YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

***Torah Lishmah* – In the Mind or in the Heart?**

**By Rav Elyakim Krumbein**

[This shiur is part of Rav Krumbein’s VBM series ***Torah Lishmah – A New Horizon***. The full series is here: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/torah-lishmah>.]

**A. “What is *Lishmah*?” – Defining the Question**

In a seminal passage in his *Nefesh Ha-chayim* (sec. 4, chs. 2-3),Rav Chayim of Volozhin addresses the question how one is to learn *Torah* *lishmah*, “Torah for its sake.” He records two theories: first, the Chassidic view that one learns *lishmah* by learning for the sake of *deveikut* – spiritual attachment to God; second, Rav Chayim’s own position that *lishmah* is attained by learning for the sake of understanding the Torah.

This debate, however, requires a more in-depth analysis. That is, we must first take a step back and ask ourselves, what exactly is the question being addressed by *Torah lishmah*? Precisely what point is being debated?

On the surface, the answer is clear and obvious. One who seeks to fulfill the *mitzva* of Torah study in the most complete fashion must study with a certain intention, and the question thus becomes what intention should accompany his learning. As we will soon see, however, this formulation is far too simplistic.

When Rav Chayim challenges the “*deveikut*”approach, he notes that one can achieve this goal more easily through other means, such as reciting *Tehillim*, without engaging intricate Talmudic texts. Why, then, should one study Torah? His claim is that the *deveikut* approach obviates Torah study. Yet this challenge requires further probing to be fully understood. Seemingly, the question Rav Chayim raises relates to the thought and intention that must accompany the act of learning, and the Chasidim answered by pointing to the desire to attach oneself to the Almighty. While it is true that other religious activities are well-suited for this goal, and even assuming that they are better suited than Torah study, why should this warrant neglecting the *mitzva* of Torah study in deference to those activities? All parties to this debate accept the premise that there exists an obligation to learn Torah; the discussion surrounds only the intention with which one must study to achieve the standard of “*lishmah*.”

Clearly, then, when Rav Chayim raised this objection, he made an important assumption regarding the essential nature of this topic of “*lishmah*.” The question is not merely, as it superficially appears, which intention one should have as one learns. A person must intend to attain the value that constitutes the **basic objective** of learning. Thus, defining “learning *lishmah*” relates to a far more fundamental question: why do we learn Torah? The Chasidim held that in order to achieve the quality of “*lishmah*” in learning, one must intend to attach oneself to God; but more fundamentally, they also believed that achieving this *deveikut* is actually the purpose of learning – and not merely an additional dimension whereby one fulfills the *mitzva* at the highest standard. This explains Rav Chayim’s critique of their approach. In his estimation, Torah learning is not the most effective way to achieve the stated goal, and he therefore could not accept the premise that Torah study was intended solely for the purpose of *deveikut*.

Accordingly, the topic of *lishmah* actually inquires into the “soul” of Torah learning, and addresses the question: “What is this learning for?”[[1]](#footnote-1) However, even this understanding of the issue of *lishmah* does not yet get to the heart of the matter, as we shall presently see.

**B. Distinguishing Between Objective and Motive**

The act of Torah study is an intellectual one. However, if we say that this act of learning does not suffice, and it should take place with the added dimension of “*lishmah*,” then we in effect view the intellection as part of a process. The meaning and quality of the act of learning change once we view it as part of a broader framework, as the learning leads to a certain goal, a goal which is perhaps not intellectual in nature. We specifically emphasize our “viewing” of this process, because the demand of *lishmah* is not met simply by the fact that the Torah bears religious, cosmic, spiritual or other significance; it requires the intention and conscious awareness of the person studying. We speak here of directing one’s learning toward the stated objective, and this intention is what transforms the learning into *Torah lishmah*.

We may describe this process as follows:

the person’s inner motive -> learning -> objective.

It is the final component – the objective – that is subject to debate among the different scholars, as we have seen. Alongside the “religious” approach of the Chasidim (learning for the sake of *deveikut*) and the “cognitive” approach of Rav Chayim, Rabbi Norman Lamm notes a third approach.[[2]](#footnote-2) Namely, there are those who define learning *lishmah* to mean “*lilmod al menat la’asot*” – learning for the purpose of observance. Rabbi Lamm explains this model – to which we will refer as the “utilitarian” approach – to mean simply that a person studies Torah so that he knows how to observe the *mitzvot*. In any event, whichever of these three purposes one accepts, the student must direct himself toward that purpose in order for his learning to meet the demand of *lishmah*.

But this is where the crucial question arises. When considering the two stages which determine the student’s mindset – the motivation and the objective – which of these is the primary component? Which aspect is the main focus of *lishmah*? I believe this to be a very important question, and we will demonstrate its centrality by taking a closer look at one of the three definitions given for *lishmah* – the “utilitarian” definition.

**C. Sources for the Utilitarian Approach**

A passage in *Berakhot* (17a) serves as a source for the “utilitarian” approach to *Torah lishmah*:

Rava was wont to say: “The purpose of wisdom is repentance and good deeds” – so that a person should not read Scripture and study, and then defy his father, his mother, his rabbi, and those greater than him in wisdom and numbers, as it says, “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord; all who practice it gain good understanding” (*Tehillim* 111:10). It does not say, “those who practice,” but rather “those who practice it” – those who practice for its sake, and not those who practice not for its sake. And whoever practices not for its sake – it would have been preferable for him not to have been created.

For the time being, we will accept Rabbi Lamm’s definition of this approach, namely, that a person studies so that he will know how to fulfill the commandments. Clearly, the objective and motive are here found in two different realms of activity. The learning-motivation lies in the mindset of the student, whereas the objective is found in the realm of action and implementation. Our question is: which area do we emphasize?

Let us draw a comparison to a different area where we find a continuum of motive-action-objective. A person shoots an arrow from a bow to a target. His shooting has an objective, and because of that objective, he has a motive: since he wants to hit his target, he directs his action in a manner that can achieve this goal. In this instance, the objective constitutes the main component. It fully and precisely defines what is demanded of the individual in directing his action. He must do whatever is needed to hit the target – no more and no less. In order to succeed in his task as an archer, his intent and desire must conform to the professional requirements.

At first this seems obvious, but if we take a closer look at the human reality in which that archer lives, we will realize that according to this definition, there are things occurring “inside him” that are not part of this process. Worlds of feeling and experience may very well underlie this otherwise innocent act of releasing an arrow from a bow. One person intends to hit the target for pure enjoyment, or to hone his athletic skills, while somebody else wants to succeed because he is competing in an Olympic event for which he has trained for years. Yet, all those who hit the target are equally considered as having succeeded, regardless of whether the arrow was shot out of boredom, for recreation, to win an Olympic competition, or to save the life of one’s son (as in the legend of William Tell). A high level of existential identification and emotional involvement does not afford the archer any advantage, as the action is evaluated strictly by a professional standard – the ability to execute the desire to achieve a predetermined goal.

Let us now return from the analogy of the archer to our topic – the realm of Torah study, according to the model of “*al menat la’asot*”: learning for the purpose of knowing how to act. This model of learning may also be understood on the assumption that the objective alone, and not any underlying motivation, constitutes the critical element in defining *lishmah* – as we will see in the next section.

**D. The “Utilitarian” *Lishmah*:The Objective as the Primary Component**

We find in traditional sources a number of passages that urge us to learn Torah “for the sake of observing.” We will give two examples. The first is from the introduction to the halakhic work *Chayei Adam*:

Torah includes two commandments. The first part is to study Torah, as it says (among many other verses), “You shall teach your children” (*Devarim* 11:19). In this regard, there is no difference between learning the tractates of *Berakhot* or those in *Mo’ed* [which deal with practically relevant *halakhot*], and learning the order of *Kodashim* [which deals with the laws of the *Mikdash*], for it is all the “words of the living God.”

The second part is that one should learn for the sake of fulfilling, and this takes precedence over the first part, for it accomplishes both objectives [i.e., learning itself and the facilitation of mitzva observance]. For if one does not learn, one will not know what to do. And regarding this the [Sages] said, “It was decided that learning takes precedence [over mitzva observance], because learning leads to practice,” meaning that one thereby knows what to do. Therefore, the ancient [scholars] – the Rif and the Rosh – composed [works] only on the tractates that are practically relevant for us, and they omitted many things that are not common. This is because they saw that people’s minds had declined, and they therefore downsized the material to accommodate our capabilities.

In short, although even theoretical learning has a purpose, one should afford precedence to the study of practical Halakha*,* according to *Chayei Adam*. A somewhat sharper expression of this notion appears in the writings of one of our generation’s great Torah sages, Rav Ovadia Yosef (*Yabi’a Omer*, introduction to vol. 3):

From all that has been said we may learn that the leaders of Israel and *Roshei Yeshiva* everywhere bear the sacred obligation to guide yeshiva students … in an appropriate manner and closely supervise their courses of study … and educate them in the paths of *hora’a* [halakhic decision-making] and the proper methodology of study, to understand and rule [on halakhic matters] for today and for the distant future – regarding which [the Sages] said (*Kiddushin* 40a), “Learning is great for its leads to practice” – and to engage in the *halakhot* required of every rabbi in Israel. How distressing it is to see many of the fine young men of Israel spending all their time only in *pilpulim* [Talmudic sophistry] without discerning whether their words are correct according to *Halakha* and sound reasoning! What a waste of their brilliant talents, which they could have utilized for the knowledge and clarification of laws and practical halakhic problems! But instead, they invest all their energy in fruitless *pilpul* which grants them temporary gratification. It is appropriate to apply to them [the Talmud’s remark], “They abandon eternal life for the sake of the thrill of the moment” (*Shabbat* 10a). It is almost certain that when somebody like this needs to rule on a halakhic matter, he will leave the straight “path of vineyards” and wander aimlessly.

Rav Yosef goes further than *Chayei Adam*, describing the study that is not “*al menat la’asot*” as “fruitless *pilpul*” and bordering on actual waste of time. In any event, we will endeavor at this point to understand more precisely the dynamics of this quality of “*al menat la’asot*.”

According to this approach, the main goal is knowledge of the Halakha, similar to the goal of hitting the target: the one who studies wants to know how to observe the Halakha. Once he has this intent, he will naturally develop his learning program accordingly, just as the athlete utilizes all available means that enable him to fulfill his goal. Here, too, we know nothing of, nor are we concerned with, the existential world underlying the individual’s desire to know the Halakha. It could be that he simply wants to know how to fulfill his obligations, and nothing more, or that he wants to act “the way a Jew is supposed to act.” He might be afraid of punishment in the next world. Possibly, his desire to fulfill the divine word stems from deep-seated ideological commitment, or from the depths of his soul, or from his love or fear of the Almighty. These motivations certainly differ from one another in terms of the person’s religious and spiritual stature. But if the definition of “*lishmah*” considers the objective alone, then all of these people share the same goal, namely, to know the Halakha*.* Thus, from the perspective of the level of “*lishmah*,” there is no difference between all the people described, despite the experiential and religious distinctions.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**E. The Requirement of *Lishmah* When Writing a *Get***

Rabbi Lamm compares the “utilitarian” definition of *lishmah* with the halakhic requirement of *lishmah* that applies to writing a *get* (divorce contract). One who writes a *get* must write it with the intention that it will be used for the divorce of such-and-such woman and such-and-such man. This intention itself becomes a formal, legal quality of the document, without which the document is not legally qualified to effect the divorce of this couple. In this instance, too, we see that the objective – the halakhic efficacy of the *get* – constitutes the primary component; it dictates the need for the intention of *lishmah*, and it fully and precisely defines that intention. The scribe must “express” through his thought his desire that the document fulfill its goal. The mental act is the intent, comparable to the archer directing the arrow toward its target. This intention is completely defined by the predetermined objective. And here, too, whatever other intentions the scribe has in his mind are of no consequence.

For instance, let us imagine a scribe who invests extraordinary concentration and emotion into his work. He may be a good friend of the couple and thus shares in their heartbreak; he emotionally identifies with the pain of their separation, realizing that this is the only option to extricate them from their current family crisis. All this added emotional baggage is absolutely meaningless as far as the *lishmah* element is concerned, as the efficacy of the document is secured by the simple thought and plain desire to meet the halakhic requirement that the document be written with its legal purpose in mind. The *get*’s validity is the objective, and this validity cannot compensate the scribe for the impressive seriousness with which he goes about his work, nor does it rise to a higher level as a result of his emotional efforts. In general, emotion plays no role whatsoever in this endeavor. Achieving the desired goal demands the will of consciousness, rather than the will of emotion.

Applying this example to the issue of learning “*al menat la’asot*,” we reach the exact same conclusion: the deep, inner world of the student has no bearing at all on the definition of his learning as *Torah lishmah*. There is no advantage in this respect to a pure heart, strength of desire, or internal identification with the material. The student is simply called upon to direct his act of learning toward the goal of familiarizing himself with the Halakha – and this suffices.

However, we will now see that this approach suffers from a serious flaw indeed – one which renders it almost untenable.

**F. *Lishmah* – A Trivial Task?!**

The problem is simple. *Lishmah* differs from ordinary learning in that it entails a heightening of one’s learning; it is a challenge that requires the student to add meaningful intent to the intellectual exercise of learning. It goes without saying that *lishmah* is not meant to lower the stature of the learning or diminish from its importance. Remarkably, however, if the quality of “*lishmah*” defines mainly the objective of the learning, and this objective is acquiring the knowledge needed for halakhic observance, then it effectively lowers the inherent value of the learning. According to this perspective, learning has no significance other than as a means by which one fulfills other *mitzvot*. Learning has now descended to the level of a medium that facilitates halakhic practice – just as the requirement of *lishmah* in writing a *get* serves only as a means to the objective of producing a valid document.

The magnitude of the problem emerges from the comments of the *Beit Halevi* (responsa, 6) regarding the ruling of the *Semag* that women are required to study practically relevant Halakha. The *Beit Halevi* questions how we may reconcile this ruling with the blanket exemption given to women from Torah learning, as established in the Gemara (*Kiddushin* 29a). He gives the following answer:

Undoubtedly, then, they [women] do not bear the obligation of Torah study that applies to men at all, even with regard to the *mitzvot* that apply to them. For regarding men, the learning constitutes an affirmative command like laying *tefillin*, and when one learns he fulfills an affirmative command. And even with regard to the *mitzvot* that are not practically relevant to him, he is nevertheless obligated to study [their laws] due to the affirmative command of Torah study. Regarding women, however, their study does not entail any *mitzva* at all, intrinsically. Rather, the *Semag* wrote that women are nevertheless obligated to study the *mitzvot* that apply to them in order that they will know how to fulfill them.

The *Beit Halevi* presents a convincing argument that learning intended only to provide the knowledge necessary for observance does not fulfill the *mitzva* of Torah study. Obviously, one who is obligated in a *mitzva* must first learn how to observe it. But we cannot begin to understand the exalted ideal of *talmud Torah*, and its lofty stature within Jewish life, unless we release it from its subjugation to practical halakhic observance.

Thus, if we accept the “utilitarian” understanding of *Torah lishmah*, then learning *lishmah*, which is meant to be the loftiest and highest goal, actually lowers and trivializes Torah study.

This problem arises because of the way we presented the “utilitarian” approach to *Torah lishmah*. We developed it according to the model of shooting an arrow and writing a *get*, so that everything is determined solely by the objective, and no meaning at all is ascribed to emotional involvement. This resulted in a *lishmah* which is far too trivial to be true. It is very difficult to assume that this was the intent of those scholars who identified *Torah lishmah* as learning “*al menat la’asot*.”

**G. Interim Summary**

We have begun analyzing the process of *lishmah* by breaking it down into its various components: the motive, the intellectual act, and the objective. We posed the question of whether the root of the process lies specifically in the designated objective; this is indeed the explanation given by Rabbi Lamm in his treatment of this topic. But when we assessed this possibility based on one of the three definitions of *lishmah* – the “utilitarian” model – which led us to a critical problem.

From here, we must turn to the second option, and examine the opposite premise: namely, that the student’s existential motivation is not to be ignored, In fact, existential motivation is what lies at the very heart of the process of *lishmah*. This premise will now be fleshed out.

Let us reexamine the statement of Rava, quoted above, about the value of learning *al menat la'asot*.

**H. “*Lilmod Al Menat La’asot*” – A New Definition**

Rava would often comment: The purpose of wisdom is repentance and good deeds – that a person should not read and study and then defy his father, his mother, his rabbi, and those greater than him in wisdom and numbers, as it says, “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord; all who practice it gain good understanding” (*Tehillim* 111:10). It does not say, “those who practice,” but rather “those who practice it” – i.e., those who practice for its sake, and not those who practice not for its sake. And whoever practices not for its sake – it would have been preferable for him not to have been created. (*Berakhot* 17a)

Until now, we assumed that the term *lomed al menat la’asot* means that a person studies *halakhot* to know how to observe the Torah practically. However, rereading Rava’s comment in the Gemara may yield a different understanding. Why did Rava suspect that somebody who learns “not for its sake” will likely come to “defy his father, his mother, his rabbi and those greater than him,” rather than commit other offenses? Why, for example, did Rava not warn “that a person should not read and study and then sit in an invalid *sukka* or mistakenly eat non-kosher meat” as a result of halakhic errors caused by his failure to learn “for the sake of practicing”?

Clearly, Rava is not merely concerned that one who does not properly learn will not know what to do. Rava is talking about an emotional identification with Torah, which then points one towards a practical way of life. Learning expresses devotion to the practical ideals of the Torah and the desire to implement those ideals. Studying Torah is a spiritual union with the Torah, and this bonding is meant to strengthen the fervor that brings the Torah to realization in practical life. A person’s desire to defy those greater than him, the phenomenon described by Rava, is not the result of insufficient study of the laws concerning respect for Torah scholars. Rather, it stems from one’s viewing learning as a road to greater personal status, rather than as a compass for a values-oriented life.

If so, we may infer from Rava’s comments that learning *al menat la’asot* is an experience whose locus is the soul of the student. *Lishmah* is thus an educational endeavor, through which the student forges his essential desires out of inner identification with the Torah’s concrete vision, expressing this idealism in the act of learning. It is not a matter of simply acquiring the knowledge required for fulfilling *mitzvot*. True, the desire to fulfill the Torah’s laws may very well impact upon the program of study, so that priority will be given to practical halakhic topics. But this is not the essence of *lomed al menat la’asot*. The category can apply equally to a student engaging in the in-depth study of *kodashim* (the laws of the *Mikdash* and sacrifices). A person can aspire to the ultimate purpose of Torah – “repentance and good deeds” – even if he chooses to learn subject matter that has nothing at all to do with his daily routine. And, in fact, regarding somebody who limits his studies to the *halakhot* he must know for daily observance, we would point to the *Beit Halevi* cited above: it is doubtful whether we could credit such a student with the distinction of *Torah lishmah*. The ideal of *lomed al menat la’asot* of which Rava spoke refers to something else entirely.

Earlier we suggested a comparison between the student who learns for the sake of practice, and one who shoots an arrow with the purpose of hitting a certain target, or one who writes a *get* (divorce contract) “*lishmah*” as Halakha requires. However, according to the new understanding we are now proposing, this comparison no longer obtains. In contrast to the scribe who writes a *get* “*lishmah*,” with the formally required intent, the emotional attachment of a student to the goal of *lilmod al menat la’asot* is indeed very significant. In fact, we may say that the criterion that determines the degree of success in achieving *lishmah*, is the strength of one’s existential connection to the goal of the practical realization of Torah. The more intensely this connection is felt by the student, the greater the level of *lishmah*.

Let us briefly summarize the two different understandings we have seen of the goal of *limud al menat la’asot*. On the one hand, this learning might require the individual to make his goal the practical observance required by Halakha, and then direct his learning toward that goal. This view underscores defining *the goal* as the prime element in *lishmah*. But we proposed an alternative: an approach that deals mainly with the student’s *emotional experience*. Accordingly, *limud al menat la’asot* demands that a person engender within himself a deep personal identification with the goal of practical observance of the *mitzvot*. A careful reading of Rava’s comment in the Gemara lends support to this second approach.

Beyond the implications of this finding to the definition of “*al menat la’asot*,” it also exemplifies, more generally, the question we posed at the outset, as to whether the value of *lishmah* focuses on the goal of learning, or on the inner drive and motivation behind one’s learning.

**I. *Torah Lishmah*: The Critical Question**

We can now return to the fundamental query with which we opened: what is the critical question that the topic of *Torah lishmah* seeks to answer?

One way to pose the question is: what is the purpose of the *mitzva* of Torah learning, and to what end must the action be directed? This question assumes that the act of learning has a certain goal to which one must intend as one learns. I suggest, however, that the question be formulated differently, utilizing a different assumption. This assumption says that the deep, inner feelings of the student are not meant to slumber away or sit idly by as he exercises his intellectual faculties through learning. A person should engage in Torah not only by exercising the mind, but also from within the existential levels of his character, with deep emotional involvement and an awareness of Torah’s significance in his life. According to this assumption, the question becomes: to which direction should the student’s personal and emotional world be directed at the time of study, and which desires are meant to develop and be empowered, realized and expressed through the encounter with Torah? Our analysis thus far supports this latter way of defining the question, to which *Torah lishmah* is the answer.

**J. “*Al Menat La’asot*” in the Thought of the *Reishit Chokhma***

To be sure, this discussion does not entirely negate the goal of “*al menat la’asot*” in its practical formulation. Recall that we cited passages from the *Chayei Adam* and Rav Ovadya Yosef that emphasized the priority of learning practically relevant Halakha. We might also add to this list the Chafetz Chayim, who elaborated on this point at length in his introduction to *Mishna Berura* and elsewhere in his writings. However, if we read these sources more carefully, we reveal an interesting point: not one of them mentions *Torah lishmah* while stressing the importance of practical learning. This seems to us to support our claim that when Rava discusses “*al menat la’asot*” in the context of *Torah lishmah*, he did not refer to the same point that the aforementioned authors sought to stress. Rava sees the practical direction of learning as part of the educational and experiential issue of *Torah lishmah*, and does not address the choice of subject material.

This argument receives further support from the work of another great author who followed Rava’s lead and – unlike those cited above – did explicitly identify *Torah lishmah* with the ideal of “*al menat la’asot*.” I refer to Rav Eliyahu de Vidas, a disciple of the famed Kabbalist of Safed, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, and author of the Kabbalistic *mussar* work entitled *Reishit Chokhma*.

The author opens the introduction to his work by setting forth his fundamental outlook:

It is well-known that that the true, main [purpose] of Torah study is to lead toward practical observance, as explained in *Masekhet Berakhot*, chapter 2 – “Rava would often comment: The purpose of wisdom is repentance and good deeds – that a person should not read and study and then defy his father, his mother, his rabbi, and those greater than him in wisdom and numbers, as it says, ‘The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord; all who practice it gain good understanding’ (*Tehillim* 111:10). It does not say, ‘those who practice,’ but rather ‘those who practice *it*’ – i.e., those who practice for its sake, and not those who practice not for its sake. And whoever practices not for its sake – it would have been preferable for him not to have been created”… This teaches that the primary “*Torah lishmah*” is the Torah which a person studies in order to observe it, and this is the meaning of the verse: When a person affords precedence to “fear of the Lord” over “wisdom,” the wisdom will then grant “good understanding” to “all who practice it,” that the wisdom shall be retained within him, since he studied the wisdom only to use it as a medium to achieve fear, and fear is the “practice.”

The work under discussion is actually named after Rava’s homily (“*Reishit Chokhma*” – “The Beginning of Understanding”); the homily is clearly a pivotal part of the author’s vision and aim. We may thus assume that the goal of achieving *lishmah* was at the forefront of the author’s mind as he composed this work. However, note that the final sentence in Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas’s introductory passage discusses “fear of the Lord,” which gives rise to the question: what is the precise purpose served by this “fear” in the context of *lishmah*? The verse cited by Rava indeed speaks of “*yir’at Hashem*” (“fear of the Lord”), but his homily does not explicitly elaborate this theme. We might assume, therefore, that “fear of the Lord” is merely a code-word for *mitzva* observance. The author of *Reishit Chokhma*, however, does makes a point of mentioning this concept in explaining the verse and Rava’s comments. Did he use the term *yir’at Hashem* synonymously with *mitzva* observance, as we might understand from his concluding words – “and fear is the practice” (“*ve-yir’a hu ha-ma’aseh*”)?

I believe that this reading misses the mark. Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas speaks of *yir’at Hashem* as the motivational point of departure for learning: “when a person affords precedence to ‘fear of the Lord’ over ‘wisdom’…” In his view, this sequence transforms the scholarship that a person obtains into “a medium to achieve fear” – *before* it serves as a means of facilitating practical observance. Clearly, then, he speaks of “fear” as an internal quality, rather than as *mitzva* observance. When he concludes by remarking, “fear is the practice,” he likely means that the student’s *yir’at Hashem* is then manifest in his conduct. Indeed, as the author declared at the outset of this introduction, the objective of learning is practical observance. However, this goal is achieved by cultivating one’s *yir’at Hashem* as an inner motivation to study. The wisdom that one studies is then the “medium” that leads to *yir’at Hashem*, and the practical observance – which is the end result of this process – is the expression of *yir’a*.

We may thus contend that in defining *Torah lishmah*, the *Reishit Chokhma* sees utmost importance in the inner motivation behind one’s learning. In fact, the structure of the book clearly reflects this premise. This work, which explicitly raises the banner of *lishmah* in the sense of leading to practical observance, is divided into sections named after religious qualities – mainly fear of God, love of God, and holiness. How do these qualities relate to the author’s clearly stated goal of explaining the concept of *lishmah* in terms of the desire to practically observe the Torah? Presumably, Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas did not believe that the practical observance could succeed if this effort is not built upon personal involvement in, and commitment to, the path of *musar* outlined in this book. He apparently felt that either such success is not possible, or the value of this success is questionable.

Not surprisingly, later in the introduction we find further support for this point, and we cite here only one example. The author endeavors to explain a comment in the *Zohar* which lauds those “who exert themselves in Torah day and night.” If a person does nothing but learn Torah day and night, how does he fulfill the ideal of learning “*al menat la’asot*”? The *Reishit Chokhma* poses this question and presents the following answer:

One should not neglect his involvement in [good] deeds because of his involvement in Torah, for it is possible to accomplish both. By involving oneself in Torah while adorned with *tzitzit* and *tefillin*, which the ancient [scholars] were very careful to do ... one thereby accomplishes both Torah and [good] deeds.

Upon reading his answer, we must wonder, does learning with *tallit* and *tefillin* qualify as learning *lishmah* – obtaining the knowledge necessary for performing *mitzvot*? Does the *Reishit Chokhma* refer here to those who spend the entire day and night learning the laws of *tzitzit* and *tefillin*? Clearly, the value of practical observance in Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas’s approach relates to the student’s inner commitment to implement the Torah in the realm of action. This goal is achieved through every *mitzva* act, including acts that have nothing to do with the material one studies.

On the other hand, *Reishit Chokhma*’s approach to this topic is not monolithic. To the contrary, a close reading of the introduction reveals also the notion of learning which equips the student with the guidance he needs for daily conduct and for avoiding halakhic mistakes. Thus, for example, he cites the comment of the *Sefer Chasidim* that one who acts in violation of the *halakhot* he studied is liable to punishment even for his learning. However, statements such as these should likely be viewed as details within the main conceptual framework of the *Reishit Chokhma*, which understands “repentance and good deeds” as referring to a student’s aspirations and the values with which he must profoundly identify as he learns Torah.

**K. Summary**

In this *shiur* we established a new frame of thought for understanding the topic of *Torah lishmah*. The concept demands emotional involvement with the essence of Torah, and the debate between the different views relates to the particular direction this emotional identification ought to take.

Thus, not only the “religious” and “intellectual” approaches to *lishmah*, but also the “utilitarian” approach (on which we focused here) speaks of the inner motivation, and it is this element upon which we must focus when formulating the question that *Torah lishmah* seeks to answer. In this vein we explained the possibility that *Torah lishmah* means “learning for the sake of doing,” as follows: *lishmah*-study is driven by a vision of sanctifying one’s life of action by implementing the Torah in one’s day-to-day conduct.

What can help today’s student reach that existential involvement in Torah, and can we construct a bridge from the ancient sources that will impact on Torah learning in our current culture? The VBM series [Torah Lishmah – A New Horizon](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/torah-lishmah) explores answers that have been given to these questions in the past and possible directions for the future.

1. Clearly, Rav Chayim Volozhin’s very discussion assumes this to be the basis of the whole inquiry, even before he poses his own position on the matter. In all fairness, we should raise the question of whether all those who dealt with this subject agreed with Rav Chayim Volozhin’s premise. We might find somebody who views *lishmah* simply as a kind of *hiddur mitzva* (higher standard of performing the *mitzva* of learning) and does not relate to the primary purpose of Torah and Torah study. So far, however, I have not found any proof of the existence of such a view. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah’s Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his Contemporaries* (New York, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We should qualify this point by noting the condition that the person has no negative intent from an ethical standpoint. If a person learns in order to observe, but his desire to observe stems from the desire to argue or boast, then he is not considered as learning “*lishmah*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)