will be stricken by a plague, he must abstain from engaging in typical mourning observances. He is therefore instructed “*He’anek dom*,” “Moan silently,” among other practices. On the basis of this verse, the Gemara derives the prohibitions against *she’eilat shalom* (greeting a friend) and Torah study. At first glance, the nature of the latter derivation is unclear. We understand the linkage between silence and not greeting a friend. The mourner often finds him or herself in an inward, anti-social state. It is therefore inappropriate for him to greet others. But the reasoning behind the prohibition of Torah study is unclear. Presumably, a mourner can study privately yet remain “silent.” How are we to understand the Gemara’s basis for the *issur* of *talmud Torah*?

Perhaps troubled by this strange linkage, some Rishonim reinterpreted the *issur* in light of another Gemara concerning Torah study on Tisha Be-Av. As the Gemara (*Ta’anit* 30a) points out, many of the prohibitions of *aveilut* apply on Tisha Be-Av as well, including that of *talmud Torah*. The Gemara also rules that one is permitted to study sorrowful materials, such as the relevant sections of *Iyov* and *Yirmeyahu*. Yet the Gemara, after citing this prohibition and adding that children similarly do not attend class on Tisha Be-Av, cites the verse from *Tehillim* (19:9), “*Pikudei Hashem yesharim mesammechei lev*,” “God’s precepts are right, rejoicing the heart.” This implies that the *issur* *talmud Torah* on Tisha Be-Av is rooted not in “*He’anek dom*,” but in the fact that *talmud Torah* is an inherently joyous experience, which contravenes the spirit of Tisha Be-Av, the saddest day on the Jewish calendar.

Based on this Gemara, some Rishonim seek to reinterpret the prohibition of Torah study for a typical mourner. Rabbeinu Tam (cited by Tosafot, *Mo’ed Katan* 21a, s.v. *Ve-asur*), for example, while having initially held that a mourner is barred from all forms of Torah study, concluded in his old age that a mourner may also study Torah that is mournful in nature. Ramban (*Torat Ha-adam*, cited in *Beit Yosef, YD* 384) cites various views on this subject. According to Rabbeinu Tam, the true conceptual basis for the mourner’s *issur* is *“Pikudei Hashem yesharim mesammechei lev*.” As for “*He’anek dom*,” Rabbeinu Tam argues that the verse cannot be taken as the literal source for the mourning prohibitions. In support of this view, he points to the prohibition of wearing *tefillin*, which only applies only on the first day of mourning, despite there being nothing in the verse to support this conclusion. Similarly, Rabbeinu Tam concludes, *“He’anek dom”* is not the true basis for barring the mourner from engaging in *talmud Torah*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Others, including Rabbeinu Yitzchak (cited by Tosafot above; cf. Meiri, *Mo’ed Katan* 15a, s.v. *Avel*), disagree, maintaining that there remains a basic distinction between the nature of the prohibition for typical mourners versus the prohibition on Tisha Be-Av. In Meiri’s words, “For the *avel,* the matter depends on silence; whereas on Tisha Be-Av, it is only a matter of suffering.”

Assuming we do take the view that the mourner’s prohibition is truly rooted in “silence,” we must inquire more deeply as to its reasoning. The mourner, after all, is not barred from speaking. And if the matter is dependent on interacting with others, as the *issur* of exchanging pleasantries would appear to imply, why is he barred from private Torah study?[[6]](#footnote-6)

Another perplexing detail in the Gemara should be noted in this context. *Mo’ed Katan* 21a rules that if the mourner is needed by the community, he may teach them Torah. This seems unusual: if he is barred from Torah study, why do we relax the prohibition simply because he is needed by the community? Similarly, the Yerushalmi (*Mo’ed Katan* 3:5, cited in *Beit Yosef, YD* 384), rules that a mourner who feels compelled to study (literally *lahut achar ha-Torah*, ignited to pursue Torah) may do so. Again, why break the rules simply for one who wants to study? Do we permit milk and meat for someone who craves a cheeseburger?

To appreciate what is happening, let us turn to a classic *aggada* in *Nida* (30b). The Gemara teaches:

R. Simlai delivered the following discourse: What is the fetus like in its mother’s womb? A folded writing tablet. Its hands rest on its two temples respectively… A light burns above its head and it looks and sees from one end of the world to the other, as it is said, “Then his lamp shined above my head, and by His light I walked through darkness” (*Iyov* 29:3)... And there is no time in which a man enjoys greater happiness than in those days, for it is said, “O that I were as the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me” (ibid. v. 2). It is also taught all the Torah from beginning to end, for it is said, “And he taught me, and said unto me: Let your heart hold fast my words, keep my commandments and live” (*Mishlei* 4:4), and it is also said, “When God was familiar in my tent” (*Iyov* 29:4).

What could this possibly mean? Why learn in order to forget?

As Rav Soloveitchik notes in his article “Redemption, Prayer, *Talmud Torah*” (*Tradition* 17:2, pp. 55-72),[[7]](#footnote-7) this passage is highly reminiscent of the Platonic theory of anamnesis, which asserts that all learning is really a form of recollection.[[8]](#footnote-8) While at least in some instances Plato presents this notion on the basis of the immortality of the soul, the Gemara does not invoke the transmigration of the soul. Instead, as the Rav contends, the Rabbis seem to be suggesting that the Torah is an essential part of our identity. In the Rav’s words:

R. Simlai wanted to tell us that when a Jew studies Torah he is confronted with something which is not foreign and extraneous, but rather intimate and already familiar, because he has already studied it, and the knowledge was stored up in the recesses of his memory and became part of him. He studies, in effect, his own stuff. Learning is the recollection of something familiar. The Jew studying Torah is like the amnesia victim who tries to reconstruct from fragments the beautiful world he once experienced. In other words, by learning Torah man returns to his own self; man finds himself, and advances toward a charted, illuminated and speaking I-existence. Once he finds himself, he finds redemption. (ibid. 69)

In light of Rav Soloveitchik’s striking thesis, we may better understand the nature of the mourner's exclusion from *talmud Torah*. *Talmud Torah* is a form of self-expression in that it constitutes a search for personal identity. By learning, we find not only the wisdom of Torah but also, in a sense, our deeper selves. Such a search for personal identity is contrary to the experience of the mourner. An *avel* experiences a sense of alienation not only from those around him (as exemplified by the prohibition of *she’eilat shalom*) but also from himself. For this reason, the personal search of Torah study runs counter to the experience of the mourner, who is torn asunder by the terrifying news of personal loss.

Armed with this interpretation, we may return to the two puzzling *halakhot* we noted above. If Torah study is prohibited, why may the *avel* teach if he is needed by the community? Perhaps the reason for this leniency is that in this instance, the mourner’s motivation in studying is not to forge one’s own identity but to teach others. In this situation, there is a unique reason for leniency.

We may similarly explain the passage in the Yerushalmi regarding someone who is emotionally attached to *talmud Torah*. Due to one’s love for learning, one whose identity is so inextricably interwoven with Torah study will not be capable of foregoing one’s sense of personal identity during the mourning period. For such an individual, there is no use in prohibiting Torah study during this period of *aveilut*.

This approach allows for a fuller appreciation of the importance of *talmud Torah*. To properly grasp Torah study allows us to understand not only God’s will, but also the Torah that He has implanted within us.

1. See, for example: Norman Solomon, *The Analytic Movement: Hayyim Soloveitchik and His Circle*; Chaim Saiman, “The Turn to Conceptualism in Nineteenth-Century Jewish Law,” in *The Journal of Law and Religion* 21 (2006), pp. 39-100; and Benjamin Brown, *The Hazon Ish* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See R. Natan Slifkin, “The Goal of Torah Study,” available at: <http://www.rationalistjudaism.com/2010/05/goal-of-torah-study.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.torahweb.org/torah/special/2003/rtwe_JA_women.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Introduction, Yabia Omer*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It should also be noted that some, such as Maharsha (*Taanit* 30a s.v. *Ve-asur*), maintain that even the prohibition on Tisha Be-Av is not rooted in *simcha* but in the fact that Torah study distracts one from focusing on the mourning of this day. According to Maharsha, the Gemara’s citation of *“Pikudei Hashem yesharim”* pertains specifically to children’s Torah study, as they are barred from learning even though they may be too young to spend their day focusing on mourning regardless. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Shulchan Arukh YD* 384:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Footnote 20. Article available at: [http://traditionarchive.org/news/originals/Volume%2017/No.%202/Redemption,%20Prayer,Talmud.pdf](http://traditionarchive.org/news/originals/Volume%2017/No.%202/Redemption%2C%20Prayer%2CTalmud.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See also David Flatto, “The Angel’s Oath: The Relationship of Hazal to the Platonic Doctrine of Recollection,” available at: <http://text.rcarabbis.org/the-angel%E2%80%99s-oath-the-relationship-of-hazal-to-the-platonic-doctrine-of-recollection/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)