YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

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**Shiur *#*30*: Birkhot Ha-Torah*: A Reprise of *Talmud Torah*'s Themes**

This final *shiur* will use *birkhot ha-Torah*, the blessings recited each day over Torah study, as a way of recapitulating the major themes of this course. It is perhaps unsurprising that this sublime set of blessings abounds with so much meaning, and they are therefore the perfect topic with which to conclude our exploration of *talmud Torah*.

**Axiological Centrality**

Throughout the series, particularly in our opening two *shiurim*, we stressed the axiological centrality of *talmud Torah*. It is therefore natural that *birkhot ha-Torah* is similarly considered particularly important among the constellation of blessings. *Berakhot* 11b cites a series of possible variants, concluding (according to Rif, in the words of Rav Papa): “Therefore let us say all of them.”

The source for *birkhot ha-Torah* appears two chapters later (21a):

Rav Yehuda says: Where do we find that Grace after Meals is ordained in the Torah? Because it says (*Devarim* 8:10): “And you shall eat and be satisfied and bless.”

Where do we find that a blessing before studying the Torah is ordained in the Torah? Because it says (ibid. 32:6): “When I proclaim the name of the Lord, ascribe greatness to our God.”

Nevertheless, Rambam does not count *birkhot ha-Torah* as a biblical obligation in its own right, leading some commentators (*Mar’eh Ha-panim,* Yerushalmi *Berakhot* 7:1; Responsa *Penei Moshe* 1:1; Responsa *Torat Refael* 1) to argue that the obligation is merely rabbinic and the verse is to be viewed as a mere *asmakhta* (allusion); perhaps Rambam simply has a different text in *Berakhot* 21a. Still, the overwhelming majority of authorities (Rashba, *Berakhot* 48b; *Sefer Ha-chinnukh* 430; Meiri, *Berakhot* 21a; Responsa *Sha’agat Aryeh* 24) follow Ramban (*Aseh* 15) in insisting that the obligation is biblical in nature. (Indeed, Rav Soloveitchik dedicated a yahrzeit *shiur* to the thesis that one who omits *birkhot ha-Torah* violates a positive commandment and does not merely pass up on a mitzva opportunity.) The level of obligation testifies, loudly and clearly, to the centrality of *talmud Torah* in the rabbinical constellation of values.

**Multiplicity and Flexibility of *Talmud Torah***

As noted and as is immediately evident to anyone who recites *birkhot ha-Torah*, these blessings are multi-faceted. We appear to recite three distinct blessings, one focused on the obligation of study, another requesting enlightenment and success in Torah, and a third thanking God for the gift of Torah. Indeed, based on the first chapter of Rambam’s *Hilkhot Berakhot,* we may say that these represent the three general categories of blessings.

Perhaps swayed by the highly unusual multiplicity of blessings in *birkhot ha-Torah*, some Rishonim, most prominently Rabbeinu Tam (*Tosafot, Berakhot* 46a, s.v. *Kol*; see also Rabbeinu Yona, *Berakhot* 5b, Rif, s.v. *Ve-ha*), maintain that the first two blessings are really one; on this basis, the majority of halakhic authorities rule that one should not recite Amen between the conclusion of the opening blessing (“*la’asok be-divrei Torah*” for Ashkenazim, “*al divrei Torah*” for Sephardim) and *Ha’arev Na*. This limits somewhat the range of themes in the blessing. What is more, Ramban (ibid.) seems to hold that the essence of the biblical obligation is that of *shevach* (praise) to the Almighty for endowing us with His Torah. Still, others, including Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 7:11) and Ba’al Ha-maor (*Berakhot* 5b, Rif, s.v. *Mai*) take the more obvious view, namely that there are three distinct blessings. Moreover, that we cover a wide range of themes — *shevach*, *bakasha* (request) and *hoda’a* (thanksgiving) — further accentuates the impressive territory covered in *birkhot ha-Torah*.

The multiplicity of themes in *birkhot ha-Torah* touches on the interaction between *talmud Torah* and other *mitzvot* that we noted in the second *shiur* of this series. *Birkhot ha-Torah* are themselves a form of prayer; this speaks to the larger relationship between *talmud Torah* and *tefilla*, both of which are designated as a mode of *avoda*, divine service, by *Sifrei* (*Ekev* 41) and Rambam (*Aseh* 5). Indeed, before the Gemara cites the debate about the text of *birkhot ha-Torah,* it mentions the ruling of Rav Yehuda in the name of Shemuel that one’s obligation to recite *birkhot ha-Torah* may be fulfilled with the blessing of *Ahava Rabba* before *Keriat Shema*, showing the relationship between *Shema* and Torah study.

To this we may add another case in point. As mentioned, the Sephardic text of the blessing concludes “*al divrei Torah*.” What is the significance of this version? A number of Rishonim suggest that the blessing is recited not only upon *talmud Torah* but upon the performance of *mitzvot* as well (*Manhig,* pg. 9; Abudraham, *Tefillot Chol*; Ra’avya 1:181; see also *Beit Yosef, OC* 47 and *Magen Avraham* 47:3). This underscores not only the chameleon-like quality of *talmud Torah*, but also that it is both intrinsically important and meant to lead to practical implementation.

**Covenantal Relationship**

We noted, particularly in our discussions of studying the Oral Law and teaching Torah to non-Jews, that *talmud Torah* is a centerpiece of the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people. We also noted that this motif might be particularly manifest in the public reading and study of the Torah, which seek to reenact the Revelation at Sinai.

In a similar vein, *Tur (OC* 47) movingly writes:

When reciting this blessing, one should think of the Convocation at Sinai, that He chose us from among all the nations; brought us near to Mount Sinai and made us to hear His words out of the fire, and gave us His sacred Torah which is the base of our lives — His precious vessel in which He reveled daily.[[1]](#footnote-1)

If *talmud Torah* is, in part, a reenactment of Sinai, we ought to bear that recollection in mind while reciting the blessings.

Additionally, if *talmud Torah* is about more than the technical fulfillment of the mitzva of *talmud Torah*, including the covenant, it makes sense to assert that *birkhot ha-Torah* are analogously not only recited upon the technical act of *talmud Torah*. This thesis finds considerable support among the classical proof-texts. As Rav Chayim Soloveitchik contends, there is ample evidence for the thesis that *birkhot ha-Torah* are recited not over *talmud Torah* but upon the encounter with Torah. It is, as we noted in *shiur* 11, perhaps for this reason that Rav Yosef Karo obligates women in *birkhot ha-Torah* despite the fact that he generally precludes women from reciting blessings over *mitzvot* from which they are exempt. More compellingly, as we saw in *shiur* 7, *Berakhot* 11b cites a number of views which hold that we do not recite *birkhot ha-Torah* upon all texts which one studies, notwithstanding the fact that one certainly fulfills the mitzva of *talmud Torah* in all these scenarios.

This insight can also help us understand a dispute among the authorities regarding one who recites biblical verses in the context of prayer (see *Shulchan Arukh* OC 46:9). Why would we not require one to recite *birkhot ha-Torah* prior to the recitation of verses that appear, for example, in *Selichot*? One possibility is that *talmud Torah* requires not just reading words of Torah, but reading for the sake of study. Alternatively, however, such an individual might technically fulfill the obligation of Torah study, but, following Rav Chayim’s view, one has not meaningfully engaged with the Torah text. Such a recitation, to borrow from the language of *birkhot ha-Torah* themselves, does not rise to the level of engaging with words of Torah.

**Learning as a Return to our Essential Selves**

We argued (*shiur* 4), following the analysis of Rav Soloveitchik, that *talmud Torah* might be best understood as a return to one’s self. This dovetails perfectly with the view of Tosafot (*Berakhot* 11b, s.v. *She-kevar*). They ask why one who stops learning and continues later in the day does not recite *Birkhot Ha-Torah* again. After all, there has been a *hefsek* (interruption). They explain: “Torah is different, because one’s mind never budges from it, as one is constantly obligated to study, for it states, ‘but you shall meditate therein day and night,’ and it is as if one sits all day [studying] without pause.” This seems hard to swallow. One might be obligated in Torah study, but in what sense is one learning all day long? We might explain that in fact, one’s actions throughout the course of the day are intended to be an outgrowth of one’s study; in this sense, one’s *mitzvot* extends one’s Torah study, therefore generating continuity between one’s formal acts of learning.

While plausible in theory, this interpretation does not seem to fit Tosafot’s language. Instead, we may suggest that people are naturally wired to be engaged in Torah study. In the deepest recesses of our souls, we all strive to learn throughout the day and night. Thus, even one who is not formally engaged in the act of learning is, deep down, connected to Torah study throughout the day. Despite taking a break, our organic connection to *talmud Torah* provides that continuity.

**Toil that Engenders Joy and Love**

We noted that *talmud Torah* accents toil which results in love of learning and love of God. All these motifs are underscored in *birkhot ha-Torah*. At the conclusion of the blessing, in the Ashkenazic text, we say that God commanded us “to engage in words of Torah.” This clearly indicates that our obligation is not just to learn, but to toil in the process. Yet in the same breath, we ask God to “sweeten” the words of Torah in our mouths. In our text of the blessing (which does not appear in our printed Gemara but does appear in the text of the Rif and other Rishonim) we beseech God to render us “studiers of Your Torah for its own sake.” This emphasis on *lishmah* echoes not only the general significance of *Torah lishmah* but also, at least for Rambam, the critical importance of love of learning to the mitzva. The fusion of toil and love that we encounter in *birkhot ha-Torah* is characteristic of *talmud Torah* writ large.

The emphasis on *lishmah*, it is worth adding, is amplified by a classic comment of Rabbeinu Yona, cited by Ran on *Nedarim* 81a (s.v. *Davar*). There Rav Yehuda cites Rav’s statement that the First Temple was destroyed because the Jews did not make the blessing over the Torah first. Rabbeinu Yona explains:

The Torah was not all that important in their eyes, such that it was worthy of the recitation of a blessing. For they did not engage in its for its own sake (*lishmah*), and therefore they disrespected its blessing. That is what [the verse] indicates by saying, “They did not follow it” — meaning, with its proper intent and for its own sake.

Here too, *lishmah* is representative of the broader spiritual omni-significance of *talmud Torah*.

In this context, it is also worth referring to the innovative position of the Steipler Gaon (ch*.* 24), who notes that *Berakhot* 21a analogizes between *birkhot ha-Torah* and the blessing recited over food. On this basis, he contends that *birkhot ha-Torah* are to be viewed as blessings over the derivation of benefit: just as one recites *birkhot ha-nehenin* prior to deriving physical pleasure, so too one must recite *birkhot ha-nehenin* before deriving the spiritual pleasure of Torah study. For this reason, one may not study Torah before reciting a blessing. This novel reading of *birkhot ha-Torah* accentuates the theme of joy in Torah which, as we noted, features prominently in the text of the blessings..

**Parent-Child Relationship**

Finally, in the end, the most crucial aspect of *talmud Torah* is not one’s own learning, but to ensure the perpetuation of our tradition by teaching Torah to one’s children and other members of the Jewish community. It is therefore fitting that in *birkhot ha-Torah* we ask God to that our progeny merit to study Torah as well. In fact, Bava Metzia 85a states:

Rabbi Parnakh said in Rabbi Yochanan’s name: Whoever is a scholar, whose child is a scholar too, and whose grandchild is a scholar as well, the Torah will never cease from that one’s seed, as it is written (*Yeshayahu* 59:21), “As for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord; My spirit is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, nor out of the mouth of your seed, nor out of the mouth of your seed's seed, says the Lord, from henceforth and forever.”  What is meant by “says the Lord”? — The Holy one, blessed be He, said, I am surety for you in this matter. What is the meaning of “from henceforth and for ever”? Rabbi Yirmeya says: From henceforth [i.e., after three generations] the Torah will always make its abode there.

On this basis, many texts of *Ha’arev Na* include: “May we, our progeny, and our progeny’s progeny and the progeny of all your people, the House of Israel, be knowers of Your name and studiers of Your Torah for its own sake (*Manhig*, *Tefilla* 19; Bach *OC* 47). Others (*Magen Avraham*, prologue to *OC* 47) maintain that such an addition is unnecessary, as the phrase “and our progeny” includes both children and grandchildren. Either way, essential to *birkhot ha-Torah* is the plea for the successful transmission of Torah to multiple generations.

This brings us back to the theme of reenacting the revelation at Sinai, which we have encountered on numerous occasions throughout this series. As *Kiddushin* 30a puts it:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: Teaching one’s grandchild Torah is considered by the verse like receiving it directly from Mount Sinai, as it is written: “And you shall impart them to your children and your children’s children” (*Devarim* [4:9](https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.4.9)), and it is written thereafter: “The day that you stood before the Lord your God at Chorev” (*Devarim* [4:10](https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.4.10)).

Through our study of the themes of *birkhot ha-Torah* and *talmud Torah*, may we merit to successfully internalize and transmit the Torah to future generations.

1. See HaRav Lichtenstein, “Reflections Upon Birkot Ha-Torah,” http://etzion.org.il/en/reflections-upon-birkot-hatorah. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)