YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

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**Shiur #09: Prerequisites for *Talmud Torah***

What are the prerequisites for one to begin learning? What is the disposition that ensures one’s success in *talmud* *Torah*? These qualities shed important light on the central themes that animate *talmud Torah* overall.

On a practical level, one might argue that a basic working knowledge, if not mastery, of the Hebrew language, is necessary for one to study Torah properly. While there are other reasons for the importance of studying the Hebrew language, Sifrei (*Ekev* 46) seems to confirm this understanding, clearly linking a father’s obligation to teach Torah to his son with his need to teach his son Hebrew.

Moreover, numerous *sugyot* highlight the importance of *yirat shamayim* (fear of Heaven) as a prerequisite for engaging in *talmud Torah*. In particular, our discussion will center on a crucial but somewhat perplexing passage in *Shabbat* (31a-b). The Gemara makes three comments regarding the connection between *talmud Torah* and fear of Heaven, based on a verse in *Yeshayahu* (33:6), “And there shall be faith in your times, strength, salvation, wisdom and knowledge; but the fear of God is his treasure.”

First, Reish Lakish expounds the six elements in the first clause to refer to the Six Orders of the Talmud, concluding: “Nevertheless, ‘fear of God is his treasure.’” On the most basic level, this means that no matter how much Torah one studies, fear of Heaven is preeminent. If one lacks fear of Heaven, his Torah study will ultimately not achieve its sacred purposes. Since this is the storehouse for wisdom, this indicates that fear of Heaven ensures one retains that which one learns as well.

Interestingly, this second meaning, which ties retention of Torah to fear of Heaven, is formulated more explicitly later in the second pertinent section in that *sugya*, where the Gemara instructs:

If “fear of God is his treasure,” yes; if not, no.

A parable: one said to an emissary: “Bring a barrel of wheat up to the attic for me.”

[The emissary] went and brought it up for him.

The owner said to the emissary: “Did you mix a quart of preservative into it for me?”

“No.”

“It would have been preferable had you not brought it up. “

The parable compares Torah to wheat, and *yirat shamayim* to the preservative. Just as wheat without a preservative is useless, because it will decay, so too Torah without *yirat shamayim* is somehow ephemeral. It is unclear, however, what precisely is the connection between Torah and fear of Heaven.

The continuation of the Gemara pushes the metaphor further:

Rabba bar Rav Huna said: Any person who has Torah in him but does not have fear of Heaven is like a treasurer to whom they gave keys to the inner doors of the treasury but not the keys to the outer door. With what key will this one enter?

Here, *yirat shamayim* is not merely a paramount value, but also the key that unlocks a portal into the world of Torah. The logic of this statement, however, is unclear. What exactly is the correlation between Torah and fear of Heaven? Similarly, the Gemara’s earlier suggestion that *yirat shamayim* ought to be seen as a preservative that ensures one’s retention of Torah seems odd. In what way does *yirat shamayim* ensure that one retains one’s learning?

The connection between fear of Heaven and knowledge does not start in this *sugya*; *Tehillim* 111:10 declaims: “The beginning of wisdom (*chokhma*) is the fear of God.” Why? The precise nature of the relationship remains ill-defined.

A *midrash* (*Bamidbar Rabba, Naso* 11) may help clear up the matter; it uses this verse to prove that the nazirite, who avoids sin by abstaining from worldly pleasure, is a *chakham*. This source reads the verse as equating *yirat shamayim* with a certain type of a wisdom. In other words, an individual such as the nazirite, who makes decisions motivated by *yirat Hashem*, is endowed with wisdom. Similarly, we might contend, the *sugya* in *Shabbat* indicates that one who is endowed with wisdom, as evidenced by fear of Heaven, is more likely to study Torah in depth.

Another *midrash* offers a different perspective on the relationship between Torah and *yirat shamayim*. *Midrash Zuta* (*Shir Ha-shirim* 1) teaches that one who lacks fear of Heaven lacks Torah as well. As a proof text, the *midrash* cites the example of Shelomo, who sinned with foreign wives because he lacked the proper fear of Heaven. From the context it is clear that the *midrash* refers to Shelomo’s study of Torah. This source, then, seems to be most easily understood according to the view that the primary purpose of Torah study is to do *mitzvot*. One who lacks *yirat shamayim* will be unable to translate study into action, missing the point of *talmud Torah*. This, then, might be the true meaning of the sugya in *Shabbat*: while one who lacks *yirat shamayim* might technically understand the content of one’s learning, because one is unlikely to put it into practice, this study is fundamentally lacking.

Let us consider another key source, *Avot* 3:9:

Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa says: “One whose fear of sin precedes wisdom, this one’s wisdom lasts; one whose wisdom precedes fear of sin, this one’s wisdom does not last.”

Rashi (s.v. *Ein* c*hokhmato*) explains that by definition, if one lacks *yirat shamayim*, one’s wisdom is null and void. If the purpose of study is to properly observe the commandments, one who lacks *yirat shamayim* has undermined the very enterprise of *talmud Torah*. Rashi, in explaining the *mishna* in this fashion, not only returns us to *Midrash Zuta*’s comments, but also closes a circle of sorts, returning us to the wider themes of the purpose of *talmud Torah*.

Rambam (s.v. *Zeh*), however, offers a characteristically naturalistic reading of the *mishna*. He cites “the philosophers” as maintaining that if one develops habits that are attuned to what one studies, this leads to happiness, as one’s behavior is confirmed by one’s study. However, one whose actions are contradicted by one’s study will be agitated by that study. Similarly, one who acts with *yirat shamayim* will enjoy study and deepen commitment; one who lacks fear of Heaven will find study unpleasant and will ignore the Torah’s prescriptions. We may apply this psychological insight to *Shabbat* 31. One who fears Heaven will be more receptive to the Torah’s ideas than one who has not fundamentally “bought in.” What is more, one who possesses *yirat shamayim* is less likely to discard seemingly troubling texts; one will begin with the assumption that the text has something important to say, and that it is worth struggling to try and understand its deeper meaning.[[1]](#footnote-1) In both these senses, the fear of Heaven helps one to better understand Torah.

**Humility**

Humility, arguably a cousin of *yirat shamayim*, is another key prerequisite for Torah study. The Gemara goes out of its way to stress that one must embrace humility before studying Torah. *Eruvin* 54a provides a series of homilies around this theme.

R. Elazar said: What is the meaning of the verse: “And chains around your neck?” If one trains oneself to be like a chain that hangs loosely upon the neck, sometimes exposed and sometimes concealed, one’s learning will last; otherwise, it will not.

R. Elazar further stated: What is the meaning of the verse: “His cheeks are as a bed of slices?” If one allows oneself to be treated as a bed upon which everybody treads, and as spices with which everybody uses as perfume, one’s learning will last; otherwise, it will not.

R. Elazar further stated: What is the meaning of the verse: “Tablets of stone?” If one regards his cheeks as stone that is not easily worn away, one’s learning will last, but otherwise it will not…

R. Matana expounded: What is the meaning of the verse: “And from the wilderness to Matana?” If one allows oneself to be treated as a wilderness on which everybody treads, one’s learning will last, but otherwise it will not.

He asked: What is the meaning of the verse: “And from the wilderness to Matana, and from Matana to Nachaliel, and from Nachaliel to Bamot, and from Bamot to the valley?”

The other replied: If one allows oneself to be treated as the wilderness upon which everybody treads, the Torah will be given to one as a gift; and as soon as it is given as a gift, one will be the inheritance of God, as it says: ‘And from Matana to Nachaliel”; and as soon as one is the inheritance of God, one rises to greatness, as it says: “And from Nachaliel to Bamot.” But if one is haughty, the Holy One, blessed be He, humbles, as it says: “And from Bamot to the valley.” If, however, one repents, the Holy One, blessed be He, raises one, as it says: “Every valley shall be lifted up.”

This passage is a striking endorsement of self-abnegation. One must allow oneself, *Eruvin* 54a teaches, to be “like the wilderness upon which everyone treads.”

The Gemara in *Ta’anit* (7a), while less elaborate, conveys a similar theme:

Rabbi Chanina bar Idi said: Why are words of Torah likened to water, as it is written: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come for water” (*Yeshayahu* 55:1)? This is to tell you: just as water leaves a high place and flows to a low place, so too, Torah matters are retained only by one whose spirit is lowly.

And Rabbi Oshaya said: Why are words of Torah likened to these three liquids: to water, wine and milk? For it is written: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come for water,” and it is written: “Come, buy and eat; come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” This is to tell you: Just as these three liquids can be retained only in the lowliest of vessels, so too, words of Torah are retained only by one whose spirit is lowly.

What exactly is the nature of the relationship between humility and learning, and why does the Gemara place such a premium on the relationship between the two?

In *Hilkhot Talmud Torah,* Rambam emphasizes the degree of physical self-sacrifice necessary to achieve success in learning:

One whose heart is stirred to perform this precept in a proper manner, to be adorned with the crown of the Torah, must not have attention diverted to other matters, nor imagine that one can acquire the crown of the Torah with the crown of riches and honor simultaneously.

This is the way of [toiling in] Torah: eat bread with salt and drink a small amount of water and sleep on the ground and live a life [whose conditions will cause you] pain, but in Torah you must toil.

Though it is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, you are not at liberty to abstain wholly from it.

If you have studied much you will acquire much reward, for the reward will be commensurate with the trouble. (3:6)

After outlining this quasi-ascetic ethic, Rambam turns to the importance of humility in the learning process:

Words of Torah are likened to water, as it is written: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come for water” (*Yeshayahu* 55:1), for water cannot be gathered in a slanting place, but will run down and gather in a cistern. Thus, words of Torah cannot be found among the haughty, nor in any overbearing mind, but among those of contrite and meek spirits, those “who embrace the dust of the feet of the wise,” who banish physical cravings and transient pleasures from their hearts.[[2]](#footnote-2)

For Rambam, humility is expressed by being willing to live frugally and abandon the comforts of this world. Only through such self-abnegation will an individual ultimately achieve success in *talmud Torah*.

For an alternative approach, let us see *Nedarim* 62a:

It is taught: The verse states, “To love God your God, to listen to His voice, and to cleave to Him” (*Devarim* 30:20). This verse indicates that a person should not say: I will read the Written Torah so that they will call me a Sage; I will study Mishna so that they will call me Rabbi; I will review my studies so that I will be an Elder and will sit in the academy.

This passage links the topic of *Torah lishmah* to that of humility. Similarly, the aforementioned sugya in *Ta’anit* discusses the subject of *Torah lishmah* just a few lines before turning to the subject of humility in learning.

The danger of self-aggrandizement is obvious, as *Avot* puts (4:5) it:

Rabbi Tzadok says: Do not make the Torah a crown to magnify yourself with, or a spade with which to dig. So would Hillel say: “One who make personal use of the crown [of Torah] shall perish.” Hence, one who benefits oneself from the words of Torah removes one’s life from the world.

However, unlike the Rambam’s interpretation, which focuses on the self-discipline necessary to master Torah, in the view of this *sugya*, haughtiness creates *talmud Torah she-lo lishmah*, undermining the entire endeavor. If *talmud Torah* is meant to be a humbling experience, the conceited student enters with a pernicious mindset that is the antithesis of the proper attitude toward *talmud Torah*.[[3]](#footnote-3) This dovetails with our earlier *shiur* about the connection between *talmud Torah* and *Keriat Shema*, which highlighted the shared commitment of *kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim*, accepting the yoke of Heaven.

In conclusion, we must acknowledged that a comprehensive treatment of this subject is a near-impossibility within the confines of the present series. *Avot* 6:6 lists a total of forty-eight traits that enable one to better acquire the Torah. Given our constraints and the prominence the various *sugyot* attach to the traits of *yirat shamayim* and humility, we have chosen to lay the greatest emphasis on these two attributes.

Next week, we will turn from prerequisites for Torah study to the experiential element of learning.

1. On this theme, see Jerome Marcus, “On the Irrelevance of Biblical Criticism,” http://www.thelehrhaus.com/commentary-short-articles/2017/8/27/irrelevance-of-biblical-criticism [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an elaboration of this theme, see “Reading Rambam on the Rabbi-Community Relationship,” <http://www.torahmusings.com/2017/02/reading-rambam-rabbi-community-relationship/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For an inspiring development of this theme, see Rav Soloveitchik’s lecture, “Torah and Humility,” in *Halakhic Morality: Essays on Ethics and Masorah*, pp. 209-222. An earlier summary of this lecture is available at the VBM (<http://etzion.org.il/en/12-torah-and-humility>). For the Rav’s classic 1978 elaboration of the inextricable link between Torah and *kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim*, see the transcription available at <http://arikahn.blogspot.com/2013/03/rabbi-soloveitchik-talmud-torah-and.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)