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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Purpose of *Talmud Torah***

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[This shiur is part of Rav Sinensky’s VBM series ***Talmud Torah: The Mitzva of Torah Study***. The full series is here: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/talmud-torah-mitzva-torah-study>.]

Whyis Talmud Torah assigned so much weight in the rabbinical tradition? We will propose a series of explanations for the importance of Torah study.

**Approach #1 – Instrumentalism**

The first possibility is that the purpose of Torah study is simply to generate Torah knowledge, whether halakhic, hashkafic or both. We will term this the **instrumentalist approach**. On this view, the experience of Torah study per se is secondary; it is the resulting practical knowledge that is most important.

Numerous biblical, Talmudic and medieval texts seem to point in this direction. One of the primary scriptural sources for *talmud Torah*, “You shall learn them and guard them to observe them” (*Devarim* 5:1), implies that Torah study is a prerequisite for proper observance of the law. Another key verse appears toward the beginning of *Yehoshua*, in which the leader is charged not to permit the words of Torah to leave his lips, so that he may properly fulfill them (1:8).

The Mishna in *Avot* lend further support to the instrumental approach. One classic instance occurs in the first chapter, where the mishna states, “It is not the study that is primary but the action” (1:7). A later mishna, which teaches that “one who studies Torah in order to teach will be given the opportunity both to study and to teach; one who studies in order to practice will be given the opportunity to study, to teach, to observe, and to practice” (4:5), fits well with this theme.

Similarly, *Tosefta Sanhedrin* (7:7; codified by Rambam in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 4:8) rules that if two students come forward with halakhic questions, one of which is practical and the other theoretical, the practical question takes precedence. The privileging of the practical query works best if we maintain that knowledge of practical halakha is the raison d'être of Torah study, and therefore it takes precedence.

The Gemara further asserts that study is important inasmuch as it leads to action (*Kiddushin* 41a, *Bava Kama* 17a). *Berakhot* (8a) similarly asserts that God loves “gates distinguished by the study of halakha even more than synagogues and study halls”; this implies that the study of halakha is paramount relative to theoretical study, presumably because the primary goal of Torah study is for halakhic practice. Additionally, as we will explore in greater depth in a later *shiur*, the *Gemara Kiddushin* (30a) derives from “*Ve-shinantam le-vanekha*,” “You shall teach them diligently to your children,” that one is required to master Torah to the point that its material becomes “sharp in one’s mouth.”

Numerous Rishonim adopt this position. Rashi (*Vayikra* 26:3, s.v. *Ve-et*) cites the aforementioned verse in *Devarim* (5:1) in support of his contention that one must study in order to observe the commandments. Rambam (*Introduction to Mishna*, *Peia* 1:1), to whose view we will return later in the *shiur*, insists that the primary purpose of study is for the same of action, citing the Talmudic dictum that “study is great because it leads to action” (*Kiddushin* 41a). Ramban (*Devarim* 6:7 s.v. *Ve-shinantam*) asserts that “we are obligated for our sons to know the commandments, and how shall they know them if we do not teach them?” *Sefer Ha-chinukh* (419) defines the mitzva of Torah study as learning “how to perform the commandments with precision, and to refrain from that which God forbade us.” Meiri (*Mo’ed Katan* 9b, s.v. *Af al pi*) argues that if one is studying Torah and is confronted with a mitzva opportunity that no one else can perform, one must set aside Torah and perform the mitzva because “its primary purpose is for the fulfillment of *mitzvot*.”[[1]](#footnote-1) (We will explore this in greater depth in a later *shiur*.) Finally, R. Chasdai Crescas, despite his philosophical orientation, asserts that eternal life comes from observance, not study (*Or Hashem* 2:6:1).[[2]](#footnote-2)

In their first comments on the Torah (*Bereishit* 1:1), Rashi and Ramban offer different explanations of the fact that the first mitzva to the Jewish people appears only in *Shemot* 12. Rashi cites Rabbi Yitzchak’s solution, that this is to establish the Jewish claim to the Land of Israel; but Ramban (who, as we noted, adopts an instrumentalist approach) argues that *Sefer Bereishit* is primarily devoted to teaching not laws but fundamental principles of faith. Ramban implies that the purpose of Torah study – at least that of *Chumash* – is instrumentalist in a dual sense: Torah teaches us not only how to properly observe the *mitzvot* but to correct philosophical attitudes as well.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Approach #2 - Cultivating a Halakhic Ethos**

In contrast to the instrumentalist approach, another school of thought maintains that Torah study possesses not merely extrinsic but also intrinsic significance. While many further variations on this perspective may be suggested, we will discuss four classical approaches that fall broadly under this rubric.

The first view within the “intrinsic” camp holds that by studying Torah, we become more closely attuned to Torah values, thereby cultivating a Torah personality. Perhaps the clearest formulation of this principles appears in Chazon Ish’s *Emuna U-vitachon* (3:7), where Chazon Ish stresses that by studying Torah, we not only learn practical *halakhot* but also deepen our sense of being commanded beings:

The masters of awe located the influence of study in two regards. The first is the study of the obligation to fulfill the ruling and observance of the commandment, as well as the appropriate accompanying inspiration, to pay heed to He Who is the commander of this, namely the blessed Master of the Universe, the Creator of all creations, and the recognition of the grave sinfulness of one who abandons it and the magnitude of the punishment. The second type is the study of the details of each law…

While Chazon Ish clearly also accepts the instrumentalist approach (“the second type”), he offers a clear formulation of the character-cultivation approach (“the first”).

A number of sources, in emphasizing the effectiveness of Torah study in combating the evil inclination seem to reinforce Chazon Ish’s view. *Sukka* 52b recommends that one who feels overwhelmed by the evil inclination should “drag it to the study hall.” *Avot* 6:1 teaches that, among other characteristics, Torah study “prepares [one] to be righteous, devout, upright and trustworthy, and distances one from sin.” This view also animated Rav Chayim Soloveitchik’s classic opposition to the study of *Musar* (see *Halakhic Man*, p. 75). Properly studied, Torah itself possesses the capacity to refine one’s character. Of course, not all students of Torah, even outstanding scholars, manage to refine their character through the encounter with God’s will as manifest in the Torah. Nevertheless, the potential is there.

**Approach #3 - Variations on *Deveikut***

A more common view (at least in contemporary treatments) is that *talmud Torah* allows us to gain the greatest possible human understanding of the divine will, thereby enabling us to develop an intimate relationship with *Ha-kadosh Barukh Hu*. Rambam hints at this thesis in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (*Aseh* 3), where he cites *Sifrei*, which suggests that “one who desires to understand and thereby love God should study His Torah.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Perhaps most famously, this view is encapsulated in the Chasidic concept of *deveikut,* clinging to God.As (ironically) popularized by R. Chayim Volozhin in *Nefesh Ha-chayim* (Gate 4), early Chasidic thinkers emphasized that the goal of *talmud Torah* – indeed, of all religious living – is to cling to the divine. This position is rooted in a Chasidic doctrine that has been termed “panentheism,” diverging from two extreme theological views. Classical theism maintains that God is an entity entirely independent from nature and humankind. Full-fledged pantheism, by contrast, which lies beyond the contours of traditional Jewish thought, sees God and the world as one and the same. Panentheism seeks to carve out an intermediary position between these two extremes, maintaining that God encompasses nature but supersedes it. Thus, Chasidism adopted a quasi-mystical viewpoint, emphasizing that “the entire earth is suffused of his glory” in a literal sense.[[5]](#footnote-5) From this perspective, *mitzvot* – including *talmud Torah* – are seen as an opportunity to cling to the divine.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Rav Kook (*Olat Re’iya*, vol. 1, p. 59) formulates a variation on this motif. In *Birkhot Ha-Torah,* we say “*la’asok be-divrei Torah*,” “to engage with words of Torah,” as opposed to simply learning Torah. Rav Kook comments that this reflects the principle that “the divine command transcends mere study and understanding.” Instead, the command of Torah study issues from a divine source. By learning, we not only amass more knowledge but “connect with the source of life, which is a far more sublime notion than the value of any study.” While the study of all disciplines is intrinsically religiously valuable in that it can “shine a spiritual light on the student,” only by learning Torah does one “inherit a measure of the Source of life.”

While the panentheistic theology standing behind the Chasidic position and its offshoots remains hotly debated, the larger notion that through Torah study one clings to the divine has gained recent popularity. One popular variation on this line of thinking runs along the following lines. The crown of humanity is the intellect, which distinguishes us from the animals. It is the greatest manifestation of the “divine image” in which we are created, and therefore is the primary fashion in which we are meant to worship Him. HaRav Yehuda Amital zt”l[[7]](#footnote-7) formulates this approach, citing Rav Kook’s emphasis on the importance of our cognitive faculties, particularly in an age that emphasizes the importance of intellectual attainment:

If in a particular generation or generations all the general ideas have become elevated and developed, but those ideas which pertain to the Divine show no development, that generation remains in a lowly and unfortunate state, the religious fissures multiply, breach after breach, and there is no remedy other than intensive intellectual work… until the concepts pertaining to God become elevated, corresponding to the intellectual and moral development of the general culture reached by that generation in general.

Rav Amital comments:

Rabbi Kook is talking here about the need for sophisticated concepts in the realm of faith and Jewish thought. There is, however, an educational need to apply this principle to the intellectual aspect of Divine service, which finds expression in Torah study. Particularly during a period when intellect pursuits are so central in human life, and especially for a person who chooses to engage in an intellectual profession, it is critically important that the service of God find special expression in this realm, and not only in the observance of *mitzvot*. This is the reason that it is so important for a person to continue with in-depth Torah study his entire life, even after he has left full-time study in the *beit* *midrash*. This is not only because this is the highest level of Torah study, but because it is in this way that the service of God finds expression in its fullest intensity. In a world where so much importance is attached to the intellect, a person cannot possibly fulfill his obligation by learning "*Daf Yomi*," or the like, which does not require great intellectual effort.

The brain, the seat of the intellect, is man's most important organ. Should we content ourselves with serving God with our hands and other organs – taking the *shofar* in our hands and blowing it with our mouths, donning *tefillin* and eating *matza* on Pesach – and let our brains lie idle, uninvolved in His service? A person who does not occupy himself in Torah study lacks something very basic in his service of God. Should we leave our brains and intellect for our careers, for acquiring academic degrees, and serve God only with our other organs?

These powerful sentiments are part of what motivates the embrace of advanced Talmud study for women on the part of HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l.[[8]](#footnote-8) What is more, they are particularly commonplace in our day, when the Chasidic and Mitnaggedic movements have moved significantly closer to one another. Marrying the Chasidic value of *deveikut* to the yeshiva world’s stress on the importance of intellectual attainment, one can arrive at this intellectual-spiritual appreciation for the importance of *talmud Torah.*

**Approach #4 – Existential Basis for the Universe**

Returning to the Chasidic view, it should be noted that many rejected this view and suggested a fourth perspective on *talmud Torah* in its place. The Vilna Gaon, who went so far as to decry the Chasidic approach as heretical,[[9]](#footnote-9) is a classic example of rejecting panentheism. The Gaon instead adopts a doctrine of *tzimtzum*, which maintains that God miraculously removes Himself from the world at the time of creation. It is therefore unsurprising that R. Chayim Volozhin, a leading student of the Gaon, fiercely attacks what he describes as the Chasidic approach to Torah study.

R. Chayim poses a series of critiques against the Chasidic doctrine. Since we will have the occasion to analyze this subject more fully in our discussion of *Torah lishma*, at this stage it suffices to make just one main point. For R. Chayim, the purpose of Torah study is quite literally to ensure the continued existence of this world. In his view, the stakes are existential. In support of this striking assertion, R. Chayim cites *Nedarim* 32a, which teaches: “Rabbi Eliezer said: Great is the Torah, for if not for Torah, heaven and earth would not have been established, as it is stated: ‘If My covenant be not with day and night.’” In the yeshiva of Volozhin this Gemara was taken literally; thus, in fulfillment of this ideology, it was traditional for some students to be studying Torah at all times.[[10]](#footnote-10) By ensuring the perpetuation of the world, we become God’s partners in the process of creation (*Nefesh Hachayim* 4:11, 30). Thus, we have a fourth suggestion: *talmud Torah* is critically important since, as the blueprint and telos of the universe, Torah study is existentially necessary for human survival.

To summarize the shiur to this point: after exploring the instrumentalist view, which sees *talmud Torah* as primarily a vehicle for attaining knowledge, as well as Chazon Ish’s view that Torah study refines our characters as commanded individuals, we noted that the Chasidic theology of panentheism, which maintains that God encompasses and supersedes the physical universe, inclines toward the view that the purpose of *talmud Torah* is to cultivate *deveikut*, clinging to the divine. We concluded by noting the position of R. Chayim Volozhin, who sees *talmud Torah* as essential to ensuring the universe’s ongoing existence.

**Approach #5 – Reenacting Matan Torah**

A fifth approach to the significance of Torah study – and one that is most appropriate for Shavuot – links *talmud Torah* back to the revelation at Sinai: each time we study Torah, we reinforce our connection to that formative event. There are a variety of sources that lend support to this theory. For instance, the Gemara (*Berakhot* 22a, *Mo’ed Katan* 15a) seeks to account for the view of Rabbi Yehuda that one who experiences a seminal emission (*ba’al keri*) may not study Torah:

As it was taught in a *baraita*: 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)). Just as below, the Revelation at Sinai was in reverence, fear, quaking, and trembling, so too here, in every generation, Torah must be studied with a sense of reverence, fear, quaking, and trembling.

This implies that, at least according to Rabbi Yehuda, the *halakhot* of daily engagement in Torah study, especially as concerns its emotional experience, are framed by that which was appropriate during *Matan Torah* proper. In particular, public *talmud Torah*, such as Torah reading and *Hakhel*, exemplify this motif of Torah study particularly well.

**Additional Perspectives**

In addition to the reasons outlined above, we may note a number of additional benefits to be gained from Torah study. Seventeenth-century proponents of *pilpul*, a style of Gemara study based on intense textual analysis, contended that Talmud study in particular helps to sharpen the intellectual abilities of its students. What is more, Torah study, especially compared to the previously dominant Temple-centric mode of worship, contains a democratic streak that helps to make religious experience available to a broader population. Thus, Rambam writes (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 3:1), based on *Yoma* 72b (see Rashi ibid. s.v. *Shelosha*): “Israel is crowned with three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of Priesthood, and the crown of Kingship... the crown of Torah stands ready for all of Israel [to take], as it says (*Devarim* 33:4), ‘The Torah was commanded by Moshe as an inheritance for the congregation of Yaakov.’ Anyone who desires can come and take it.” In modern times, when Torah is arguably being studied by more people and in greater quantity than at any previous point in history, we are witnesses to the fruit born of this opportunity.

**Complementary Approaches**

Of course, the different approaches we have outlined are far from mutually exclusive. Indeed, they may well be seen as complementary. For instance, R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady (*Shulchan Arukh Ha-rav* 3:4) maintains that there is a dual obligation: to study Torah and to know Torah. He derives this from the Gemara itself, which in one place (*Menachot* 99b) seems to rule that one need not study more than a minimal amount each morning and evening, and elsewhere (*Kiddushin* 30a) rules based on “*Ve-shinantam*” that one must know the entirety of the Torah. How can one come to know so much Torah by merely studying briefly twice a day? Apparently, he concludes, there is a dual obligation. It seems reasonable to suggest that these two views line up nicely with the different schools of thought we have surveyed. The obligation to **know** Torah correlates with the instrumentalist view; the obligation to **study**Torah is more easily understood according to the view that there is an intrinsic value of Torah study, such as *deveikut* (particularly apt for R. Shneur Zalman) or Chazon Ish’s ethic of submission. Indeed, reinforcing the theme of *deveikut*, R. Shneur Zalman writes elsewhere (*Tanya*, *Likutei Amarim* 34) that one creates for God an internal “tabernacle and habitation by engaging in the study of Torah.”

Another classical position in *Shulchan Arukh Ha-rav* may dovetail nicely with the suggestion that there are two aspects to Torah study. Earlier in his *Laws of Torah Study*, R. Shneur Zalman rules (2:12-13) that whereas one who studies the Oral Torah without understanding the words has fulfilled no mitzva, one who studies the Written Torah without understanding still fulfills the obligation of *talmud Torah*. We might explain the logic for this view as follows: the primary value of the Oral Torah is to understand the *halakhot* (i.e., the instrumentalist view). Thus, one who does not understand the words fails to fulfill one’s obligation. However, study of the written Torah is qualitatively different; the very encounter is significant, along the lines of the later interpretations we suggested.

Though there are various option for “bridging the gap,” the different approaches we have outlined underscore some of Torah study’s central dilemmas: the question of granting priority to practical versus theoretical study; the tension between clarifying the simple meaning of the law and innovation; the degree of freedom one is given in properly choosing a course of study; the importance of high-level Torah study for the masses and not just the intellectual elite; and the very legitimacy of analytical methods such as *derush* and *pilpul*.

What is more, there is room to argue for evolution in the goals of Torah study throughout history. To take a relatively obvious example, Tanna’im and their predecessors assign great value to the ability to memorize accepted *halakhot*, simply to ensure the proper establishment of the halakhicbaseline for any analysis. Similarly, Rishonim place great stress upon the importance of studying to determine the practical halakha, while in more recent times, especially in 19th century Lithuanian *yeshiva* circles, theoretical analysis and study were paramount. Indeed, the various views we have discussed reflect this, as the medieval conception of *talmud Torah* tends to emphasize practical *halakhot*, while the theory of R. Chayim of Volozhin tends more toward the theoretical.[[11]](#footnote-11) Professor Isadore Twersky contrasts R. Yosef ibn Caspi’s utilitarian approach with later views:

This confrontation continues when we find the Maharal of Prague vehemently denouncing those who ridicule the study of Nezikin while revering the study of physics; he repeatedly exposes the fallacy of such argumentation. If we were to look ahead, we could see the Maharal's position as a historical fulcrum: on one hand reacting against the position established by Kaspi and on the other setting the stage for that position usually attributed to the two great contemporaries and antagonists of the beginning of the nineteenth century: R. Hayyim of Volohzin and R. Shneur Zalman of Ladi, the two great ideologues of pure Talmud study which is, in the final analysis, to be perceived as study of God's essence. All Talmud study is useful and perennially relevant; expending time and energy in order to understand even the discarded opinion in a debate or the wrong view in a controversy is unquestionably meritorious, for it is study of the word of God, it is thinking God's thoughts. Study per se is practical and need not seek to anchor itself in an external, self-transcending relevance. All Talmud study is self-validating and its universality should be the ideal for all. This, of course, is the absolute antithesis of Kaspi's restrictive attitude which would make Talmudic knowledge a purely professional concern nurtured by pragmatic or utilitarian criteria…[[12]](#footnote-12)

Arguably, the turn toward conceptualization also reflects a new, expanded role for *talmud Torah* in the post-Enlightenment period. As Rabbi Meir Twersky astutely notes, “This caveat has become especially repercussive for post-Enlightenment Jewry. Increasingly, instruction in Torah has become necessary not only to teach proper *halakhic* observance, but also to inculcate enduring religious commitment and conviction.”[[13]](#footnote-13) While this argument was initially formulated in relation to women’s Torah study, it may also be relevant to the historical development of men’s study.

Although the picture is more complex than this space allows, it is a fair to say that the Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions about this differ. Already in the medieval period, whereas Sephardic scholars such as the Geonim and later the Rif sought to clarify the practical *halakha* as much as possible, Ashkenazim, particularly the Tosafists, placed a greater stress on dialectical study. (Rambam tends toward the Sephardic view in this regard, although his decision to include all his halakhic rulings in *Mishneh Torah* makes him something of an outlier.) In more recent times, it is no coincidence that the great Sephardic decisor R. Ovadya Yosef[[14]](#footnote-14) led the charge against the theoretical abstractions of the Lithuanian-style *yeshivot*, advocating for the prioritization of practical areas of study, such as *Berakhot* and *Mo’ed*, over more theoretical subjects such as *Nezikin*, *Zera’im* and *Kodashim*.

***Approach #6 - Talmud Torah* as a Form of Self-Identification**

A final perspective on the nature of *talmud Torah* emerges from a consideration of the laws governing the mourner, who is prohibited from studying Torah. What is the basis of the mourner’s prohibition, and how might this rule reflect more broadly on the nature of *talmud Torah*?

The Gemara in *Mo’ed Katan* (15a) derives a series of prohibitions incumbent upon the mourner from a verse in *Yechezkel* (24:17), in which God instructs the prophet that although he will be stricken by a plague, he must abstain from engaging in typical mourning observances. He is therefore instructed “*He’anek dom*,” “Moan silently,” among other practices. On the basis of this verse, the Gemara derives the prohibitions against *she’eilat shalom* (greeting a friend) and Torah study. At first glance, the nature of the latter derivation is unclear. We understand the linkage between silence and not greeting a friend. The mourner often finds him or herself in an inward, anti-social state. It is therefore inappropriate for him to greet others. But the reasoning behind the prohibition of Torah study is unclear. Presumably, a mourner can study privately yet remain “silent.” How are we to understand the Gemara’s basis for the *issur* of *talmud Torah*?

Perhaps troubled by this strange linkage, some Rishonim reinterpreted the *issur* in light of another Gemara concerning Torah study on Tisha Be-Av. As the Gemara (*Ta’anit* 30a) points out, many of the prohibitions of *aveilut* apply on Tisha Be-Av as well, including that of *talmud Torah*. The Gemara also rules that one is permitted to study sorrowful materials, such as the relevant sections of *Iyov* and *Yirmeyahu*. Yet the Gemara, after citing this prohibition and adding that children similarly do not attend class on Tisha Be-Av, cites the verse from *Tehillim* (19:9), “*Pikudei Hashem yesharim mesammechei lev*,” “God’s precepts are right, rejoicing the heart.” This implies that the *issur* *talmud Torah* on Tisha Be-Av is rooted not in “*He’anek dom*,” but in the fact that *talmud Torah* is an inherently joyous experience, which contravenes the spirit of Tisha Be-Av, the saddest day on the Jewish calendar.

Based on this Gemara, some Rishonim seek to reinterpret the prohibition of Torah study for a typical mourner. Rabbeinu Tam (cited by Tosafot, *Mo’ed Katan* 21a, s.v. *Ve-asur*), for example, while having initially held that a mourner is barred from all forms of Torah study, concluded in his old age that a mourner may also study Torah that is mournful in nature. Ramban (*Torat Ha-adam*, cited in *Beit Yosef, YD* 384) cites various views on this subject. According to Rabbeinu Tam, the true conceptual basis for the mourner’s *issur* is *“Pikudei Hashem yesharim mesammechei lev*.” As for “*He’anek dom*,” Rabbeinu Tam argues that the verse cannot be taken as the literal source for the mourning prohibitions. In support of this view, he points to the prohibition of wearing *tefillin*, which only applies only on the first day of mourning, despite there being nothing in the verse to support this conclusion. Similarly, Rabbeinu Tam concludes, *“He’anek dom”* is not the true basis for barring the mourner from engaging in *talmud Torah*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Others, including Rabbeinu Yitzchak (cited by Tosafot above; cf. Meiri, *Mo’ed Katan* 15a, s.v. *Avel*), disagree, maintaining that there remains a basic distinction between the nature of the prohibition for typical mourners versus the prohibition on Tisha Be-Av. In Meiri’s words, “For the *avel,* the matter depends on silence; whereas on Tisha Be-Av, it is only a matter of suffering.”

Assuming we do take the view that the mourner’s prohibition is truly rooted in “silence,” we must inquire more deeply as to its reasoning. The mourner, after all, is not barred from speaking. And if the matter is dependent on interacting with others, as the *issur* of exchanging pleasantries would appear to imply, why is he barred from private Torah study?[[16]](#footnote-16)

Another perplexing detail in the Gemara should be noted in this context. *Mo’ed Katan* 21a rules that if the mourner is needed by the community, he may teach them Torah. This seems unusual: if he is barred from Torah study, why do we relax the prohibition simply because he is needed by the community? Similarly, the Yerushalmi (*Mo’ed Katan* 3:5, cited in *Beit Yosef, YD* 384), rules that a mourner who feels compelled to study (literally *lahut achar ha-Torah*, ignited to pursue Torah) may do so. Again, why break the rules simply for one who wants to study? Do we permit milk and meat for someone who craves a cheeseburger?

To appreciate what is happening, let us turn to a classic *aggada* in *Nida* (30b). The Gemara teaches:

R. Simlai delivered the following discourse: What is the fetus like in its mother’s womb? A folded writing tablet. Its hands rest on its two temples respectively… A light burns above its head and it looks and sees from one end of the world to the other, as it is said, “Then his lamp shined above my head, and by His light I walked through darkness” (*Iyov* 29:3)... And there is no time in which a man enjoys greater happiness than in those days, for it is said, “O that I were as the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me” (ibid. v. 2). It is also taught all the Torah from beginning to end, for it is said, “And he taught me, and said unto me: Let your heart hold fast my words, keep my commandments and live” (*Mishlei* 4:4), and it is also said, “When God was familiar in my tent” (*Iyov* 29:4).

What could this possibly mean? Why learn in order to forget?

As Rav Soloveitchik notes in his article “Redemption, Prayer, *Talmud Torah*” (*Tradition* 17:2, pp. 55-72),[[17]](#footnote-17) this passage is highly reminiscent of the Platonic theory of anamnesis, which asserts that all learning is really a form of recollection.[[18]](#footnote-18) While at least in some instances Plato presents this notion on the basis of the immortality of the soul, the Gemara does not invoke the transmigration of the soul. Instead, as the Rav contends, the Rabbis seem to be suggesting that the Torah is an essential part of our identity. In the Rav’s words:

R. Simlai wanted to tell us that when a Jew studies Torah he is confronted with something which is not foreign and extraneous, but rather intimate and already familiar, because he has already studied it, and the knowledge was stored up in the recesses of his memory and became part of him. He studies, in effect, his own stuff. Learning is the recollection of something familiar. The Jew studying Torah is like the amnesia victim who tries to reconstruct from fragments the beautiful world he once experienced. In other words, by learning Torah man returns to his own self; man finds himself, and advances toward a charted, illuminated and speaking I-existence. Once he finds himself, he finds redemption. (ibid. 69)

In light of Rav Soloveitchik’s striking thesis, we may better understand the nature of the mourner's exclusion from *talmud Torah*. *Talmud Torah* is a form of self-expression in that it constitutes a search for personal identity. By learning, we find not only the wisdom of Torah but also, in a sense, our deeper selves. Such a search for personal identity is contrary to the experience of the mourner. An *avel* experiences a sense of alienation not only from those around him (as exemplified by the prohibition of *she’eilat shalom*) but also from himself. For this reason, the personal search of Torah study runs counter to the experience of the mourner, who is torn asunder by the terrifying news of personal loss.

Armed with this interpretation, we may return to the two puzzling *halakhot* we noted above. If Torah study is prohibited, why may the *avel* teach if he is needed by the community? Perhaps the reason for this leniency is that in this instance, the mourner’s motivation in studying is not to forge one’s own identity but to teach others. In this situation, there is a unique reason for leniency.

We may similarly explain the passage in the Yerushalmi regarding someone who is emotionally attached to *talmud Torah*. Due to one’s love for learning, one whose identity is so inextricably interwoven with Torah study will not be capable of foregoing one’s sense of personal identity during the mourning period. For such an individual, there is no use in prohibiting Torah study during this period of *aveilut*.

This approach allows for a fuller appreciation of the importance of *talmud Torah*. To properly grasp Torah study allows us to understand not only God’s will, but also the Torah that He has implanted within us.

1. For additional Rishonim who adopt this view, see R. Natan Slifkin, [http://www.rationalistjudaism.com/2010/05/Rishonim-on-torah-study.html](http://www.rationalistjudaism.com/2010/05/rishonim-on-torah-study.html). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Warren Zev Harvey, “Beliefs and Commandments,” in *Moses Mendelssohn: Enlightenment, Religion, Politics, Nationalism*, eds. Michah Gottlieb and Charles Manekin (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2015), p. 83, n. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For an intriguing perspective on the relationship between study and action, see Rav Kook (*Ein Aya, Shabbat* 2:56), who argues that study is internally-directed whereas action is more outwardly-oriented. On this theme, see also Maharal’s commentary to Avot (*Derech Chayim* 4:5). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also *Rabbeinu Yonah, Avot* 1:1 s.v. *Hevu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For further discussion, see Dr. Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of* *Hasidism*, (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1999), chapters 1 and 5. For sources on Chasidic views of Torah study, see ibid., chapter 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to this approach, we can better understand *Chazal*’s linkage of *talmud Torah* and prophecy, including the precept *eilu ve-eilu divrei Elokim chayim*. For further discussion, see “Hillel’s Living God,” available at: <http://www.thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/2017/6/9/hillels-living-god>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “In Depth Torah Study,” in his *Jewish Values in a Changing World*, ed. R. Amnon Bazak (Jersey City: Ktav, 2005), available at <http://etzion.org.il/en/depth-torah-study.> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.lookstein.org/professional-dev/torah-study-women/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See his letter printed in Allan Nadler’s *The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Shaul Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century: Creating a Tradition of Learning* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Studies, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example: Norman Solomon, *The Analytic Movement: Hayyim Soloveitchik and His Circle*; Chaim Saiman, “The Turn to Conceptualism in Nineteenth-Century Jewish Law,” in *The Journal of Law and Religion* 21 (2006), pp. 39-100; and Benjamin Brown, *The Hazon Ish* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “Joseph ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual,” in Isadore Twersky, ed., *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 246. See also R. Natan Slifkin, “The Goal of Torah Study,” available at: <http://www.rationalistjudaism.com/2010/05/goal-of-torah-study.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <http://www.torahweb.org/torah/special/2003/rtwe_JA_women.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Introduction, Yabia Omer*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. It should also be noted that some, such as Maharsha (*Taanit* 30a s.v. *Ve-asur*), maintain that even the prohibition on Tisha Be-Av is not rooted in *simcha* but in the fact that Torah study distracts one from focusing on the mourning of this day. According to Maharsha, the Gemara’s citation of *“Pikudei Hashem yesharim”* pertains specifically to children’s Torah study, as they are barred from learning even though they may be too young to spend their day focusing on mourning regardless. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See *Shulchan Arukh YD* 384:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Footnote 20. Article available at: [http://traditionarchive.org/news/originals/Volume%2017/No.%202/Redemption,%20Prayer,Talmud.pdf](http://traditionarchive.org/news/originals/Volume%2017/No.%202/Redemption%2C%20Prayer%2CTalmud.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See also David Flatto, “The Angel’s Oath: The Relationship of Hazal to the Platonic Doctrine of Recollection,” available at: <http://text.rcarabbis.org/the-angel%E2%80%99s-oath-the-relationship-of-hazal-to-the-platonic-doctrine-of-recollection/> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)