YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

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**Shiur #12**

**Is There a Constant Obligation of Torah Study? Part 1**

This week we turn to our second question concerning the scope of *talmud Torah*, namely whether there is a constant obligation. After reviewing the background, we will consider a range of views, including some striking compromise positions.

**The Talmudic Contradictions**

Two key *sugyot* address this question directly.

Our Rabbis taught: “And you shall gather in your corn” (*Devarim* 11:14) — what is to be learned from these words? Since it says, “This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth” (*Yehoshua* 1:8), I might think that this injunction is to be taken literally. Therefore it says, “And you shall gather in your corn,” which implies that you are to combine the study of them with a worldly occupation. This is the view of Rabbi Yishmael.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says: Is that possible? If a person plows in the plowing season, sows in the sowing season, reaps in the reaping season, threshes in the threshing season, and winnows in the season of wind, what is to become of the Torah? Rather, when Israel perform the will of the Omnipresent, their work is performed by others, as it says, “And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks,” etc. And when Israel do not perform the will of the Omnipresent, their work is carried out by themselves, as it says, “And you shall gather in your corn.” Nor is this all, but the work of others also is done by them, as it says, “And you shall serve your enemy,” etc.

Said Abbayei: “Many have followed the advice of Rabbi Yishmael, and it has worked well; others have followed Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and it has not been successful.” (*Berakhot* 35b)

According to Rabbi Yishmael, *Yehoshua* 1:8 is not to be taken literally; after all, one must work to earn a living. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, however, is a purist, and maintains that one ought to spend one’s life learning. God, he insists, will take care of the rest. The Gemara concludes by wryly noting that Rabbi Yishmael’s approach tends to work better in practice. In so doing, the Gemara seems to conclude that there is not a constant obligation of *talmud Torah*.

The second *locus classicus* for our discussion is *Menachot* 99b:

It was taught: Rabbi Yosei says: Even if the old [Showbread] is taken away in the morning and the new is set down in the evening, there is no harm. How then am I to explain the verse, “Before me continually?” [It teaches that] the Table should not remain overnight without bread.

Rabbi Ami says: From these words of Rabbi Yosei, we learn that even though a person learns but one chapter in the morning and one chapter in the evening, he has thereby fulfilled the precept “This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth.”

Rabbi Yochanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, “Even though a person but reads the *Shema* morning and evening, one has thereby fulfilled the precept of ‘[it] shall not depart.’ It is forbidden, however, to say this in the presence of *ammei ha-aretz*.” But Rava says, “It is a meritorious act to say it in the presence of *ammei ha-aretz*.”

Ben Dama the son of Rabbi Yishmael's sister once asked Rabbi Yishmael, “May one such as I who have studied the whole of the Torah learn Greek wisdom?” He thereupon read to him the following verse, “‘This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate therein day and night.’ Go then and find a time that is neither day nor night, and learn Greek wisdom.”

This, however, is at variance with the view of Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachmani. For Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachmani says in the name of Rabbi Yonatan, “This verse is neither duty nor command but a blessing. For when the Holy One, blessed be He, saw that the words of the Torah were most precious to Yehoshua, as it is written, ‘His minister Yehoshua bin Nun, a young man, departed not out of the tent,’ He said to him: ‘Yehoshua, since the words of the Torah are so precious to you,’ therefore, ‘This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth.’”

Here, while the Gemara does not arrive at a clear conclusion, the roles nonetheless seem to be reversed. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai holds that it suffices to study minimally, and it is Rabbi Yishmael who sardonically insists that since one must study “day and night,” ben Dama may only study secular texts at a time that is neither day nor night.

**Resolving the Contradictions**

Acharonim expend significant energies in trying to resolve the apparent contradictions. While we will not present a comprehensive summary of possible solutions, we will draw attention to three suggestions.

In *Torah Umadda*, *mori u-zekeini* Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm proposes a novel solution regarding the opinion of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, attributing his apparently conflicting statements to different stages in his life:

Perhaps the key to the solution lies in a famous story recorded in *Shabbat* 33b concerning the threatened arrest by the Romans of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai and his son, Rabbi Elazar. Father and son were forced to stay in a cave for twelve years, during which time they studied Torah and survived by the fruit of a carob tree. When they emerged, they were scandalized by the "normal" behavior of their fellow Jews, who engaged in worldly pursuits and neglected the transcendental demands of Judaism; whereupon a Heavenly Voice ordered them back to the cave. Their level of sanctity was too great and constituted a threat to Jewish society. Twelve months later they were again permitted to leave their cave, and this time the father became reconciled to the world, declaring that the two of them alone would suffice for the rest of Israel (in completely fulfilling the high demands of constancy in the study of Torah). Eventually, the son too joined the father in a new-found appreciation of "ordinary" Jews and their far less intense way of showing their love of the *mitzvot*.

This story hints at a basic change in attitude by Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai. It is reasonable to assume that his view of *hoi polloi,* highly elitist from the start, was powerfully enhanced and reinforced during his isolation in the cave, and that this view was radically altered by his experience upon emerging. (*Torah Umadda*, pp. 66-67)

This is a tantalizing theory: Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai changes his mind after emerging from the cave. In this view, the Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai of *Berakhot* is the fiery elitist who uncompromisingly demands constant commitment to Torah study. In *Menachot*, however, we encounter a changed man, who more readily recognizes the importance of supporting one’s family and, more broadly, engaging in “normal” activities.

Another resolution is offered by Rabbi Aryeh Karlin (*Keren Ora*, *Menachot* 99b, s.v. *Amar*), relying not on biography but on demography. Theologically speaking, Rabbi Karlin argues, different Jews play different roles in relation to Torah. An elite few are meant to be constantly engaged in Torah study, while the majority are meant to work for much of the time yet commit themselves to regular Torah study. Thus, Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in *Berakhot* are not disagreeing but referring to different types of individuals: Rabbi Yishmael refers to the average person, and encourages such an individual to pursue a typical living wage, whereas Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai speaks of the elite sage who ought to be studying constantly. This is the meaning of Abbayei’s conclusion. Far from constituting an endorsement of Rabbi Yishmael’s view at the expense of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s, the Gemara in fact merely means to say that the majority should not pursue the path of the latter. Finally, there is a third category, called *ammei ha-aretz,* who do not possess the capacity for even limited intensive study. Regarding this third class of individuals, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai advises in *Menachot* that they at least recite the *Shema* morning and evening mindfully.

A third theory, to which we have referred in previous *shiurim*, is offered by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady in his earliest halakhic work, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*. After posing the contradiction between the *sugyot*, he postulates that there are in fact two elements to the obligation of Torah study: studying and procuring knowledge. The *sugya* in *Kiddushin* refers to an individual who has not yet mastered Torah; such an individual is obligated to study constantly. One who has already mastered the corpus, however, is exempt. The *sugyot* in *Berakhot* and *Menachot*, which rule that one can fulfill one’s obligation by reciting *Shema*, refer only to such a person.

**The Practical Halakha**

What these *sugyot* have in common is the conclusion that although Torah study is critically important, the obligation of *talmud Torah* is minimal: twice a day.

Moreover, *Nedarim* 8a seems to confirm this view. One cannot make a vow about biblical obligations because “one stands bound from Sinai.” Nonetheless, the Gemara teaches that if one vows to study a particular chapter or tractate, the vow is binding because one is only obligated from Sinai to study in the morning and evening. Here too, the Gemara seems to explicitly rule that the obligation of Torah study is limited to once by day and once by night. Indeed, Rambam (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:8)[[1]](#footnote-1), Rosh (*Tosafot Ha-Rosh* *ad loc*. s.v. Rabbi Shimon), Rabbi Yehuda He-chasid (*Tosafot Rabbi Yehuda He-chasid* ibid.), Radbaz (*Responsa* 3:416) and the Mechabber (*YD* 246:1) rule in accordance with this view.

Others, however, cite *Kiddushin* 30a in contending that there is a constant obligation of Torah study. The Gemara derives from the term “*ve-shinantam*” that one is obligated to master Torah to the point that one does not hesitate in responding if asked a question about halakha. Mastery at such a level requires constant engagement in Torah learning. Thus, the Gemara seems to imply a far greater requirement than reciting *Shema* in the morning and evening. Therefore, Ran (*Nedarim* 8a s.v. *Ha*) rules that there is an obligation to “study constantly, day and night, to the extent of one’s abilities.”

Ran’s view, however, raises an obvious difficulty: how are we to understand *Nedarim* 8a? Ran explains that one is bound from Sinai only regarding those obligations explicitly stated in the Torah; those derived by exegesis may have the force of biblical law generally, but they are not considered a pre-existing vow. Since the obligation of mastering the corpus of Torah is derived by hermeneutics, a vow to complete a particular chapter or tractate is binding.

Ritva (ibid. s.v. *Amrinan*), following Ran’s general line, circumscribes the idea of *Shema*’s sufficing for daily Torah study. First, he suggests that this applies only to one who is unable to study more due to financial responsibilities. (Surprisingly, he cites *Menachot* 99b; perhaps he holds that Rabbi Yishmael’s retort to ben Dama is in fact the authoritative ruling.) However, he prefers an alternative: *talmud Torah* is a constant mitzva, but one may choose to study any text that one desires. Thus, a commitment to study a particular chapter or tractate is binding, because it goes beyond the strict biblical requirement.[[2]](#footnote-2) This second option also enables Ritva to reconcile *Nedarim* 8a with his view that, at least if one is not distracted by other responsibilities such as earning a living, there is a constant obligation of Torah study, albeit with a wide range of subjects that fall under that rubric.

Semag (*Positive* 12; codified by Rema, *YD* 246:1) presages the Ritva’s view:

When times are tight, when a person is in a state of confusion and does not have time to study, one may rely on that which Rabbi Yochanan says… that one fulfills his obligation by studying in the morning and evening only.

Although he does not precisely delineate the criteria for this category, Semag makes it abundantly clear that the primary obligation is to study Torah on a constant basis, with exceptions for extenuating circumstances.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**A Relative Obligation: The Vilna Gaon, Rav Baruch Ber and *Or Same’ach***

As we noted in our inaugural *shiur*, the first *mishna* in *Peia* lists *talmud Torah* as being without measure, and the commentaries debate whether this means that study has no minimum or maximum quantity. According to the view that *talmud Torah* has no ceiling, we might understand the *mishna* as saying either that one is constantly obligated to study Torah, or that one receives reward no matter how much one studies. These two interpretations carry rather different implications for the question of whether the obligation of Torah study is constant.

Significantly, the Vilna Gaon maintains that *talmud Torah* has neither minimum nor maximum; in other words, there is a constant obligation to study Torah, but one must set aside study to perform a mitzva or earn a living.

In elaborating on this view, Rav Baruch Ber Leibowitz (*Birkat Shemuel, Kiddushin* 27:4), an outstanding student of Rav Chayim Soloveitchik, offers an insightful interpretation that speaks to the nature of *talmud Torah*. First, he explains the *mishna* as follows: one who sets aside his learning to perform a mitzva or earn a living has not, in effect, ceased to study Torah. Rather, one fulfills *talmud Torah* in the broader sense of the term. Thus, Torah study is without measure in either direction: there is a constant obligation of Torah study, and one may fulfill that obligation through either actual study or application of its larger principles, as manifest in one’s daily activities.

This explanation is consistent with some of the motifs we developed in previous *shiurim* concerning the relationship between Torah study and action, particularly in connection with the concept of not exempting one who is engaged in Torah study from performing other *mitzvot*. Pertinent to our discussion, Rav Hutner[[4]](#footnote-4) interprets a classic comment of Tosafot along similar lines. Tosafot (*Berakhot* 11b, s.v. *She-kevar*) ask why one who stops learning and continues later in the day does not recite *Birkhot Ha-Torah* again. After all, there has been a *hefsek* (interruption). They explain: “Torah is different, because one’s mind never budges from it, as one is constantly obligated to study, for it states, ‘but you shall meditate therein day and night,’ and it is as if one sits all day [studying] without pause.” These lines are puzzling. First, if one is constantly obligated in Torah learning, what is the justification for taking a break? Second, Tosafot seem to be making an unfounded, if inspiring, psychological assumption. Is it really true that a person is in fact studying the morning’s *Daf Yomi* at every single moment? Rav Hutner offers the following explanation: ideally, Torah study and proper behavior are meant to be closely associated. Indeed, from this perspective, proper action validates one’s learning. Thus, one’s proper behavior throughout the day is an extension of his *talmud Torah*. This is the true reason that *Birkhot Ha-Torah* extend throughout the day, despite the interruption in one’s daily study.

Rav Baruch Ber, building on the Vilna Gaon’s view, claims that there are two obligations of *talmud Torah*, one quantitative and the other qualitative. He cites Ran’s view that one must master Torah “to the extent of one’s abilities.” To Rav Baruch Ber, this means that there is a subjective, or relative, element in this obligation:

If one has such an intellect to study an entire tractate in one hour and to encompass the entirety of Torah instantaneously, one must complete the tractate or encompass the Torah in just one hour. And if one’s mind can only bear to study half a page [of Gemara] in an hour, this is the obligation, based on the verse ““You shall teach them diligently to your children” — the words of Torah must be “sharp in one’s mouth.”

Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (*Or Same’ach*, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:4) offers a similar interpretation that tailors the obligation of Torah study to the capacity of the student. Bothered by the contradictions we raised, he suggests that the rabbis intentionally avoid assigning a precise measure to Torah study because it is inherently subjective. Not only are different individuals subject to different economic situations and professional responsibilities, which impacts on their quantitative requirement, but different people experience varying degrees of emotional connection to Torah study. Beyond the basic requirement of *Keriat* *Shema* morning and evening, the obligation of *talmud Torah*, for Rav Meir Simcha, is contingent upon one’s personality: the more Torah study of which one is capable, the greater one’s obligation.

Debates and distinctions aside, one point remains clear: whatever one’s position on the scope of the technical obligation of Torah study, the critical importance of regular study is indisputable. Instead of attempting to formulate this on our own, we defer to the spirited and sophisticated formulation of HaRav Lichtenstein:

Nonetheless, even if the more modest standards be posited, a second major issue independent of the scope of the *miẓvah* of lifelong learning must be considered: the axiological and existential place of Torah in our lives and our total relation to it. The enormous (in many respects, incomprehensible) attachment which, practically and ideologically, *knesset Yisrael* has had historically to Torah study... springs from deep rooted faith in the sanctity and significance of Torah at the cosmic, sociohistorical, and personal planes; as that which sustains the creation, binds his covenantal community to the *Ribbono Shel ‘Olam*, and purgatively sanctifies the individual Jew... It ennobles and enriches, investing its votary with a transfiguring “crown of Torah.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the end, whatever the narrow obligation, *talmud Torah*’s crucial role in our faith and tradition remains assured.

1. Since he rules that the Showbread must be on the Table constantly (*Temidin* 5:4), Rambam’s position is difficult, as *Lechem Mishneh* (*Talmud Torah* 1:8) points out; he suggests that the terms “continually” and “day and night” may have different connotations. Regardless, Rambam’s ruling regarding Torah study seems clear-cut. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Re’em (*Shita Mekubetzet, Nedarim* 8a, s.v. *Katav)* offers the same approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Hagahot Maimoniyot* (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:7), who often tries to square Rambam’s views with the Ashkenazic tradition, reads Rambam in the same way. His view of the technical obligation is minimal; this reading is confirmed by *Lechem Mishneh* (ad loc.) and *Keli Chemda* (*Devarim* 330). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Pachad Yitzchak, Shavuot*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict,” in *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection of Integration*, Jason Aronson (New York: 1997), pp. 264-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)