YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Before Sinai: Jewish Values and Jewish Law**

**By Rav Dr. Judah Goldberg**

**Shiur #61: Spirituality (16):**

**Spiritual Ambition**

This *shiur* continues to explore the implications of our *Avot*’s spiritual legacy.In what ways does it affirm and encourage spiritual aspiration beyond the calling of the law? Can it grant validity even to aspiration that conflicts with the law?

**Ambition Beyond Obligation**

Must one look to perform *mitzvot* even when he or she is exempt? Harav Lichtenstein briefly addresses this question in a [responsum](https://etzion.org.il/en/halakha/orach-chaim/holidays/travelling-and-mitzva-sukka) about the obligation to eat and sleep in a *sukka* during youth trips that are run over the intermediate days of Sukkot. The first part of the responsum is a characteristic, penetrating analysis of the mitzva of *sukka* and the exemption of travelers – *berit Sinai* scholarship at its best. But the responsum then transitions to another subject:

The existence of formal exemptions from positive *mitzvot* is not the exclusive nor the only decisive way of gauging whether to perform them. We do not speak of actual evasive trickery (*ha’arama*) – itself a significant problem in halakha and belief – and this is not the forum to relate to it. Even not relating fully to a mitzva is problematic, even when it involves ignoring and not evading.

As evidence, Harav Lichtenstein recruits a number of Rabbinic statements, most prominently with regard to the mitzva of *tzitzit*. Only one who dons a four-cornered garment must concern himself with affixing *tzitzit* to it; for one who avoids such a garment altogether, the mitzva has no relevance. Yet, *Menachot* 41a chastises Rav Ketina for doing exactly that[[1]](#footnote-2) – just as Machlon and Kilyon were critiqued for leaving the Land of Israel in legally permissible circumstances. Apparently, formal obligation does not fully describe the expectations made upon a Jew regarding his or her relationship to *mitzvot*.[[2]](#footnote-3)

But what other categories do we have at our disposal? A strict formalist might indeed struggle here, for how can exemption and obligation coexist? Conceivably, one could appeal to broad, open-ended *mitzvot* of Sinai, such as love of God, in critiquing one who is apathetic towards mitzva opportunity. Harav Lichtenstein, however, conceptualizes the point differently:

A Jew must be saturated with an ambition and longing for mitzvot and not, God forbid, view them as a burden he is inescapably stuck with that he tries to cast off at the first opportunity. This point is at the root of the trait of *zerizut*, rooted in the obligation not just to serve God, but to serve him with joy and exhilaration.

Again, the relatively elusive and ambiguous principle of *zerizut* serves to explain why a Jew should strive for something more than mere compliance with formal halakha. Harav Lichtenstein himself does not relate to the source and nature of *zerizut*, but, to the extent that one may view it as a perpetuation of the *Avot*’s approach to worship (see *shiur* #55), *berit-Avot* spirituality again informs our own.

Avraham’s entire worship, as the Ramban writes, was “as one who is not commanded yet performs” (see *shiur* #59). *Berit Sinai* obligation adds a layer of formal obligation to a Jew’s responsibility, but it does not erase the primal yearning and ambition that we learn and inherit from our ancestors. As subjects and students of the law, we need not second-guess its boundaries. But as children of Avraham, we can hardly hide behind mere exemption.

[R. Asher Weiss](https://minchasasher.com/he/shiur/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%94-%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%A2%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9D/%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%A9%D7%AA%D7%9E%D7%98-%D7%9E%D7%9E%D7%A6%D7%95%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%A2%D7%A9%D7%94-%D7%AA%D7%A9%D7%A2%D7%93/)[[3]](#footnote-4) also addresses the subject of avoiding *mitzva* obligation but takes a slightly different approach. He again invokes the idea of *retzon Hashem* (the will of God; see *shiur* #55), arguing that when one avoids becoming obligated in a mitzva, “There is no nullification of a mitzva in this, but rather nullification of *retzon Hashem* that we run after *mitzvot* and try to fulfill them.” However, he adds two qualifications:

1. Not all *mitzvot* are equal in this regard. Specifically, R. Weiss argues that *mitzvot* that have a palpable spiritual dimension or desired outcome deserve extra effort, with *tzitzit* serving as the paradigm.[[4]](#footnote-5)
2. R. Weiss gleans from *Tosafot* that context matters. Commenting on the critique of Rav Katina, *Tosafot* (*Arakhin* 2b) suggest that such criticism only applies in a culture that regularly wears four-cornered garments, in which one would have to actively work to avoid the mitzva of *tzitzit*. When such garments are atypical, however, the critique doesn’t hold. By extension, R. Weiss contends that in situations of extreme discomfort or inconvenience, such as a soldier involved in intense training, a four-cornered garment with *tzitzit* need not be worn.

In other words, running after *mitzvot*, whether for the sake of *retzon Hashem* or because of *berit Avot*, is a value, not a law. As such, it takes context into account and presumably allows for a degree of subjectivity. The only absolute rule, perhaps, is that a Jew live in constant response to spiritual calling and not glibly dismiss opportunities for God-worship.

**Mitzvot Without Command**

More generally, I believe *Chazal* are telling us to not be overly preoccupied with the category of obligation. On the one hand, the absence of formal obligation in a particular situation should not be used as an excuse for religious apathy. But on the flipside, obligation need not be present in order to justify the embrace of mitzva opportunities. A seeking heart will not only decline to avail itself of circumstantial exemptions when available, but will also consider participating in objective avenues of God-worship in which it is not commanded at all.

Thus, for example, many women choose to perform a range of time-bound *mitzvot* from which they are wholly exempt. Admittedly, some *Tannaim* had reservations about this (*Eruvin* 96a; *Rosh Hashana* 33a); according to Rashi, they embraced the formalist argument that performing a mitzva without command could be a violation of “*bal tosif*” (adding to the Torah; *Devarim* 13:1). *Tosafot* (*Eruvin*, ad loc), however, reject this logic, and in any case the consensus follows R. Yossi, who believes that women are entitled to perform time-bound *mitzvot* voluntarily.[[5]](#footnote-6) Similarly, a woman may elect to engage in Torah study for its own sake (*lishmah*; see Rambam, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:13 and *Perisha*, YD 246:15), even though it is not incumbent upon her at all.

In pursuing voluntary activities, a Jewish man or woman can be said to be proudly following in the footsteps of our ancestors, who excitedly sought pathways to God in the absence of command. I find evidence for this linkage in the following *midrash* about Yaakov, who makes a pledge (*neder*) to God after dreaming of angels going up and down a ladder:

“Yaakov pledged a *neder*, to say” (*Bereishit* 28:20)…. What is meant by “to say”? To say to future generations that they should pledge during times of crisis. Yaakov first introduced the *neder*; therefore, whoever pledges should associate the *neder* only with him. (*Bereishit Rabba* 70:1)

Pledges to God are endorsed and regulated by *berit Sinai*, but, as the Rambam (*Hilkhot Arakhim Ve-charamim* 8:12) stresses, there is absolutely no obligation to engage in them. The impetus to do so, our Sages tell us, comes primarily from the teachings of our *Avot*. Yaakov’s *neder* was a spontaneous, religious response to a powerful moment. Through it, he teaches his descendants to seek the same; *berit Sinai* merely supplies the framework. Similarly, I would argue, we can learn from our *Avot* to spontaneously strive for the spiritual opportunities present in *berit Sinai* generally, even when the law makes no demands.

**Respecting Ambition**

The sources presented above notwithstanding, religious ambition in contemporary Jewish life is sometimes eyed suspiciously. A woman who yearns for excellence in Torah study or in the performance of time-bound *mitzvot*, for instance, might be challenged: Why aren’t you satisfied with your spiritual lot? Have you maxed out on all of your formal responsibilities, that you are so quick to pursue new vistas? Indeed, this attitude might find support in some Rabbinic sources, such as a comment in the *Yerushalmi* that “one who performs something from which he is exempt is called a simpleton” (*Berakhot* 2:9; *Shabbat* 1:2).

Through a narrow, and somewhat selective, reading of *berit Sinai*, these arguments may carry a certain weight. After all, duty and obligation are its language far more than aspiration and ambition. From the perspective of *berit Avot*, though, as well as its reflections in *berit Sinai*, can we ever quash or invalidate deep spiritual yearning? Is one who seeks to voluntarily perform a mitzva in which he or she is not obligated – whether a blind individual, a woman, a non-Jew, or any other – any different than our forebears, who similarly pursued *mitzvot* in the absence of command?

As for the *Yerushalmi*, commentators offer various explanations for why it has no bearing here. The Ramban, for instance, argues that the *Yerushalmi* refers to situations where no mitzva exists at all, in contrast to one in which only some individuals are exempt. He concludes:

One who performs *mitzvot* of the Torah properly despite not being commanded in them, such as women or non-Jews,[[6]](#footnote-7) receives reward for them, for all of “her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all of her paths are peaceful” (*Mishlei* 3:17). (Ramban, *Kiddushin* 31a)[[7]](#footnote-8)

A woman can approach most time-bound *mitzvot*, for instance, the same way that the *Avot* and *Imahot* approached all *mitzvot*: as available opportunities without absolute obligation.[[8]](#footnote-9) On the one hand, these *mitzvot* provide objectively meaningful and highly resonant pathways of worship, and a woman whose “soul thirsts for God” (see *Tehillim* 42:3) may choose to embrace at least some of them, some of the time. On the other hand, she has the liberty to take context and circumstance into account and to sometimes forgo these *mitzvot* within her overall vision for *avodat Hashem*. The only absolute obligation, incumbent upon all Jews, is to answer the call of *berit Avot* for maximal spirituality in general, while the specific means, when the law does not obligate, is flexible.

Religious leadership might well have suggestions, on occasion, for how to channel spontaneous yearnings or how to balance them with other spiritual priorities. Pledges are a case in point, as the Rambam, in his next breath, warns against excess (*Hilkhot Arakhim Ve-charamim* 8:13). Still, I don’t think the thirst itself can ever be dismissed outright. In the tradition of the *Avot*’s pre-Sinaitic religious world, spiritual ambition is by definition virtuous, certainly when it doesn’t infringe upon the law, and even when it runs up against insurmountable hurdles. A leader may need to explain why a particular goal or aspiration is not feasible within the considerations of halakha or for other reasons, but validation of the ambition itself is crucial.

Again, I turn to the example of Harav Lichtenstein. His daughter Tonya Mittelman notes that when it came to increasing roles for women in the synagogue and in public rituals, her father often took a conservative stance. Still:

Unlike some voices that are heard elsewhere, one did not hear from my father, either orally or in writing, the notion that women’s desire for change is motivated by improper motives such as personal gain or power-seeking feminism. Absent evidence to the contrary, he assumed that women advocating for expanded roles in mitzva observance were sincerely motivated by the love and fear of heaven, even in cases where he could not support their initiatives.[[9]](#footnote-10)

She further quotes from a published lecture by Harav Lichtenstein in which he draws from a familiar episode in *Sefer Bamidbar* in order to validate religious ambition:

Many of the debates today surround the synagogue…. The requests that arise are such that they are understandable with respect to the aspiration that they reflect. Like the request of those who were “spiritually defiled by a corpse” (*Bamidbar* 9:6), who turned to Moshe regarding the Pesach sacrifice and challenged – “Why should we be excluded?” (9:7) – women ask: Why can’t we read from the Torah or lead the services?

Such a request, to the degree that it emanates from a personality marked by faith or a desire to worship God, can be understood and respected.[[10]](#footnote-11)

While the exact nature of the defiled men’s claim is disputed,[[11]](#footnote-12) the earnestness of their yearning for inclusion, and its echoes later in *Sefer Bamidbar*,[[12]](#footnote-13) are unmistakable. Harav Lichtenstein asks us to hear contemporary voices in the same spirit, even when their requests cannot be honored. Authentic spiritual thirst and drive, I would say, reflects the same vigor and enthusiasm that animated Avraham and Sarah (as well as the love and devotion of *berit Sinai*), and we need not cynically reinterpret them otherwise. Even if we find ourselves more constrained in practice than our ancestors were, the thirst itself is a part of their legacy and ought to be valued as such.

**Spirituality Independent of the Law**

Furthermore, spiritual ambition ought to be respected, according to some commentators, even when it regrettably leads to outright antinomianism! According to the Maharal’s reading of a Rabbinic homily,[[13]](#footnote-14) Moshe is admonished for telling Korach to be satisfied with his spiritual lot as a Levite and to shut down any further aspirations (*Bamidbar* 16:7-10). Commenting on the same Biblical episode, the Netziv suggests that the insatiable yearning that led 250 non-*kohanim* to offer incense (*Bamidbar* 16:18), in clear violation of the law, is nonetheless recognized positively (*Ha’amek Davar*, *Bamidbar* 16:1 and 17:3). While there are other possible interpretations, these two giants, at least, affirm that even ambition that bucks the law isn’t wholly negated.

Of course, Judaism’s vision is that spirituality and law live in symbiosis, each nurtured by the other. At the same time, Harav Lichtenstein notes that spirituality is “a quality to be admired even irrespective of specifically religious ramifications.” He illustrates this with a personal recollection:

This point was vividly brought home to me some years back when one of the Rothschilds, wholly devoid of halakhic commitment, came to visit the Rav. I asked him later how the visit had gone, and he responded, “You know, he is a spiritual person;” and I noted that this was meaningful to him. (“Law and Spirituality,” 175)

While this story would be inscrutable for a positivist, one who has an appreciation of either natural or covenantal spirituality can easily make sense of it. R. Soloveitchik was one of halakha’s greatest spokespeople in the modern era, yet that didn’t stop him from being able to recognize value even in spirituality that is oblivious to the law. Avraham’s spiritual orientation had objective meaning in the absence of command, and so does that of his progeny (or of non-Jews), even when they are not living up to the commandments of Moshe.

If, indeed, there can be value to non-halakhic spirituality, then perhaps the broad pursuit of spirituality can be seen as part of *berit Avot* commitment that is shared by both observant and non-observant Jews. Thus, in calling for different sectors of the Jewish community to “place greater emphasis upon the factors which, without denying difference, transcend it,” Harav Lichtenstein lists the following examples:

Upon confraternity, upon historical and existential ties, upon essential components of a shared moral and spiritual vision, upon elements of both a common fate and a common destiny. (“The State of *K’lal Yisrael*,” *Leaves of Faith*, Vol. 2, 360)

“Confraternity” and “historical ties” correspond to value #1 of *berit Avot* and are the primary themes of R. Soloveitchik’s *Kol Dodi Dofek*,[[14]](#footnote-15) and “shared moral vision” corresponds to value #3. But Harav Lichtenstein also speaks of “shared spiritual vision” and, echoing the language of *Kol Dodi Dofek*, of “elements of both a common fate and a common destiny.” He maintains, out of devoted allegiance to *berit Sinai*, that “Orthodoxy cannot accord secularists or dissenters the hechsher [approval] they so insistently demand.” But Harav Lichtenstein also calls upon the Orthodox community to “not only concede but assert that, whatever their deviations, other camps include people genuinely in search of the Ribbono Shel Olam [Master of the Universe]”; “and,” he adds elsewhere, “that their quest has worth.”[[15]](#footnote-16)

In other words, committed *berit Sinai* Jews should never make peace with Judaism emptied of halakha, but they can nevertheless recognize a common heritage shared by all Jews across the full range of *berit Avot* values, including the intuitive yearning for the God of Avraham. We do not whitewash differences, but we do not dismiss authentically expressed spirituality either, even when it is not pursued in ways that conform to halakha. Of course, to the degree that spirituality draws upon the richness of halakhic Judaism, the richer it will be in turn.

Circling back to Korach and his followers, I would say that even when unchecked enthusiasm leads to the breaching of boundaries, the latter does not cancel out the former. Pluralistically, the enthusiasm itself deserves approbation, even as the violation must be recognized and condemned.

**Spirituality in Tension with the Law**

If this is true for those whose enthusiasm overflows the boundaries of Sinai, what about those who curb theirs appropriately? Is there tension involved, or the simple trumping of amorphous instincts by the supreme authority of the law? Perhaps we can learn from a statement by R. Shimon bar Yochai, with which Harav Lichtenstein opens a deeply personal essay about the tensions inherent in an inclusive religious life:

Had I stood at Mount Sinai at the time that Torah was given to Israel, I would have demanded that a person be given two mouths: one with which to learn Torah, and the other with which to manage all other matters. (*Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:2 and *Shabbat* 1:2, from “To Double Business Bound: Reflections on the Divided Life of *Ovdei Hashem*,” *Varieties of Jewish Experience*, 269-290)

At first glance, R. Shimon bar Yochai’s declaration might sound deeply pious in its aspiration for more and more Torah, but it borders, in fact, on the blasphemous! Is R. Shimon “frummer” than God? Does a loyal soldier who knows nothing but total obedience question, even rhetorically, the judgment of the ultimate Commander? If God willed it that humans will necessarily have to interrupt their Torah study for mundane matters, who is R. Shimon to openly bemoan that?

And while R. Shimon subsequently intuits the wisdom in God’s design – people would have used an accessory mouth for gossip, rather than for Torah study – that doesn’t fully neutralize the brazenness of his original musing. How fitting would Yeshayahu Ha-Navi’s retort to King Chizkiyya be here: “What have you to do with God’s secrets? What you are commanded, you should do, and what is fitting before the Holy One, blessed be He, He will do!” (*Berakhot* 10a).[[16]](#footnote-17)

Clearly, R. Shimon bar Yochai is not critiquing God; rather, he is voicing his own felt tension, and thus validating ours. Love of God as a formal mitzva, or even appreciation of *mitzvot* as spiritual vehicles, cannot aspire for more than the law expects or is humanly possible. Spirituality as a transcendent value, however, is unbounded in its ambition (as was R. Shimon about Torah study[[17]](#footnote-18)), to the point where it can even lament constraints imposed by the will of God!

Furthermore, I would suggest, when R. Shimon audaciously challenges the Divine plan, he is following in the footsteps of Avraham, who gently poses questions about God’s will. Just as a genuine student of Avraham can probe the flexibility of the law when its letter and its spirit seem to diverge, so too does one need not apologize, I think, for a degree of internal frustration when untainted aspiration outstrips permission or possibility.

**Case Study: *Aliyyot* for the Blind**

For a simple illustration, I would point to a responsum by R. Binyamin Aharon Salnik (1530-1620), in which he searches for permission to be called to the Torah despite his poor eyesight.[[18]](#footnote-19) Resisting R. Yosef Cairo’s stringent ruling in the matter (*Beit Yosef*, OC, 141), he opens poetically:

For now, in my “old age” (*Tehillim* 71:9), “those that peer through the windows have darkened” (*Kohelet* 12:3); my “eyes have grown dim from sight" (*Bereishit* 27:1). And inasmuch as the Rabbi, of blessed memory, thought to “banish me from finding refuge in God’s inheritance” (see I *Shmuel* 26:19) – for the “Torah of truth” (*Malakhi* 2:6) is eternal life – that I not be counted among those who may go up [to the Torah]; therefore, I said and determined in my heart: Heaven forbid that I abandon “the path of the Tree of Life” (*Bereishit* 3:24) and let go of its branches!

I have loved “this attestation” (*Ruth* 4:7) “from its earliest days” (*Yeshayahu* 23:7), its law and its rule; and in old age as well, I shall not cast it away (see *Tehillim* 71:9), and I shall walk in it. And I will embark upon a halakhic inquiry to see why the Rabbi has done this to me (see *Devarim* 29:23). (*Maseit Binyamin*, 62)

We could challenge: What concerns R. Salnik about possibly being excluded from being called to the Torah? An *aliyya* for one who cannot read the text is either halakhically valid and thus the will of God, or it is neither. If R. Salnik is indeed ineligible, then apparently this is not his divinely ordained form of worship, and he ought to happily seek his spirituality elsewhere.

And yet, R. Salnik is troubled. Apparently, there can be spiritual aspiration that emanates from outside the law and audaciously probes the possibilities when it is seemingly restrained by the law. Of course, R. Salnik is first and foremost a devoted student of the law – ironically, it is his very attachment to it that drives his desire to be called the Torah! – and so his responsum continues with careful, rigorous, legal analysis. At the same time, he intimates – as Harav Lichtenstein does regarding morally laden quandaries (see *shiur* #44) – that not all possible answers are equal.

Citing precedents in which the Sages accommodated certain practices “because ‘acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven’ (*kabbalat ol Malkhut Shamayim*) is more important, and because of ‘peace of spirit’ (*nachat ru’ach*; see *Eruvin* 96a and *Chagiga* 16b),” R. Salnik expresses astonishment at those who rule stringently here:

Moreover, I am puzzled by the position of those who forbid: How did they decide to remove *ol Malkhut Shamayim* from upon these people, and specifically regarding a great, prominent mitzva as this?

Rather, he concludes:

The same should apply in the matter that is before us, that an ignoramus and a blind person should be allowed to be called to the Torah and recite the blessings without protest, in order that they be included in *kabbalat ol Malkhut Shamayim* and in order to bring them *nachat ru’ach*.

In its Talmudic context, *nachat ru’ach* could be dismissed as a placation of potentially disenfranchised individuals. But R. Salnik applies it here (together with the even more ambiguous concept of *kabbalat ol Malkhut Shamayim*[[19]](#footnote-20)) to all who are unable to read the words of the Torah scroll, including, presumably, himself! Circling back to the opening of the responsum, one senses that R. Salnik, too, is in need of the spiritual *nachat ru’ach* and connection that being called to the Torah affords, and he believes that these extra-halakhic values should influence one’s interpretation and application of the law.[[20]](#footnote-21)

**When Ambition is Held Back**

In this case, R. Salnik finds a path forward. But even bold halakhic inquiry doesn’t always work out that way. By definition, halakha is a constraining force, and while the Rav and Harav Lichtenstein argue that its structure and rigidity actually facilitate spirituality (see *shiur* #56), hitting up against limits can be hard for those who wish to soar. Moreover, R. Shimon bar Yochai reminds us that just being human is hard enough! For those who dream like Avraham, spiritual ambition, just like moral vision (*shiur* #44), will sometimes remain unfulfilled, and at those moments, a different kind of religious response is required.

Thus, the essay by Harav Lichtenstein that opens with R. Shimon – whose suggestion clearly resonated with Harav Lichtenstein, as he quotes it in at least two other published articles[[21]](#footnote-22) – ultimately ends on a very different note. After acknowledging the “gnawing – at times, even depressing” realization that “breadth” in *avodat Hashem* “is purchased at the expense of comprehensiveness” in Torah knowledge (284), he closes by encouraging:

Acceptance of servitude, of the yoke of bondage to the *Ribbono shel Olam*, *kabbalat ol Malkhut Shamayim*; acceptance of the yoke of submission to the divine will, *kabbalat ol mitzvot*, as formulated in the corpus of Torah; and acceptance of whatever lot He has meted out to us. (288)

The price of lofty spiritual ambition, it seems, will inevitably be some degree of disappointment with inherent limitations, whether those that are imposed by the law or those that flow from having only one mouth. Learning to live with them, though, is an integral part of *avodat Hashem* and constitutes a core element of *kabbalat ol Malkhut Shamayim* for Harav Lichtenstein (used here in the passive sense, in contrast to the active affirmation that R. Salnik has in mind).

Strikingly, Tonya Mittelman describes imbibing exactly these lessons from her father regarding her own religious life:

My father was certainly cognizant of the difficulty of the task imposed upon a woman who sought to strive, only to discover that not everything is possible. My father did not gloss over the reality, nor did he try to convince us that a secondary route is better for us, or that the tendencies of our souls are such that they do not need these other *mitzvot*. He did not see things that way. He suggested to us to see this withdrawal that halakha forces upon us as an aspect of the acceptance of the yoke of heaven, *kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim*, sacrifice and subordination before the Torah—indeed, as my grandfather [R. Soloveithcik] taught, the accepting of halakhic limits is itself cathartic.[[22]](#footnote-23) (78-79)

Here, we have father and daughter grappling with two different sources of spiritual tension – one practical, the other halakhic – but who both find strength in a common tradition that dates back, I think, to our forefather Avraham. As *shiur* #44 described, no one models submission and surrender before God’s will more than Avraham. The same figure who argues against the destruction of Sedom eventually embraces defeat, and the courage this requires pales in comparison to that which he exhibits at the *akeida*. Through the binding of his son, Avraham earns the title of “*yerei Elokim*” (fearer of God) par excellence, even as the Sages observe that the awe itself stems from his deep love for God.[[23]](#footnote-24) From Avraham, then, we learn the dual lesson of dreaming, seeking, and questing when the road is wide open, together with submitting and withdrawing when it is not.

**Torah Study and Spiritual Ambition**

If the Jewish experience is one of spiritual ambition coupled with total submission, then Torah study may have a unique role to play within it. Torah study, I believe, represents a unique fusion of awe and love, of dutiful allegiance to Sinai with the autonomous quest of the *Avot*.

On the one hand, Torah study is a literal perpetuation of the revelation at Sinai and amounts to a preoccupation with its laws. Moreover, the very experience of learning, according to *Berakhot* 22a, must forever capture the essence of Sinai, which unfolded “with trepidation, and with fear, and with trembling, and with perspiration.”[[24]](#footnote-25)

At the same time, as *shiur* #49 discussed, the *Sifrei* deduces from the Biblical juxtaposition of love of God with Torah study (*Devarim* 6:5-6) that the two are deeply intertwined. Torah study, then, emerges as the nexus at which love and awe meet. In a similar vein, R. Soloveitchik describes Torah study as the convergence of the revelatory experience, in which humans humbly receive God’s word and submit to His command, with the autonomous one, in which they audaciously exercise their intellectual creativity and imagination in pursuit of interpretative innovation (*chiddush*; *And From There You Shall Seek*, 107-110).

In particular, the drive that the Jewish people bring to Torah study, individually and collectively, cannot be explained by anything other than Avraham-like fascination and desire to understand and connect to our Creator. Through Torah study, one discovers God’s will, and, by extension, God Himself; and it is therefore a natural, endless outlet for one whose “soul thirsts for God.”

Here, fidelity to commandment is genuine and demanding but can only take us so far. Those whose preoccupation echoes King David – “How I have loved Your Torah; I converse in it all day long” (*Tehillim* 119:97) – are not only dutiful students of Moshe, I think, but are following in the footsteps of Avraham.

Not for naught is Torah study originally ascribed to the *Avot*, for they, too, thirsted for intimacy through knowledge.[[25]](#footnote-26) Similarly, Torah study can be enthralling and deeply bonding even in the absence of a formal, Sinaitic obligation to pursue it. Thus, Harav Lichtenstein writes:

Surely, however, in a tradition which has, persistently, placed so high a premium upon study, significant engagement in quality *talmud Torah* should – at the very least, for the desirous and able – serve as a portal of access to the *Ribbono shel Olam*, for women as well as for men. (“The Future of Centrist Orthodoxy,” *Leaves of Faith*, Vol. 2, 319)

Citing the *Sifrei*, he adds, “Surely, then, women’s pursuit of *ahavat Hashem* through serious *talmud Torah* is more than laudable.”

Finally, without reference to *berit Avot*, I note that the very act of Torah study can be an intensely spiritual experience of communing with the Divine; for the *Sifrei*, it is a primary fulfillment of the commandment “to worship Him” (*Devarim* 11:13). But this also depends, critically, on the attitude and motivation that one brings to intellectual activity. About Torah study, Harav Lichtenstein notes:

Its value and effectiveness is, however, very much a function of its experiential character; and that, in turn, depends, in no small measure, upon its emotional quotient. Ambivalence and shallowness flourish when *devekut* has withered or passion has waned. (“Contemporary Impediments to *Yirat Shamayim*,” 211)[[26]](#footnote-27)

In other words, Torah study is not necessarily, on its own, transformative; one gets out what one puts in. At the same time that R. Chayyim of Volozhin vigorously defended the study of Torah “for its own sake” (*lishma*), rather than as a means to some other spiritual agenda, he was adamant about the context in which such study should occur:

Whenever a person prepares himself to study, it is appropriate for him to meditate before he begins for at least a short time, with “pure awe of God” (see *Tehillim* 19:10), with pureness of the heart; to confess his sins out of the depths of his heart; so that his Torah will be holy and pure. And he should have in mind to cleave through his study to Torah, to the Holy One, blessed be He; that is, to cleave with all his might to “‘The word of God’ (*Amos* 8:12) – this is halakha” (*Shabbat* 138b), and through this he will be attached directly to Him, as it were, for He, may He be blessed, and His will are one. (*Nefesh Ha-Chayyim* 4:6)

Contemplation of God’s revealed will is magical and redemptive, but it requires the right spiritual context in which its drama can unfold. When reverence and yearning precede Sinai, though, such is the power of standing at its foot: the fusion of love, awe, and worship; of knowledge and encounter; of faithful guardianship with daring creativity; of the passion of *berit Avot* and the dedication of *berit Sinai*.[[27]](#footnote-28)

**For Further Thought – More on “*retzon Hashem*” regarding mitzva observance:**

In this *shiur*, I cited R. Asher Weiss’s invocation of “*retzon ha-Hashem*” (or “*retzon Ha-Torah*,” which seem to be interchangeable in his writings) regarding the pursuit of *mitzvot* even when no obligation applies. R. Weiss similarly turns to this principle in other contexts regarding “meta-duties” towards *mitzvot*. For example, how should we describe a person who fails to make appropriate preparations in order to fulfill a mitzva, such as one who makes no effort to procure a *lulav* or build a *sukka* prior to Sukkot? On the one hand, when the time of the mitzva arrives, the individual can plead innocence, as there is no possibility of performing it. Nonetheless, R. Weiss writes:

It seems obvious that there is an absolute obligation incumbent upon the individual to do all that is required and expected before the time of the mitzva in order to fulfill his mitzva when its time arrives; and this is because such is *retzon Hashem*. (Minchat Asher, *Devarim*, 72; see also *Bamidbar*, 21 and *Bereishit*, 37; compare to *Bereishit*, 62)[[28]](#footnote-29)

[Elsewhere](https://m.torahbase.org/pdf/Yisro_he_83.pdf), R. Weiss addresses the preemptive effort one must make to avoid desecration of Shabbat for the sake of life-saving activities. He argues that just as one has a responsibility to prepare for *mitzvot*, “so, certainly, it is ‘*retzon ha-Torah’* that we expend effort in order to fulfill the negative *mitzvot* completely and to avoid situations in which we will permissibly desecrate Shabbat” (see also *Devarim*, 75). However, since what is at stake “is not a discrete obligation, but the general principle of ‘*retzon ha-Torah*,’” one does not need to take excessive measures. In other words, the degree of effort required in pursuit of a value remains vague (see also *Bereishit*, 58).

It seems to me that perhaps one can differentiate between the multiple scenarios in which R. Weiss appeals to “*retzon ha-Torah*.” That is, one can embrace his argument regarding a meta-duty towards mitzva observance but still frame the active pursuit of non-obligatory *mitzvot* differently:

Anticipating *mitzvot* whose obligation is inevitable – perhaps this falls within the broader expectations of *berit Sinai*, even if it is unclassifiable as a discrete, legal obligation. R. Weiss cites multiples possible sources for such a duty (*Devarim*, 72).

Willfully pursuing mitzva opportunities and not orchestrating exemptions[[29]](#footnote-30) – this I would prefer to frame as an expectation of *berit Avot* *zerizut*, as described above.

1. The Rif (14a in Alfasi) and *Tosafot* (40a), however, explain that Rav Ketina’s garment indeed had *tzitzit* and was only exempt from strings of *tekhelet.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See also Harav Lichtenstein, “Formalism vs. Teleology: Circumvention and Adaptation in Halakha,” *Values in Halakha: Six Case Studies* (Jerusalem, 2023), 140-141. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *Minchat Asher*, *Bamidbar*, *siman* 40. See also [here](https://minchasasher.com/he/shiur/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%94-%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%A2%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9D/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%91%D7%97%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%99-%D7%91%D7%93%D7%99%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%A2%D7%A8%D7%9E%D7%94-%D7%91%D7%94%D7%9C%D7%9B%D7%94/). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Fittingly, R. Weiss similarly confines the relevance of *zerizut* to “spiritual” *mitzvot* (*Minchat Asher*, *Bereishit* 34). See also *Minchat Asher*, *Vayikra*, 39. Of course, all of this presumes an ability to discern, to some degree, a teleology of *mitzvot*, a proposition that would likely make a true halakhic positivist uncomfortable. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *Mori ve-rabbi* R. Hershel Schachter (*Eretz Ha-tzvi* 12:12) quotes R. Soloveitchik as further suggesting that men and women are equal recipients of time-bound *mitzvot*; women are only granted an exemption from having to execute them in practice. The practical ramification is that a woman who chooses to do a time-bound mitzva can claim it as her own and thus recite upon it, according to Ashkenazi custom (Rema, OC 17:2), the blessing of “Who has sanctified us with His commandments *and commanded us*” regarding that mitzva.

Of note, there is some ambivalence about a woman performing the *mitzvot* of *tzitzit* and *tefillin* specifically; see *Shulchan Arukh* OC 17:2 and 38:3, respectively. See also Harav Lichtenstein, “The Human and Social Factor in Halakhah” (*Leaves of Faith*, Vol. 1), 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Regarding non-Jews, see also Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 10:10 and *Tosafot*, *Bava Metzia* 71a, as well as *Minchat Asher*, *Bereishit*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. See also R. Chananel ben Shmuel (printed in *Shitat Ha-kadmonim*) on *Kiddushin* 18a, as well as *Minchat Asher*, *Bereishit*, 8. Among the sources quoted there, see especially Meiri on *Bava Kamma* 87a regarding a teleology of *mitzvot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. I thank Hannah Zucker for suggesting this formulation. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. “Women in the Torah World in the Thought of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein,” *Tradition* 52:3 (Summer 2020), 74 (available [here](https://traditiononline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/0067-0080-Mittelman.pdf); see also her comments regarding Torah study and time-bound *mitzvot*). Similarly, note Harav Lichtenstein’s response to those who question the authenticity of some contemporary expressions of spirituality: “I have no way of judging; and who has designated me to evaluate the depth of other people’s sincerity?” (“Law and Spirituality,” 185). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. “*Ma’amad Ha-isha Be-idan Ha-moderni*,” *Alon Shevut Bogrim*, 23 (Kislev 5769 [2008]), 113, available [here](https://www.etzion.org.il/he/philosophy/great-thinkers/harav-aharon-lichtenstein/%D7%9E%D7%A2%D7%9E%D7%93-%D7%94%D7%90%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%94-%D7%91%D7%A2%D7%99%D7%93%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%93%D7%A8%D7%A0%D7%99). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Admittedly, R. Yitzchak (in the *Sifrei*) explains that these men only argued that they should indeed be halakhically eligible, and thereby obligated, to offer the sacrifice at its appointed time. However, R. Akiva and R. Yishmael identify the men differently (see also *Sukka* 25a and *Gittin* 60a, with Rashi and *Tosafot*), allowing for the following interpretation by R. Yitzchak Arama:

They knew, and to the entire Jewish people it was known, that the spiritually defiled may not enter the [Tabernacle] courtyard to stand by their sacrifice. But their judgment had decreed that it is not appropriate that a spiritually defiled individual should be excluded from offering this sacrifice of God… and reason would have it that there should be some remedy, since he is without blame. (*Akeidat Yitzchak*, 74) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Compare to 27:4 and 36:3-4. In all three instances, a group expresses an impulse not covered by the revealed halakha – twice about the Land of Israel, and once about ritual worship – and Moshe generously brings their concerns before God. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See *Sota* 13b and *Chiddushei Aggadot Le-Maharal*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. See *shiur* #16. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. "Beyond the Pale? Reflections Regarding Contemporary Relations with Non-Orthodox Jews,” *Varieties of Jewish Experience*, 148; see also note #31 there regarding the position of R. Soloveitchik. See also “Religion and State: The Case for Interaction,” *Leaves of Faith*, Vol. 2, 28; and Adam Ferziger, “On Fragmentary Judaism: The Jewish ‘Other’ and the Worldview of R. Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein” and R. Nathaniel Helfgot, “*Divrei Ha-rav Ve-divrei Ha-talmid Ve-divrei Ha-Rav*: The Impact of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Thought on that of R. Aharon Lichtenstein,” *Tradition* 47:4 (Winter 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. See *shiur* #5. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. See *Berakhot* 35b, *Shabbat* 33b, and *Mekhilta* on *Shemot* 16:4, as noted by Harav Lichtenstein (278-279). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. This responsum is cited by Harav Lichtenstein in “The Human and Social Factor in Halakhah,” *Leaves of Faith,* Vol. 1, 168. For an extended analysis of this responsum, see also [here](https://psak.yctorah.org/can-a-person-who-is-blind-receive-and-aliyah-a-teshuva-of-maseit-binyamin/). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. See, for instance, *Berakhot* 16a. I thank R. Assaf Bednarsh for this reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Regarding contemporary considerations of *nachat ru’ach*, see Harav Lichtenstein, “Women in Leadership,” *Tradition* 49:1 (Spring 2016), 34-35, available [here](https://traditiononline.org/women-in-leadership/). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. “The Ideology of Hesder,” *Leaves of Faith*, Vol. 1, 141-143, and “Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict,” in *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?* 342. See also *By His Light*, Chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. “Catharsis,” *Confrontation and Other Essays* (Jerusalem, 2015), 41-61. See also [this essay](https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/the-challenge-and-joy-of-living-with-tension/) by my wife, Shayna. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. See *shiur* #49. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. See also *Kiddushin* 30a. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. See *shiur* #5. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. See also Harav Lichtenstein, “‘And to Serve Him’ – This is *Talmud Torah*,” in *Sefer Ha-Yovel of Yeshivat Har Etzion* (Alon Shevut, 2019), 34-39 and “Why Learn Gemara?” *Leaves of Faith*, Vol. 1, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Harav Lichtenstein observes about *Chazal* that “of *talmud Torah*, they can never say enough” (“A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Point of View,” *Leaves of Faith*, Vol. 1, 90), and he and R. Soloveitchik maintain that tradition. On the aforementioned themes, see: *Majesty and Humility*, Chapter 9; “The Condition of Jewish Belief,” 338-339; “Why Learn Gemara?”, 6-7; “‘And to Serve Him’ – This is *Talmud Torah*,” 29-30; “A Consideration of Synthesis,” 91; and “Reflections upon *Birkot Ha-Torah*,” 261-263. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. See also *Bereishit*, 6 and *Bamidbar*, 15 regarding the responsibility of the congregation to receive the blessing of the *kohanim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. See also Harav Lichtenstein, "Formalism vs. Teleology,” 141n. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)