**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbie and David Sable

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**LEARNING TORAH, PART 1**

**What is the mitzva of learning Torah? Does it apply to women?**

By Deracheha Staff; Laurie Novick, Director

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### ● Should we be doing this? (See Appendix 1)

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# **BACKGROUND: LEARNING TORAH**

**WHAT IS TORAH STUDY?**

The Talmud teaches that there are many facets to Torah.[[1]](#footnote-1) The word "Torah" itself has a wide range of meanings. Torah can refer to an all-encompassing Divine blueprint for creation, to the word of God, to the entirety of Jewish teachings and knowledge, or to any part thereof. More narrowly, Torah can denote the five books of the *Chumash* or a scroll containing them. Since the word "Torah" can mean so many different things, it follows that *talmud* *Torah*, literally "Torah study," eludes simple definition.

Furthermore, structured learning, as with a teacher or through direct engagement with texts, is but one form of Torah study. In a broad sense, deliberate observation of a community's or an individual's pious practice can constitute a form of Torah study as well. Elevated thoughts about the nature of God and creation can alert us to God's wisdom. Engagement with Torah is not limited to formal study.

**THE GOALS OF TORAH STUDY**

Through learning Torah, we acquire essential practical knowledge and develop our religious personality. Here, we briefly explore three passages from the Torah, and note how each reveals different facets of Torah study.

1. Devarim 31:12 Assemble the people: the men, the women, and the children, and your stranger who is in your gates, that they should hear and that they should learn, and they will fear the Lord your God, and they will be careful to perform all the words of this teaching [*Torah*].

The mitzva of *hakhel* enjoins the entire nation to assemble once every seven years to listen to the king read select portions of the Torah.

Hearing and learning the words of Torah lays the foundation for awe of God and for keeping the Torah. Study shapes the community and the individual, mitzva observance and faith.

1. Devarim 5:1-2 And Moshe called to all of Israel and said to them, 'Hear Israel the ordinances and the laws that I speak in your ears today, and learn them and be careful to perform them. The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Chorev.'

The Torah emphasizes our responsibility to study in order to perform mitzvot. Moshe Rabbeinu charges all of Israel to hear, learn, keep and perform the Torah that he teaches them. A simple reading of this verse indicates that Torah study is a prerequisite to observance: "learn them and be careful to perform them." Observance depends on study. Furthermore, we are a covenantal people whose identity depends on our collective commitment to Torah.

1. Devarim 6:7 And you shall repeat them [*veshinantam*] to your children and you shall speak of them [*vedibarta bam*], when you sit in your home and when you walk on the way and when you lie down and when you arise.

The importance of Torah study does not rest solely on having immediate practical application.[[2]](#footnote-2) Torah study is also an end in itself. The first passage of *Shema* (Devarim 6:4-9), relates to Torah study's intrinsic significance. It tells us to repeat and speak about God's oneness, God's dominion, and our love for God at regular intervals and in a range of settings.

The use of the verb *veshinantam*, "and you shall repeat them," suggests a sharpening of knowledge that goes beyond standard learning. According to the Sifrei (the *midrash halacha* on Devarim), *veshinantam* presents an imperative to know Torah with fluency.[[3]](#footnote-3) The verse emphasizes an ongoing honing of Torah knowledge, not settling for the minimum knowledge needed to know how to perform a given mitzva. Torah learning has intrinsic value.

**A LIFE OF TORAH**

Ideally, the study of Torah becomes the central focus of our lives through teaching it, having constant awareness of it, and pursuing Torah as a path to knowing and serving God.

**Teaching.** The activity of *talmud Torah* includes teaching Torah as well as learning it. Our sages understand the phrase "*veshinantam levanecha*," "and you shall repeat them to your children," as applying to students.[[4]](#footnote-4) Although priority in teaching goes to one's own children,[[5]](#footnote-5) students are spiritual children. Teaching prepares students and children for a lifetime of faith and mitzvot. It extends the transmission of Torah begun at Sinai.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Constancy.** *Vedibarta bam*, "and you shall speak of them," teaches us that *talmud Torah* has primacy over other matters. Torah should pervade conversation and consciousness.[[7]](#footnote-7) Along these lines, God tells Yehoshua to keep Torah in mind day and night:

Yehoshua 1:8 This book of the Torah should not depart your lips, and you shall ponder it day and night.

The Talmud extrapolates from this verse that Torah study should at minimum frame each day, beginning and end, so that Torah shapes lived experience.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Knowing and Serving God.** In all its manifestations, *talmud Torah* is a way to know God as well as a way to serve God, akin to prayer.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Ba'al Ha-tanya eloquently describes the experiencing and serving God through study:

Tanya, Likutei Amarim, Ch. 5 When a person understands and comprehends, correctly and fully, a halacha in the Mishna or in the Talmud, his intellect grasps and encompasses it and his intellect, too, becomes dressed by it at the same time. …Behold, he comprehends and grasps and encompasses with his intellect the will and wisdom of the Holy One, Blessed Be He….And in knowledge of the Torah, aside from the fact that the intellect is dressed in God's wisdom, God's wisdom is also within it…

In Torah learning, an individual experiences God by immersing the self in Divine will and wisdom. Internalizing God's will is a form of serving God.

At the highest level, a person's life becomes an expression of Torah. One of the practices of mourning for a Torah scholar exemplifies this idea. In mourning for a burnt Torah scroll, we rend a garment. Similarly, we rend a garment in mourning for a Torah scholar, indicating that he or she, having lived Torah fully, is like a Torah scroll.[[10]](#footnote-10)

# **The Mitzva of *Talmud Torah***

One element of the broader concept of *talmud Torah* is the formal mitzva to teach and learn Torah. What are its basic parameters?

From childhood, one must be taught the skills to read and understand the simple meaning of *Torah shebichtav* (Scripture).[[11]](#footnote-11) From there, the Rambam describes a progression in keeping the mitzva, moving from mastery of *Torah shebichtav* to mastery of *Torah shebe'al peh* (Oral Torah, i.e. rabbinic literature), and then to more developed and metaphysical Torah thinking.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Since the Babylonian Talmud incorporates both scriptural passages and Oral Torah, Talmud study plays a central role in fulfilling the mitzva of *talmud* *Torah*.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, an exclusive focus on study of the Talmud, to the neglect of basic halachic knowledge, does not fulfill the obligation of *talmud* *Torah*.[[14]](#footnote-14)

At absolute minimum, one can fulfill the mitzva in a few moments a day.[[15]](#footnote-15) Better, one can fulfill the command by learning some Scripture, Mishna, and Talmud each morning (and night), as is customary following the daily morning blessings on the Torah.

While minimum fulfillment of the mitzva of *talmud Torah* is well defined, maximal fulfillment is not. Optimally, *talmud Torah* should take up as much time and energy as a person can give it. Some authorities rule that failure to keep Torah in mind constantly, to transmit it, violates a Biblical command to remember the revelation at Sinai.[[16]](#footnote-16)

# **Women's Exemption**

Women are exempt from the formal mitzva of *Talmud* *Torah*. This exemption is derived from a verse in the Torah. The second paragraph of *Shema*, *ve-haya* *im shamo'a*, includes one of the many verses that assert an obligation to learn and teach Torah:

Devarim 11:19 And you will teach them [to] your children [*beneichem*] to speak of them when you sit in your home and in when you walk on the way and when you lie down and when you arise.

We have translated the word "*beneichem*" here as "your children." Another legitimate translation of "*beneichem*" is "your sons." The Sifrei clearly understands the verse according to the latter explanation:

Sifrei, Parashat Ekev 46: "And you will teach them [to] your sons [*beneichem*]" – and not to your daughters.

The Sifrei reads "*beneichem*" as "your sons" and derives from this that the obligation to teach Torah applies to teaching boys, not girls. The Talmud quotes this midrashic passage to establish that a parent is not obligated to teach a daughter Torah.

The Talmud then asks about a woman learning for herself, and reaches the conclusion that here too, she is exempt:

Kiddushin 29b And she, whence [do we know] that she is not obligated to learn herself? As it is written "and you will teach," [in this spelling, looking like] and you will learn. Anyone whom others are commanded to teach, is commanded to teach himself. And anyone whom others are not commanded to teach, is not commanded to teach himself.

In our verse, we vocalize the word as "*velimadtem*," and you will teach. Since the spelling is deficient (*chaser*), it could also be vocalized differently as "*ulmadtem*," and you will learn. The deficient spelling that allows for this alternative vocalization teaches that learning and teaching go hand in hand. The Talmud asserts that, since the mitzva of *talmud* *Torah* does not obligate a daughter to be taught, the mitzva does not obligate a woman to teach herself or her children.

### ● Is this a compelling reason to exempt women from the mitzva? (See Appendix 2)

**Appendices**

### ● Appendix 1: Should we be doing this?

*Should we be doing this?* *This being what we do here on this site, learning Torah, directly from sources, including the Talmud and halachic codes.*

*This question does not speak to some women, for whom Torah study holds little appeal or interest. These women may wonder instead why a woman would want to study Torah. For others, the question itself is problematic. It can be hard to imagine why anyone would limit a woman's access to Torah study. After all, men do not have to entertain questions about the propriety or importance of their Torah learning.*

*One reason for the ubiquity of questions about the appropriateness of source-based Halacha study for women, is that our communities exhibit ambivalence towards women's learning.*

*Deep uncertainty about women's learning appears in many guises: The father who learns every Shabbat with his sons, but not with his daughters. The school that teaches Mishna to boys and not to girls. The family friends who give the bar mitzva boy religious books and the bat mitzva girl jewelry. The parents who send their sons to learn in Israel, but keep their daughters close to home. The dating prospect who won't go out with a 'girl who learns.' The Rabbi who declares certain seminaries off limits because of their curricula. Communal initiatives for women to devote time to acts of* chessed*, loving-kindness, (or to less lofty pursuits,) but not to study. The couples who make great efforts so that the husband can learn daily, while the wife finds no time to learn Torah herself. The local* batei midrash *(houses of study) that women never enter and often are entirely off-limits to women.*

Mishlei 3:18 It is a tree of life to those who grasp it and its supporters are happy.

*While it's clear that Torah is "a tree of life," it is less clear what role learning plays in a woman's "holding fast to it."*

*Can we grasp Torah without studying it? Do resistance, ambivalence, or indifference to women's Torah learning have halachic roots? Is the recent growth of frameworks for women's study rooted in Halacha as well? In this article, we trace the halachic roots of differing approaches to women's Torah study.*

### ● Appendix 2: Is this a compelling reason to exempt women from the mitzva?

*Hebrew grammar treats a noun referring to a mixed-gender group as a masculine plural, so that the word "*beneichem*" can mean either 'your sons' or your children.' Sometimes the Torah refers to all Jews as a group and sometimes it explicitly distinguishes women from men. In ambiguous cases, such as the word "*beneichem*" in this verse, our sages often stipulate which meaning is correct. Whether or not females are included varies from verse to verse, and thus depends on both context and tradition.*

*Midrashic readings often provide textual derivations for a halacha. Those derivations, following carefully formulated traditional exegetical rules, can be the very source of the halacha. Sometimes, though, a midrash expounds texts in order to uphold previously known halachic traditions and connect the tradition to the text.*

*This particular* midrash halacha *may well be a midrash of the second type, upholding a previously known tradition from Moshe that women are exempt from the obligation of talmud Torah. In other words, the interpretation of "*beneichem*" as "your sons" likely supports a preexisting tradition of women's exemption.*

*This possibility still leaves us to speculate why Halacha would distinguish between men and women with regard to learning Torah.*

*One suggestion is that Halacha assigns roles in public society to men. In that case, this gender distinction could ultimately derive from the mitzva of* talmud Torah*'s role in forming a public society built on Torah, of which teacher- student transmission is a primary building block.[[17]](#footnote-17) This type of speculation raises other questions about gender roles.*

**Further Reading**

1. Wolowelsky, Joel, ed. *Women and the Study of Torah*. New York: Ktav, 2001.

2. Harvey, Dr. Warren Z., "The Obligation of Talmud on Women According to Maimonides," *Tradition* 19:2 (Summer 1981), pp. 122-130.

<http://traditionarchive.org/news/originals/Volume%2019/No.%202/The%20Obligation%20Of%20Talmud.pdf> .

3. Zolty, Shoshana. *And All Your Children Shall Be Learned: Women and the Study of Torah in Jewish Law*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997.

4. גוטל, הרב נריה. "תלמוד תורה לנשים", מתוך **טל לישראל**, ערך: מיכאל שטיגליץ, עמ' 41‑64. מרכז שפירא: המכון התורני אור עציון, תשס"ה.

5. הנקין, הרב יהודה. **שו"ת בני בנים***,* חלק ג, סימן י"ב. צור אות: ירושלים, 1998.

6. רוזנפלד, ב., עורך. **האשה וחינוכה**. כפר סבא: אמנה, 1980.

7. שבט, הרב ארי יצחק, "אגרת חדשה של הרב קוק בנושא תלמוד תורה לנשים." מתוך **מאורות ליהודה**, ערך: מ. רחימי. אלקנה: אורות ישראל, תשע"ב, עמ' 343‑362.

<http://asif.co.il/download/haravarishvat%20(2).pdf>

8. שילת, מ., עורך. **את עלית: אוצר שיחות מהרבי מליובאוויטש זצ"ל לנשים ונערות**, פרקים ג-ד. כפר חב"ד: מ. שילת, תשע"ד.

9. Sources gathered by Rav Dr. Aryeh Frimer:

<http://archive.bermanshul.org/frimer/SpireBW200_1S040.pdf>

1. Sanhedrin 34a "And [my word] is like a hammer shattering rock" (Yirmiyahu 23:29): Just as this hammer is split to a number of sparks, so too one verse gives rise to a number of meanings. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sifrei Parshat Ekev, 5 …'And learn them and be careful to perform them' (Devarim 5:1): [The verse] tells us that the action is dependent on learning, and learning is not dependent on the action. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sifrei Parshat Va'etchanan 34 'And you shall repeat them' – that they will be sharp in your mouth. When a person asks you something, don’t stammer to him, but rather say it to him immediately. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sifrei, Parshat Va'etchanan 9 'To your sons' – These are your students. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mishneh Torah, Laws of Torah Study 1:2 If so, why was he commanded concerning his son and concerning the son of his son? To give his son precedence over his son's son, and his son's son [precedence] over his friend's son. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Berachot 21b For Rav Yehoshua ben Levi said: Whoever teaches his son Torah, Scripture credits him as though he received it from Mt. Chorev. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Yoma 19b One who speaks ordinary speech transgresses a positive commandment, as it says: 'and speak of them' – of them, and not of other things. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Menachot 99b. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sifrei Devarim 41 'And to serve him' – that is study… Another interpretation: 'and to serve him' – that is prayer.

   See also Sefer Ha-mitzvot, Mitzvot Aseh 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The halacha is found in Mo'ed Katan 25a, its application to a woman here:

    Responsa Radbaz 3:558 A woman also can learn and become similar to a Torah scroll. Therefore one rends [garments for a scholar], whether woman or man. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kiddushin 30a If he has taught him Scripture, he need not teach him Mishna. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Laws of Torah Study 1:11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Tosafot, Kiddushin 30a, s.v. "Lo Tzericha" Rabbeinu Tam explained that we rely [in allocating time for talmud Torah] on that which we say in Sanhedrin (24a): Babylonia[n learning] is blended (בלולה) Scripture, Mishna, and Gemara, for the Babylonian Talmud is a blend of all of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 246:4, Rema …A person should only tour "Pardes" (other study) after he has filled his stomach with meat and wine, that is, to know prohibition and permission and the laws of the mitzvot. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Menachot 99b. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Behag, Introduction, Prohibitions Punishable by Lashes, #170 (p. 12 in the Machon Yerushalayim edition).

    Critiques of the Ramban to Rambam's Sefer Ha-mitzvot, Omitted Prohibitions And [the Torah] warned lest they depart from the heart, [lest we would not] make them known to children and children's children for generations of eternity. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar), "Ro'im et Ha-kolot: Lamdanut Yeshivatit ve-Kol Nashi," in *Shenei Ha-me'orot*, ed. Zohar Maor (Efrat: Machon Bina Le-itim, 2007), pp. 45-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)