YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

**By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

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**This shiur is dedicated in memory of**  
**Miriam Heller z"l**  
**whose yahrzeit falls on the seventh of Shvat,**  
**by her niece, Vivian Singer.**  
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**Shiur #14: Autonomy in Torah Learning**

The past few *shiurim* centered on the scope of the obligation of *talmud* Torah. Today we turn to the question of how one chooses what to learn. In particular, how strictly regulated ought the Torah curriculum be?

*Prima facie*, this question might be dependent on the purpose of Torah study. If the focus is upon acquiring practical knowledge, we might accordingly limit the scope of flexibility available to the student. Of course, there is much in Torah that falls under the wider rubric of practical halakha, leaving substantial autonomy to the student. Still, if *talmud Torah*’s primary aim is to educate a student in halakhic observance, we might discourage the student whose heart is drawn to the study of other Torah disciplines, such as *Tanakh* or Jewish thought. If, however, the primary thrust of *talmud Torah* is for the sake of *deveikut*, clinging to the divine, greater latitude is possible.

Indeed, Rav Chayim Volozhin in *Nefesh Ha-chayim* raises this possibility, albeit in a critical vein. Rav Chayim points out that according to the Chasidic doctrine of *deveikut*, the content of one’s learning ought to be beside the point. If anything, we should prioritize the study of *Tehillim*, which, for most students, more readily inspires passion than the study of obscure sections of Gemara. This view, however, contradicts the rabbinical preference for King David’s study of obscure legal sections over psalms. While Rav Chayim herein may be caricaturing Chasidic study, his point is pertinent to our larger discussion: if mastering content is the aim, a set curriculum is ideal; if having an intrinsic religious experience is the goal, flexibility is advantageous.

Moreover, let us consider the central role of joy in *talmud Torah,* which we have discussed previously. From an educational standpoint, the stronger a student’s voice is, the more enjoyable study becomes. Furthermore, research indicates that when students play key roles in choosing their courses of study, they tend to feel more invested in their learning and are therefore more successful.

Bearing all this in mind, let us turn to the two major texts that address this subject, *Kiddushin* 30a and *Avoda Zara* 19a. These sources convey contrasting messages regarding the degree of autonomy a student should be afforded.

*Kiddushin* 30a, which we have mentioned previously, cites the ruling of Rav Safra in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya that one’s study should be split into three, one-third each for *Mikra*, Mishna and Talmud. Taken literally, this would indicate a fairly regimented course of study. The Rishonim take this further by endorsing a course of study which is dominated by the study of the Babylonian Talmud. According to Rabbeinu Tam (cited by Tosafot, *Sanhedrin* 24a, s.v. *Balul*), this is because the *Bavli* contains an admixture of all three elements. According to Rambam (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:12), this is because Rav Safra’s directions are only for beginners; for an advanced student, “one’s attention should be focused on Gemara as the primary pursuit, according to one’s ambition and ability.” *Avot* 5:23 similarly prescribes ages for Torah study: five for *Mikra*, ten for Mishna, and fifteen for Talmud.

On the other hand, *Avoda Zara* 19a notes: “When they came to this verse, ‘But whose desire is for God’s Torah’ (*Tehillim* 1:2), Rabbi commented: ‘One can only learn well that part of the Torah which is one’s heart's desire.’” While there is not necessarily a direct contradiction between the *sugyot*, we do get a different sense from these two passages. Is it possible to resolve this apparent tension? Based on the commentaries, a number of answers may be offered:

1. Rambam and the Mechabber omit Rabbi’s statement in their respective codifications of the laws of Torah study, implying that the *sugya* is not accepted as a matter of practical halakha. Possibly, they see the *sugyot* as conflicting, choosing to accept the first and reject the second. Alternatively, Rabbi’s comment may be aggadic in nature, which would exclude it from the purview of halakhic compendia.
2. *Yalkut Shimoni* (*Tehillim* 614) writes that one has the right to choose not one’s course of study but one’s teacher. This recalls Yehoshua ben Perachya’s directive: “Make for yourself a teacher” *(Avot* 1:6).[[1]](#footnote-1)
3. Rashi (*Avoda Zara* 19a, s.v. *Mi-makom*) understands that one may choose the tractate which one studies. The student thus retains a significant degree of autonomy.[[2]](#footnote-2)
4. Meiri (*Avoda Zara* 19a, s.v. *Le-olam*) implies this refers specifically to the beginning of one’s learning. Although he does not spell out the logic, presumably Meiri means to say that in order to entice the student to become excited about learning at the outset of the journey, we offer choice. Based on Meiri’s comment, we can suggest that student input is important at the earliest stages of one’s study, whereas the stricter criteria apply to a later stage in one’s learning.
5. In *Derashot Ha-Ran* 5, s.v. *U-lefi*, Ran connects this statement to Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa’s dictum (*Avot* 3:9) that fear of Heaven is a prerequisite for success in Torah study. Ran contends that only one who aspires to fear of Heaven will find the laws to be opportunities rather than burdens to be avoided.[[3]](#footnote-3) Echoing the educational point we made earlier in this *shiur*, Ran suggests that much the same is true of learning generally: only the motivated student will progress significantly. Ran, it would appear, believes that Rabbi is formulating a more general principle, urging the educator to ensure that a student is inspired before teaching.

Radbaz (*Responsa* 3:472) formulates a strikingly similar idea in regard to prayer:

Prayer should be only in a place which one’s heart desires, just as we say that Torah study should be only in a place which one’s heart desires. The reason for this is the following: when one sees a person whom one likes, the soul is aroused to full concentration, the mind is broadened, and the heart is filled with joy.

For Radbaz, a person who feels comfortable is more motivated and therefore able to find greater success in study and prayer.

If we return to the text, we find that Rava echoes Rabbi’s sentiment and goes a bit further:

Rava says: One should always learn in the place one’s heart desires, as it says, “But whose desire is for God’s Torah.”

And Rava says: At the beginning, it is attributed to the Holy One, Blessed be He; but at the end, it is attributed to [the student], as it says “Whose desire is for God’s Torah, and in his Torah he will meditate day and night.”

This indicates that *talmud Torah* involves a transformation on the part of the Torah and, possibly, on the part of the student as well. The Torah, to borrow Maharal’s phraseology (*Chiddushei Aggadot* 4:48), “has a relevance to its recipient, for it is called one’s Torah when one receives it. Therefore one should study only from the place one’s heart desires, making the matter so relevant that it is called that person’s Torah.” For Maharal, Rava is teaching us not just a crucial pedagogic tool but also a fundamental insight into the nature of *talmud Torah*.

On *Kiddushin* 32b, it is Rava himself who uses this verse and his homily to establish the halakhic rule that Torah scholars may waive the deference due them, as the Torah is theirs. Through the process of learning, the Torah becomes an essential part of one’s personality.

This, perhaps above all, is the fundamental insight that *Avoda Zara* 19a means to convey, providing the most powerful argument in favor of a meaningful degree of autonomy in one’s own learning. While many important halakhic and logistical factors also play into the practical determination of a yeshiva curriculum, the Gemara reminds us that student choice ought to play a crucial role in the learning process.

1. See, however, *Meshanneh Halakhot* 17:149, who insists that the primary concern is the subject one studies, not the instructor. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Maharsha (*Avoda Zara* 19a, s.v. *Be-makom*) points out that Rabbi’s statement is echoed by Rava, in a slightly different manner: “One should always learn in the place one’s heart desires.” On this basis, he contends that both are true: Rabbi teaches that the student has the right to choose the tractate or book, and then Rava adds that one may also select the teacher. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This interpretation follows Rambam’s reading of that *mishna*. See the discussion in *shiur* 9 of the present series. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)