YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

**By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

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**In memory of Rabbi Dr. Joseph I. Singer z"l,**

**Rabbi Emeritus of Manhattan Beach Jewish Center**

**and son-in-law of Dr. Chaim Heller z"l,**

**whose yahrzeit falls on 12 Adar,**

**by his daughter, Vivian Singer**

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**Shiur #19: The Ideal Location for Learning — The *Beit Midrash***

*Chazal* place a significant emphasis on the location in which one learns. Accordingly, in this *shiur* we will explore the subject of the sanctity of the *beit midrash* (study hall), particularly as it relates to that of the *beit knesse*t (synagogue).

In Tractate *Megilla*, the Mishna dedicates half of Chapter *Bnei Ha-ir* to the laws of the sanctity of the *beit knesset*, but the *beit midrash* is not mentioned. However, the Gemara does raise the issue:

Rav Papi said in the name of Rava: To turn a *beit knesset* into a *beit midrash* is permitted; to turn a *beit midrash* into a *beit knesset* is forbidden. Rav Papa, however, said in the name of Rava the opposite.

Rav Acha said: The statement of Rav Papi is the more probable, since Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said that it is permissible to make a *beit knesset* into a *beit midrash*.

This seems conclusive. (*Megilla* 26b-27a)

Thus, there is a question as to whether the sanctity of the *beit knesset* or *beit midrash* is greater. What is more, the Gemara seems to conclude that the *beit midrash* is endowed with a high level of sanctity. Therefore, while one may repurpose a *beit knesset* for use as a *beit midrash*, the reverse is not permissible, because such an act diminishes the space’s sanctity. This position is codified by Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 11:14) and the Mechabber (*OC* 153:1). Similarly, the Mechabber (*YD* 259:2) rules that money that has been allocated to a *beit knesset* may be reapportioned for Torah learning, but not vice versa.

Rambam indicates that the higher sanctity of the *beit* *midrash* is manifest in additional ways. In *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (4:9), when underscoring the reverence that is due the *beit midrash*, Rambam emphasizes that “the sanctity of a *beit midrash* is more stringent than that of *batei kneisiyot*.” Indeed, his placement of the laws of Torah study in *Sefer Ha-madda*, the first volume of *Mishneh Torah,* and those of prayer in *Sefer Ahava,* the next volume, suggests that *talmud Torah* is assigned a higher rung in Rambam’s ladder of values than prayer is. Indeed, given his commitment to intellectualism, it is only natural that Rambam privileges the status of study over that of prayer.

This approach encounters some difficulty when we consider a number of *halakhot* regarding a *beit midrash* that do not hold for a *beit knesset*. For instance, Ran, as codified by Rema (*OC* 151:1), rules that one may eat in a *beit midrash* under any circumstances, unlike a *beit knesset* (Mishna Berura ad loc. explains that for a Torah scholar, “the *beit midrash* is one’s home”). The *Mechabber* rules that one may take a catnap in a *beit* *midrash* but not in a *beit knesset* (ibid. 151:3). In regard to the structure’s prominence, Rambam rules that a *beit knesset* ideally ought to be constructed in the highest part of town; no such law exists regarding a *beit* *midrash*. How are we to understand this paradox?

Let us begin by noting that both the *beit knesset* and *beit midrash* derive their significance from the same cataclysmic event, namely the destruction of the First Temple. Once the Jews are cast into exile, the rabbis begin to promulgate a particularly democratized form of Judaism, in which scholars replace prophets and prayer services replace Temple services. As part of this process of geographic and hierarchical transition, the *beit midrash* and *beit knesset* substitute for the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, the Temple. Indeed, this is how Rabbi Yitzchak expounds God’s declaration (*Yechezkel* 11:16) “Yet I have been for them a miniature *mikdash*” — “These are the *batei kneisiyot* and *batei midrashot* of Babylonia.” This helps to account for the general assumption that many of the same laws which apply to the sanctity of a *beit knesset* apply to the sanctity of a *beit midrash* (see *Megilla* 28a; Rambam, *Hilkhot Tefilla* 11:6; *OC* 151:1). It is thus appropriate that this connection is derived from Yechezkel, an exilic prophet.

Indeed, the conceptual parallel between the *beit midrash* and the *beit knesset* as localized, democratized loci of religious experience is probably best exemplified by the practice of various Amoraim to pray and study in the same location:

Abbayei said as well: At first I used to study in my house and pray in the Synagogue. Once I heard the saying of Rabbi Chiya bar Ammi in the name of Ulla, “Since the day that the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One, blessed be He, has nothing in His world but the four cubits of Halakha alone,” I pray only in the place where I study.

Rabbi Ammi and Rabbi Assi, though they had thirteen synagogues in Tiberias, prayed only between the pillars where they used to study. (*Berakhot* 8a)

Why is the *beit midrash* superior? As noted previously, for Rambam and those thinkers who follow his intellectualist line of thought, the preference for Talmud Torah is easily understood. This dovetails with the preference for *talmud Torah* later expressed by expositors of the Lithuanian school of thought, including giants such as the Vilna Gaon, Rav Chayim of Volozhin, and the scions of the Brisker dynasty.

To this we may add another suggestion, which is best understood in light of the *deveikut* approach to *talmud Torah* (as outlined in the third *shiur* of this series). If prayer allows us to speak to God, *talmud Torah* enables us to cling to Him. We may therefore conclude that the increased holiness of the *beit midras*h owes to the greater connection to God one achieves in the act of learning than in the act of prayer. As we have seen, God may now be found in “the four cubits of Halakha” only; God’s presence is most manifest in the *beit midrash*.

This latter approach also helps to account for the numerous parallels the rabbis draw between Torah study and prophecy.[[1]](#footnote-1) In a sense, Torah study is a form of divine revelation in which God appears to us, even in a world bereft of literal prophecy.

Why then does the *beit midrash* have leniencies associated with it? Now we turn to the initial source for the *mitzva* of *talmud Torah*, namely the first *parasha* of *Keriat Shema*. In this section, Moshe charges the Jewish people to study “when you stay at home and when you go on the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (*Devarim* 6:7). Torah study is a relatively informal activity, one that is woven into our everyday lives. While it is certainly appropriate to prepare for *talmud Torah*, there is no long lead-up to study. As Rabbeinu Tam (Tosafot, *Berakhot* 11b, s.v. *She-kevar*) proposes in accounting for the *halakha* that a single recitation of *Birkhot Ha-Torah* lasts throughout the day, we are constantly engaged in learning to some degree. Indeed, the Mishna (*Berakhot* 4:2) records that Rabbi Nechunya ben Ha-kaneh would recited a daily prayer upon entering and another upon exiting the *beit midrash*.

*Tefilla* is different, as we see in Tractate *Berakhot.*

One should not stand up to pray except in a reverent state of mind. The pious one of old used to wait an hour before praying in order that they might direct their thoughts to God. Even if a king greets one who is praying, one should not answer him: even if a snake is wound round one’s heel, one should not stop. (Mishna 5:1)

The rabbis have taught: one may neither stand to pray in an atmosphere of sorrow nor in an atmosphere of laziness, nor in an atmosphere of laughter, nor in an atmosphere of conversation, nor in an atmosphere of frivolity, nor in an atmosphere of purposeless matters. Rather, one should approach prayer in an atmosphere imbued with the joy of a mitzva. (Gemara 31a).

Rambam comprehensively enumerates preparatory elements for prayer:

Five things prevent one from praying, even though the time [for prayer] has arrived
1) the purification of one's hands;
2) the covering of nakedness;
3) the purity of the place of prayer;
4) things that might bother and distract one; and
5) the proper intention of one's heart.

(*Hilkhot Tefilla* 4:1)

A person who prays must be careful to tend to [the following] eight matters. [However,] if one is pressured, confronted by circumstances beyond one’s control, or transgresses and does not attend to one them, they are not of absolute necessity. They are
1) standing;
2) facing the Temple;
3) preparation of one’s body;
4) proper clothing;
5) proper place;
6) control of one’s voice;
7) bowing; and
8) prostration.

(*Hilkhot Tefilla* 5:1)

No such thirteen-item checklist exists for *talmud Torah.* Torah study is intrinsically a more informal experience than is prayer.

Another *halakha* lends support to this distinction. Although the Gemara exempts a *beit knesset* from affixing a *mezuza*, Mordekhai (*Halakhot Ketanot* 961) obligates a *beit midrash* to do so, citing a Yerushalmi (*Megilla* 4:12) in support of his position. Bach (*YD* 286) explains that while one not does not dwell in the *beit knesset* (with the exceptions of those *batei knesset* that contain actual living quarters), it is common to use the *beit midrash* all day long. While other Rishonim (Rambam, *Hilkhot Mezuza* 6:6; Tosafot, *Yoma* 11b, s.v. *She-ein*) reject this differentiation, Mordekhai's distinction fits nicely with the theory we have developed.

Returning to our initial question, this insight enables us to account for the leniencies regarding *talmud Torah* that we noted above. One may eat and nap in a *beit midrash* because Torah study is more organically woven into our everyday lives than prayer. The *beit knesset*, which marks a more formal encounter with the Divine, ought to be modeled directly after the Temple, and therefore, like the Temple, ought to be constructed in a place of prominence. On the other hand, “the *beit midrash* is one’s home.” This unique status generates a number of leniencies concerning the *beit midrash*, particularly in comparison with the *beit knesset*. Still, these differences, instead of implying that the *beit midrash* is assigned lesser status than the *beit knesset*, suggest that the relatively informal, intimate experience of Torah study differs qualitatively from the more formal ceremony of prayer. It is the availability of this experience of *deveikut* that is the distinguishing factor in the sanctity of the *beit midrash*.

1. See <http://www.thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/2017/6/9/hillels-living-god>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)