YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

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**Shiur #05: *Torah Lishmah***

As we noted in a previous *shiur*, to grasp the goals of Torah study, we must understand the concept of *Torah lishmah*. In this *shiur,* we will briefly summarize the major views on *Torah lishmah* (and its converse, *Torah she-lo lishmah)*, and then we will tie them back to the purpose of Torah study.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Before turning to *Torah lishmah* per se, let us consider briefly the concept of “*lishmah*” as it appears in Halakha generally, e.g. the Gemara which states (*Pesachim* 50b et al.):

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: “A person should always be engaged in Torah and *mitzvot*, even *she-lo lishmah*, for doing so *she-lo* *lishmah* leads one to doing so *lishmah*.”

We also find *lishmah* used in connection with a few distinct *mitzvot,* such as the writing of *sifrei Torah*, *tefillin* and *mezuzot*; the tying of *tzitzit*; the baking of *matzot*; and (following some views) the building of *sukkot*. Still, *talmud Torah lishmah* occupies a unique place in the constellation of *mitzvot*. Indeed, even the aforementioned passage in *Pesachim* underscores this point. By urging a person to study Torah **and** perform *mitzvot* *lishmah*, the Gemara implies that *Torah lishmah* is uniquely significant.

Numerous sources urge one to study Torah *lishmah*. *Avot* 4:5 warns of the consequences of failing to do so:

Do not make the Torah a crown to magnify yourself with, or a spade with which to dig. So would Hillel say: “One who make personal use of the crown [of Torah] shall perish.” Hence, one who benefits oneself from the words of Torah removes one’s life from the world.

While this *mishna* does not explicitly invoke the terminology of *Torah lishmah*, it clearly decries one who uses Torah for the sake of self-aggrandizement.

In a positive vein, *Avot* 6:1 offers glowing approbation for one who studies *Torah lishmah*:

Rabbi Meir says: “Anyone who engages in Torah for its own sake merits many things, and moreover makes the entire world worthwhile.”

The Mishna goes on to list a wide range of additional characteristics which such an individual acquires.

Amplifying *Avot*’s ebullient praise of *Torah lishmah*, *Sanhedrin* 99b records:

R. Alexandri said: “He who studies the Torah for its own sake makes peace in the Upper Family and the Lower Family, as it is written (*Yeshayahu* 25:7), “‘Or let him take hold of my strength [i.e., the Torah], that he may make peace with me; and he shall make peace with me.’”

We will cite two more sources that laud *talmud Torah lishmah*. *Taanit* 7a records that for anyone who studies *Torah lishmah*, Torah becomes a portion of life, but for anyone who studies *she-lo lishmah,* it becomes poisonous. Finally, *Sukka* 49b explains the famous phrase from *Mishlei* (31:26) “*Torat chesed”* by associating *chesed* (loving-kindness) with *Torah lishmah*.

We should have no doubts that the Gemara assigns astronomical value to *Torah lishmah*. Less clear, however, is the precise meaning of this celebrated activity.

First of all, the term has some negative implications. As noted, *Avot* 4:5 criticizes one who studies Torah primarily for self-aggrandizement. Indeed, Rambam (*Commentary to Mishna* ad loc., *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 3:11) uses this *mishna* in his diatribe against accepting money for studying or teaching Torah. (We will have occasion to return to Rambam’s ruling in a later *shiur*.)

Moreover, as *mori u-zekeini* Dr. Norman Lamm notes in his book *Torah Lishmah*, the pejorative quality of *Torah she-lo lishmah* means that one may not study with the specific intention **not** to perform the *mitzvot* about which one is learning. This too undermines the telos of *talmud Torah*.

What of the positive meaning of this term? For our purposes, it is quite significant that many of the commentators’ interpretations of *Torah lishmah* line up neatly with the approaches we outlined in previous *shiurim* to the purpose of Torah study. Some commentaries (*Sefer Chasidim* 944; *Midrash Shmuel* to *Avot* 3:9, cited by *Tosefot Yom Tov* to *Avot* 4:5), for example, take *Torah lishmah* to mean simply “for the purpose of halakhicobservance.” The majority of commentaries, however, understand *Torah lishmah* differently. Indeed, many of those who champion approaches to Torah study which do not merely focus on knowledge and practical observance turn to *Torah lishmah* as proof of their position. Thus, it is precisely in the post-Enlightenment era, as noted in the previous *shiur*, that we encounter a shift in the definition of *Torah lishmah*.

In one of the seminal treatments of this topic, in his *Tanya*, R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady (*Likutei Amarim* 5) declares: “*Lishmah* is to bind one’s soul to God by understanding the Torah, each person according to that individual’s understanding.” As we suggested in an earlier *shiur*, this view has deep roots in R. Shneur Zalman’s mystical theology, reflecting the view that the highest goal of religious life is to cling to God through Torah and *mitzvot*.

This may be seen in Rambam’s writing as well. After reviewing the importance of *talmud Torah* *lishmah* (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:5-6), Rambam offers a paean to the importance of worshipping God out of love:

Anyone who engages in Torah in order to receive a reward or in order to avoid misfortune engages in Torah not for its own sake; but anyone who engages in it neither from fear nor from a desire to receive reward engages in it for its own sake. Our sages have taught: A person should always be engaged in Torah even not for its own sake, for doing so not for its own sake leads one to doing so for its own sake. Therefore when we teach children and women and masses of common people, we only teach them to serve out of fear and in order to receive a reward. Once their understanding deepens and they gain additional wisdom, then we reveal this secret to them little by a little and accustom them to this concept gently, until they grasp and understand and serve God out of love.

It is a clearly known matter, that love of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is not bound up in a person’s heart until that individual engages it constantly as is appropriate and abandons everything else in the world but this, as God commanded and said: “With all your heart and with all your soul" ([*Devarim* 6:5](https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.6.5)). Love will be according to understanding: if [understanding] is slight, [love] will be slight, and if [understanding] is great, [love] will be great. Therefore one must set aside [time] for oneself to understand and grasp the wisdom and understanding that the Creator provides one according to each person’s ability to understand and grasp, as we have explained in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*.

It is beyond the scope of our discussion to fully analyze this passage in the context of Rambam’s Weltanschauung, but it is inescapable that he places *Torah lishmah* at a crucial juncture, the closing words of *Sefer Ha-madda,* the first and most philosophical book of *Mishneh Torah*. For Rambam, *Torah lishmah* reflects the wider significance of serving God out of **love**.

Rav Chayim Volozhin (*Nefesh Ha-chayim* 4:2) famously critiques the Chasidic view of *Torah lishmah* as a path to *deveikut*, clinging to God.

*Lishmah* does not mean *deveikut*, as most people currently believe. After all, our Rabbis say in the Midrash (*Midrash* *Tehillim* 1:8) that King David asked God that whoever engages in reciting *Tehillim* should be considered in His eyes equivalent to one who engages in studying [the abstruse tractates of] *Nega’im* and *Ohalot*. This clearly shows that studying Talmudic law, in depth and with dedication, is far superior and more beloved to God than reciting *Tehillim*.

If *lishmah* were to mean *deveikut*, and engaging in Torah would essentially be dependent on this idea, what more wondrous *deveikut* could there be than reciting *Tehillim* suitably all day long… Moreover, it would have been sufficient for the matter of *deveikut* to study one tractate or one chapter or even one *mishna*, engaging in it throughout one’s life in *deveikut*. But this is not what we have found…

This leads Rav Chayim (ibid. 3) to pose an alternative definition of *Torah lishmah*:

But in truth, the concept of *lishmah* means for the sake of the Torah… all your speech and give-and-take in words of Torah must be for the sake of the Torah.

In support of this contention, R. Chayim cites a comment of Rosh to *Nedarim 62a*. In the Gemara there, R. Eliezer bar R. Tzadok exhorts: “Do things for the sake of their performance, and speak of them for their own sake.” Rosh explains that one’s study should be **for the sake of****Torah**. R. Chayim seizes on this view, contending that Rosh’s words support the conclusion that *Torah lishmah* means for the sake of Torah, not for the sake of our relationship with God. What could it possibly mean to say that one studies Torah for the sake of the Torah itself?

To explain this concept, R. Chayim cultivates a Kabbala-influenced conception in which the study of the Torah carries celestial implications: by studying Torah on earth, one creates heavenly bodies above. In developing this thesis, R. Chayim elevates Torah study to a matter of cosmic significance. (Indeed, this view finds support in the above-mentioned citation from *Sanhedrin* 99b, which asserts: “He who studies the Torah for its own sake makes peace in the [celestial] Upper Family and the [earthly] Lower Family.”)

It is worth adding that, at least in one passage (*Orot Ha-Torah* 2:1), Rav Kook follows R. Chayim’s view. In a moving passage, he posits that while the Torah is complete, we are deficient in our ability to achieve wisdom. Torah study draws out that inherent wisdom, which, given the varied nature of human personalities, manifests itself differently for each person. Thus, one contributes something unique to Torah itself by engaging in its study *lishmah*.

Granted, R. Chayim’s reading of *Nedarim* 62a is not necessarily the obvious one. The precise phrasing is unclear, and many commentators, e.g. Rashi and Ran ad loc., adopt the diametrically opposed view: that R. Eliezer is advocating engaging in Torah and *mitzvot* “for the sake of heaven.” If anything, the surface reading of the Gemara seems to accord more with the negative interpretations we cited above. Instead of studying for the sake of self-aggrandizement, one should study for reasons of devotion alone; indeed, the next words essentially restate the proscription of *Avot* 4:5 against making Torah a crown or a spade.

While there is much more to say about the subject of *Torah lishmah*, for our purposes, this brief review suffices to demonstrate our basic thesis: the variety of views regarding the purpose of *talmud Torah* are clearly manifest in the different opinions regarding the meaning of *Torah lishmah*.

Next week, we will explore another question that relates to the purpose of Torah study: must one set aside Torah study for the fulfillment of other *mitzvot*? We will consider the striking irony that *talmud Torah*, considered the equivalent of all other *mitzvot*, may in fact be set aside more readily than nearly any other commandment.

1. A more comprehensive treatment of this subject is well beyond the scope of this series. Fortunately for VBM readers, Rav Elyakim Krumbein has authored an entire series on this subject, available at <http://etzion.org.il/en/topics/torah-lishmah>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)