YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**TORAH STUDY**

**By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

**Shiur #13**

**Is There a Constant Obligation of Torah Study? Part 2**

In last week’s *shiur*, we explored the extent to which Torah study is a constant obligation; now it is worth examining three issues that relate to this idea: Torah and *derekh eretz*, pushing off marriage for Torah study, and *bittul Torah*. An examination of these three areas will enable us to tie up some of the loose ends from our previous *shiur*.

**TORAH AND *DEREKH ERETZ***

Last week, among other sources, we considered *Berakhot* 35b, in which Rabbi Yishmael expounds “you are to combine the study of them with a worldly occupation (*derekh eretz*).” Similarly, *Avot* 2:2 teaches:

Rabban Gamliel the son of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi said: Excellent is the study of the Torah together with a worldly occupation (*talmud Torah im derekh eretz*), for the exertion [expended] in both of them causes sin to be forgotten. And all [study of] Torah in the absence of labor (*melakha*) comes to nothing and leads to sin.

The Mishna stresses a rabbinical concern that we have not yet seen: one who studies Torah without earning a livelihood risks the temptation of theft. This additional consideration, unfortunately all too realistic, must be taken into account in determining the proper balance between Torah and secular activities.

Thus, Torah study must be integrated with a worldly occupation; however, Rabbeinu Tam and Rabbeinu Elchanan (cited in *Tosafot Yeshanim*, *Yoma* 85b s.v. *Teshuva[[1]](#footnote-1)*) debate whether Torah study or the pursuit of economic sufficiency is primary. As HaRav Lichtenstein emphasizes, this debate ought to clearly be understood not as an argument regarding axiological priority, but concerning the practical prioritization of study and work. As he [puts it](http://etzion.org.il/en/all-your-ways-know-him-two-modes-serving-god):

The dispute between Rabbeinu Tam and Rabbeinu Elchanan is really a sharper form of the argument between Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Here again we encounter different perceptions concerning how a person is normally expected to live.

Rabbeinu Tam, however, seems to go far beyond Rabbi Yishmael’s position. While Rabbi Yishmael recognized the legitimacy of labor, Rabbeinu Tam considers it to be the *ikkar* (primary component). Thus, Rabbeinu Tam is the opposite extreme of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who negated the value of work entirely.

However, we must be more precise in our understanding of Rabbeinu Tam’s position. It is inconceivable that Rabbeinu Tam, of all people, thought that working in the fields or collecting garbage is the *ikkar*—the main thing in human life and the purpose of one’s existence. Not that these things may not be valuable and good, but could they be the *ikkar*?

One therefore needs to differentiate between two senses of the term *ikkar*. It can be meant in an axiological sense, in terms of value: What is most important? It can also be meant as something which is central not in qualitative, axiological terms, but rather in quantitative terms: How does the Torah expect, how do *Chazal* expect, a person to spend the bulk of his day? I believe we must interpret the argument between Rabbeinu Tam and Rabbeinu Elchanan in the latter sense: How does God expect a person to spend his day?[[2]](#footnote-2)

**TORAH AND MARRIAGE**

In an earlier *shiur*, we explored the question of interrupting *talmud Torah* for the sake of another mitzva. It is worthwhile pausing here to consider an instance of that issue, namely the prioritization of learning versus building a family. This subject touches on the larger question of the degree to which there is a constant obligation of Torah study.

The Mishna consider 18 to be the age of marriage (*Avot* 5:21). This raises a problem: if one marries at this relatively young age, won’t the economic burdens of raising a family interfere with one’s development as a Torah student? *Kiddushin* 29b raises precisely this quandary, pitting the centrality of Torah study against the critical importance of marriage as a way of staving off the evil inclination, which enables the Torah student to better avoid the distraction of sexual thoughts. After raising a contradiction regarding this matter, the Gemara concludes by distinguishing between the Amoraic sages of Israel and those of Babylonia.

The direction of the Gemara’s distinction, however, is unclear, leading to a dispute among the commentaries. Rashi (ad loc. s.v. *Ha*) explains that since, in Talmudic times, the major *yeshivot* were stationed in Israel, the Babylonian students left home and were therefore better able to focus on their studies. Israeli students, however, tended to stay home for their studies, and so were more readily distracted by their domestic responsibilities. Since their familial obligations did not interfere with their learning, Babylonian students were encouraged to marry first, whereas Israeli students were encouraged to learn first and marry later, so as to avoid domestic distractions. Tosafot, however, reject Rashi’s interpretation and read the Gemara as drawing precisely the opposite distinction. Babylonians, who were forced to study far from home and their wives, would have been subject to sexual distraction even after marriage and were therefore urged not to marry before studying. The reason for early marriage simply did not apply to the Babylonians. Israelis, on the other hand, were encouraged to marry early.

How are we to implement the Gemara’s distinction in practice nowadays? Rambam (*Hilkhot Ishut* 15:2), in a striking comment we explored earlier in this series, writes that the ideal age for marriage is between 17 and 20, but one may delay marriage in order to pursue scholarly endeavors. Rosh (*Kiddushin* 1:42) makes a similar argument: one may continue learning beyond the age of 20 in order to avoid distraction in one’s learning. Indeed, the Mechabber (*EH* 1:3), while lowering the preferred age for marriage to between 13 and 18, follows Rambam and Rosh: one may delay marriage in order to continue learning.

According to the classical sources, may one push off marriage indefinitely? Is there any way to quantify the amount of time one may study before the obligation of marriage sets in? As *Beit Shemuel* (ibid. 5) notes, the matter is not entirely clear: Rosh explicitly notes that he does not know the precise time at which one sets aside one’s books and begins to search for a spouse; Rambam, by way of omission, implies that in fact no set time exists. It is, instead, a subjective matter left up to the individual student.

**Contemporary Application**

With this background in mind, when should the contemporary Torah student get married? To properly understand why the contemporary student might be treated differently than one living at the time of the Gemara, let us first examine the nature of the obligation as it existed in Talmudic times. While it might sound somewhat absurd, we might ask why, from the vantage point of a technical halakhic standpoint, the obligation to become married (at least to begin searching for a suitable spouse) does not begin from the age one becomes a bar mitzva. Why is marriage treated differently than other biblical obligations? On a basic level, we might answer that marriage requires a significant degree of maturity, and one therefore ought to wait until one is sufficiently mature to be married.

Beyond this point, we may introduce two additional considerations. First, as the Gemara (*Sota* 44b) and Rambam (*Hilkhot De’ot* 5:11) note, one who fails to support one’s family has acted in a manner that is counter to *derekh eretz,* in the sense of the previously cited *mishna* in *Avot*. Therefore, one should delay marriage until later, when one is in the position to responsibly support one’s family. Second, as we noted in a previous *shiur*, one who studies Torah may, in the case of procreation and marriage, lean on the principle of *ha-osek be-mitzva patur min ha-mitzva*, one who is engaged in fulfilling one commandment may set aside all others. At least for one who is learning, there is an additional reason to delay one’s study.

In light of these considerations, we can understand why the age of marriage might be later than it was in the time of the Gemara. Depending on one’s area of study, it often requires more years in today’s world for one to reach the stage of economic self-sufficiency. What is more, with student loans outstanding, many young people take years before they are in a relatively secure financial position. (And all this is before we consider the high cost of Jewish living.) Furthermore, in light of fundamental cultural changes and the nature of modern marriage, preparedness for marriage requires an exceedingly high level of maturity. Exceptions notwithstanding, many young adults are not prepared for the emotional self-awareness necessary to build a healthy long-term relationship in the context of marriage. Thus, we may set aside the prescriptions of the Gemara, Rambam and *Shulchan Arukh* just as contemporary considerations led *Chazal* to delay marriage to age 18 in the first place.

All this regards the proper age of marriage, setting aside *talmud Torah*. Once we include that consideration as well, there is additional room for flexibility. In Rav Eliezer Melamed’s view, for instance, one needs to acquire a certain amount of basic knowledge in Torah before marrying; one who has reached this point may no longer delay marriage due to one’s commitment to study.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This position, accepted by many authorities, underscores one of the key points we have emphasized in the previous two *shiurim*: we must not conflate the axiological centrality of Torah study with the technical question of the extent to which its obligation is constant. Rambam, who exempts one from a constant obligation to study Torah, holds that one may legitimately delay marriage for the purpose of *talmud Torah.* Notwithstanding the importance of one’s career, one’s calling ought to be Torah study, and there are important halakhic ramifications to this ideal, even if there is no strict obligation to constantly study Torah.

***BITTUL TORAH***

In order to further develop our thesis that *talmud Torah*’s centrality cannot necessarily be measured by the scope of the technical obligation of constant study, let us consider the subject of *bittul Torah*, neglecting Torah study.

Many Talmudic sources condemn *bittul Torah*. On *Berakhot* 5a, Rava teaches that suffering should compel a person to examine one’s conduct; if no misdeed is apparent, it should be attributed to *bittul Torah*. *Shabbat* 33a lists mass calamities which result from injustice and *bittul Torah*. On *Yoma* 19b, Rava expounds: “One who engages in mundane talk transgresses a positive command, for it is written: ‘And you shall speak of them’ — ‘of them’, but not of other matters.” On *Ta’anit* 7b, Rav Katina declares: “Rain is withheld only because of bittul Torah, as it says, ‘Slothfulness makes the roof sag.’”

Other rabbinical sources agree. Rav Acha (*Kalla Rabbati* 6) teaches that the righteous die solely due to the sin of *bittul Torah*. *Eikha Rabba* (1:20) teaches that exile comes about due to the neglect of study. In light of the rabbinic emphasis on Torah learning, none of this is particularly surprising.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Still other sources take the concept further. *Sanhedrin* 99a expounds the verse “For he has spurned the word of God,” and Rabbi Nehorai explains: “This is one who has the opportunity to engage in Torah but declines.” Such an individual has not only missed the chance for *talmud Torah,* but has actively rejected the Torah.

*Chagiga* 5b carries a similar implication. The Gemara teaches that God cries for one who has the ability to learn Torah but chooses not to do so. Here too, the Gemara’s emphasis is not on whether or not one has fulfilled the technical obligation to learn; indeed one may not have violated it at all. Instead, neglecting to learn causes God to cry. If one can learn and chooses not to, the outcome is tragic and viewed as a personal rejection of God.

Another source points toward a similar message but from a different direction. In *Avot* 2:8, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai states: “If you have studied a lot of Torah, do not credit yourself, because you were created for this purpose.” Just as one who has neglected Torah study is punished, above and beyond any technical halakhic violations, so too one who has studied a lot ought not to be overly proud. Learning Torah is not a typical mitzva; it is simply among our most basic duties as Jews.

1. See also *Tosefot R. Yehuda He-chasid, Berakhot* 35b, s.v. *Ve-asafta*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://etzion.org.il/en/all-your-ways-know-him-two-modes-serving-god> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.torahmusings.com/2014/04/when-to-get-married/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is also striking that *Avot* 1:5 teaches that “as long as one speaks overly much with a woman, he causes evil to himself and neglects words of Torah.” On the simplest level, the Mishna is describing not a sin but a consequence: one who is distracted will simply not attain the same level in Torah study as one who focuses with greater intensity. It is striking, therefore, that the Mishna nonetheless uses the terminology of “*u-votel mi-divrei Torah*.” *Bittul* *Torah* is not merely a sin but a negative consequence in its own right. This too underscores the severity of *bittul Torah*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)