YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**TALMUD TORAH: THE MITZVA OF TORAH STUDY**

**By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

**Shiur #03: The Purpose of *Talmud Torah,* Part 1**

In our previous *shiurim,* we established the critical importance of Torah study, noted a variety of implications that flow from its centrality and considered the significance of Torah study relative to other *mitzvot*. This, in turn, raises the question: *why* is Talmud Torah assigned so much weight in the rabbinical tradition? In this *shiur* and the next, we will propose a series of explanations for the importance of Torah study. In subsequent *shiurim*, we will consider a host of ramifications stemming from this fundamental question.

**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.*

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.

In today’s *shiur*, we have reviewed four basic perspectives as to the purpose of *talmud Torah*: practical knowledge, the cultivation of a halakhic ethic, the Chasidic doctrine of *deveikut* and R. Chayim’s existential approach. Next week, we will consider those who reject this notion of *deveikut*, and we will then segue into a discussion of a number of additional approaches to the telos of *talmud Torah*.

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* (Maryland: 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)