YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

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**Shiur #21: Ideal Times for *Talmud Torah*** part II

While last week we focused on the calendar of *talmud Torah,* we now turn to the clock, the question of day versus night. Is one or the other preferred in regard to Torah study? Interestingly, the Gemara (*Eruvin* 65a) grapples with this question [as explained by Rashi ad loc.]:

Rav Yehuda said: Night was created only for sleep.

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: The moon was created only for Torah study.

When people said to Rabbi Zeira, “Your teachings are sharp,” he said to them: “They were formulated during the daytime.”

Rav Chisda’s daughter said to Rav Chisda: “Doesn’t the master wish to sleep a little?” He said to her: “Days that are long but short will soon arrive, and we will sleep a lot [in the grave].”

Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak said: We are day-laborers.

Rav Acha bar Yaakov would borrow [from his daytime study] and repay [by studying at night].

This Gemara is fascinating on numerous levels. It appears that the central question of the discussion concerns the balance between quality and quantity in one’s learning. On the one hand, the Gemara suggests, one’s learning is clearer during the daytime. Thus, Rabbi Zeira’s success is due to his having studied intensively during the daytime hours. However, Rav Chisda points out that, at least at the time of the Gemara, in practice the nighttime leaves far more time free for study.

Indeed, Tosafot ad loc. (s.v. *Ela*) limit Rav Yehuda’s statement about night being only for sleep to the short nights of the summer. This brings these views in line with another Gemara (*Ta’anit* 31a), which is quite chilling:

It has been taught: Rabbi Eliezer the elder says: From the fifteenth of Av onwards the strength of the sun wanes, so they no longer felled trees for the Altar, because they would not dry [sufficiently].

Rav Menashiya said: And they called it the Day of the Breaking of the Axe.

From this day onwards, one who increases [knowledge through study] will have a prolonged [life], but one who does not increase [knowledge] shall be gathered in.

What is meant by “gathered in”? Rav Yosef taught: Buried by one’s own mother.

Indeed, Reish Lakish’s declaration, “The moon was created only for Torah study,” is an approach he champions elsewhere.

Resh Lakish said: Whoever occupies oneself with [the study of] the Torah by night, the Holy One, blessed be He, draws over one a thread of lovingkindness by day, for it is said (*Tehillim* 42:9): ‘During the day, God ordains His kindness,” because “at night, His song is with me.”(*Chagiga* 12b)

In fact, the Midrash (*Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 5:11) tells that Reish Lakish was convinced of this by his brother-in-law and colleague, Rabbi Yochanan, who bases his view on two verses: “She rises while it still night” (*Mishlei* 31:15) and “Rise, chant at night” “(*Eikha* 2:19).

Reish Lakish said: Rabbi Yochanan taught me well that the gathering of Torah is only at night; as Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: When we exhausted ourselves in Torah during the day, enlightenment came to me at night, as it says (*Yehoshua* 1:8): “Recite it day and night.”

Moreover, *Pesiketa Rabbati* (11:5) teaches that “just as stars only rule at night, so too Israel masters Torah only at night…”Similarly, the *baraita* in *Avot 6:6* lists a total of forty-eight traits that enable one to better acquire the Torah, “diminishing of sleep” among them.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This view is echoed in Rambam’s classic paean to nighttime study:

Even though it is a mitzva to study during the day and at night, it is only at night that a person acquires most of one’s wisdom. Therefore, a person who desires to merit the crown of Torah should be careful with all nights, not giving up even one to sleep, eating, drinking, talk, or the like. Rather, [they should be devoted to] the study of Torah and the words of wisdom.

Our Sages declared: "The gathering of Torah is only at night as it says, 'Rise, chant at night.’“

Whoever occupies oneself with [the study of] the Torah by night, the Holy One, blessed be He, draws over one a thread of lovingkindness by day, for it is said: “During the day, God ordains His kindness and, at night, His song is with me.” *(Hilkhot Talmud* *Torah* 3:13)

Rambam intensifies this in his *Introduction to the Mishna*:

Because [the Sages] knew the truth of their words, they spent all of their lives in this occupation, and they commanded one to engage in it diligently all night and part of the day, making it the quintessence of wisdom. And so it is.

At first glance, the Mishna in *Avot* 3:4 might seem to challenges this view:

Rabbi Chanina the son of Chakhinai would say: One who stays awake at night, one who travels alone on the road, and one who turns the heart to idleness, is liable to death.

However, both Rabbeinu Yona and Tashbetz (ad loc.) reinterpret this. The former writes:

Because these are favorable hours, one should focus only on those things which find favor before the Omnipresent, Blessed be He. These are words of Torah, and those hours are important and appropriate for focusing on Torah, as one does not have work to do and does not hear the sounds of human activity.

“One who turns the heart to idleness, is liable to death” because it is a waste of time, when one could have clear and proper focus, but instead diverts one’s mind from thinking about words of Torah.

Rabbeinu Yona gives a practical reason; for Rambam, however, it appears to be more than merely a matter of convenience. If his paean is read in the larger context of Rambam’s discussion in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, it becomes clear that we are intended to read this *halakha* in the context of Rambam’s wider advocacy for a mild asceticism.[[2]](#footnote-2) One might be exhausted at the end of a hard day at work; nonetheless, one must push oneself to the limit in order to achieve mastery of Torah.

Along these lines, Dr. Norman Lamm cites a classic Chasidic witticism in the name of Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz (author of *Hafla’a)*, who refers to Rava’s classic question (*Shabbat* 31a), “*Kavata itim la-Torah*?” Taken simply, this teaching urges one to establish fixed times for learning, lest one come to neglect one’s studies. The Chasidic interpretation, however, notes that in *Tanakh*, the root *keva* refers to theft. Thus, Malakhi scolds the people (3:8-9),

Ought man to defraud )*Ha*-*yikba*) God? Yet you are defrauding Me. And you ask, “How have we been defrauding You?” In tithe and levy. You are suffering under a curse, yet you go on defrauding Me — the whole nation of you![[3]](#footnote-3)

Thus, the rabbinical dictum may also be taken to mean that must “steal time for Torah.” Often, we find unexpected gaps in our schedules. One who designates that time for study demonstrates true commitment to learning.

Perhaps, though, we might make another suggestion. Torah study at night might be taken as representative of a different mode of study. Learning at night, particularly beyond the parameters of one’s prescribed schedule, creates an opportunity for creativity in one’s learning that is often lacking during fixed times of study. Perhaps it is also on this basis that Reish Lakish and his camp underscore the importance of nighttime Torah study.

**Different Stages of Life**

Finally, in considering the larger question of what time is most conducive to *talmud Torah*, it is important to note that there is room to distinguish between different stages in one’s life.

In a wide-ranging essay, HaRav Lichtenstein suggests that in practice, we may discern various levels in one’s development. He cites a comment of Rabbi Chayim Or Zarua (*Responsa* 183), who asserts that so long as one “sits before his teacher,” one is not obligated to perform other commandments due to the precept of *osek be-mitzva patur min ha-mitzva*.

While in practice we do not adopt this radical position, the conceptual thrust is clear: there is room to place a greater, more exclusive emphasis on Torah study at certain stages in one’s life. Indeed, such a perspective is consistent with Hillel’s directive, “Do not say ‘I shall study whenever I become free,’ lest you never become free” (*Avot* 2:4). It is also consistent with the Gemara’s ruling, analyzed earlier in our series, that one may delay marriage for the sake of study. One should never take for granted the opportunity for relatively uninterrupted study.

In summation, while Torah study is important at all times, many prominent thinkers point to particularly propitious times for *talmud Torah*: Shabbat and festivals, nighttime and the years within the walls of the yeshiva.

1. In a fascinating comment, *Tiferet Yisrael* (*Yachin* 83) points to Rambam’s classic admonition to sleep eight hours a night, and cites a contemporary medical authority who maintains that for adults, just five to six hours of sleep suffice. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *shiur #*9 in this series regarding Rambam’s view on the importance of humility in Torah study. In his *Guide of the Perplexed*, Rambam, following Aristotle, argues even more strongly in favor of asceticism, going so far as to describe the sense of touch as a “disgrace.” See *Guide* 2:36, 2:40, and 3:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://brussels.mc.yu.edu/gsdl/collect/lammserm/index/assoc/HASH01dc/4c451e7c.dir/doc.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)