YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

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**Shiur #20: Ideal Times for *Talmud Torah*** part I

Is there any association between *talmud Torah* and particular moments in time? For example, is there any distinction to be drawn between *Shabbatot* and holidays on one hand and the rest of the year on the other?

A memorable *midrash* offers an excellent entry point for this subject, from *Yalkut Shimoni* at the beginning of *Parashat Vayakhel* (408):

“*Vayakhel Moshe” —* Our rabbis, the aggadic masters, would note that from the beginning of the Torah to its end, there is no *parasha* which starts with the word “*Vayakhel*” save this alone.

God said: “Make for yourself great throngs (*kehillot*) of people, and publicly expound before them the laws of Shabbat, so that future generations will learn from you to gather groups of people every Shabbat and to assemble in the study halls to teach and instruct Israel in the words of Torah, that which is forbidden and that which is permitted, so My great name will be praised among my children.”

Based on this, they said that Moshe instituted for Israel to expound the matters of each day: laws of Pesach on Pesach, laws of Shavuot on Shavuot, laws of Sukkot on Sukkot.

Moshe said to Israel: “If you follow this arrangement, God considers it as if you have declared Him to be the King of His Universe, as it says: ‘And you are my witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God.’”

So says David: “I have brought tidings of justice in a great throng (*kahal*).” Now what tidings did Israel need in the days of David? Were not his days like the Messianic Era? Rather, he would open and expound before them words of Torah which no ear had ever heard before.

This *midrash* is quite positive about the cosmic impact of public Torah study on *Shabbatot* and holidays, but the converse is also true: neglecting such *talmud Torah* holds disastrous consequences. Thus, Rabba lists among the reasons for losing one’s fortune (*Gittin* 38b):

People lose their fortune… for taking their main Shabbat meal at the hour when the discourse is given in the study hall. For so said Rabbi Chiya bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Yochanan that there were two families in Jerusalem, one of which used to take its main meal on Shabbat [at the hour of the discourse] and the other on the eve of Shabbat, and both of them became extinct.

Indeed, the same Rabbi Chiya bar Abba is cited by Rabbi Berekhya in Talmud Yerushalmi (*Shabbat* 15:3) declaring: “*Shabbatot* and holidays were given for but one reason: to occupy oneself with words of Torah.”

Another *midrash* of unclear provenance is mentioned by the Tur (OC 290), before he cites and rules in accordance with *Gittin* 38b (as does Rav Yosef Karo):

So says the Midrash that the Torah complained to God, “Master of the Universe, once Israel enter the Land, they will run, each to one’s vineyard and each to one’s field. But I — what will become of me?”

He told her: “I have a partner to espouse you to; his name is Shabbat. [When he comes,] they will be idle from their labors and able to occupy themselves with you.”

For this reason, a study session needs to be set so that the people may “know the laws of God and His teachings.”

This second *midrash* may help us understand the first two sources. After all, there is a daily obligation to study Torah, so why should Shabbat be any different? The Tur’s *midrash* makes a pragmatic point: one who works all week long has more time available to study on Shabbat than throughout the week.

Other commentators (Meiri, *Shabbat* 118b) suggest that as *talmud Torah* involves a unique degree of joy (as *Tehillim* 19:9 states, “God’s precepts are right, rejoicing the heart*”*), Torah study constitutes a fulfillment of *oneg Shabbat*, making Shabbat a delight. This returns us to the motif of joy, which we discussed earlier in this course.

A third approach brings us back to the *Yalkut Shimoni,* which ascribes to Moshe the following guarantee: “If you follow this arrangement, God considers it as if you have declared Him to be the King of His Universe, as it says, ‘And you are my witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God.’” In other words, by engaging in public Torah study on Shabbat, we implicitly testify that God is Creator and Master of the Universe, a theme uniquely appropriate to the seventh day of creation.

What precisely is the connection? First, properly conceived, Torah study constitutes the paradigmatic act of *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim*, acceptance of the yoke of Heaven. The Torah itself serves as the paramount testimony to God’s role as Creator and Master of the Universe. For this reason, many commentators maintain that one may fulfill the biblical obligation of reciting the *Shema* by studying Torah (e.g., Ritva*, Berakhot* 21a). Second, acceptance of the yoke of heaven, as an outgrowth of the recognition of God as Creator, occupies a central place among the themes of Shabbat (see *Ramban, Devarim* 5:14, as well as the introductions of Arukh Ha-shulchan, Chayei Adam and Mishna Berura to the laws of Shabbat).

The uniqueness of Torah study on Shabbat, then, illuminates both. On one hand, it serves to illustrate the importance of *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim* as a Shabbat motif. On the other hand, it also underscores an essential ingredient of Torah study. Ideally conceived, Torah study is far more than a mere intellectual exercise. Rather, *talmud Torah* inculcates an ethic of surrender and submission to the Almighty, centerpiece of our religious philosophy and experience (see *Halakhic Man*, footnote 4). Torah study on Shabbat, thus, is truly a match made in heaven.

What of *Yom Tov*? Let us return to the passage we mentioned earlier from Talmud Yerushalmi, *Shabbat* 15:3 and see the debate in context (cf. *Pesachim* 68b).

Rabbi Chaggai says in the name of Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachman: *Shabbatot* and holidays were given for but one reason: to eat and to drink; but because the mouth may come to reek, they allowed one to occupy oneself with words of Torah during them.

Rabbi Berekhya says in the name of Rabbi Chiya bar Abba: *Shabbatot* and holidays were given for but one reason: to occupy oneself with words of Torah.

A *baraita* supports the view of this and of that: “What should one do: sit and eat or sit and occupy oneself with words of Torah? A verse says, ‘It is the Sabbath for the Lord,’ and a verse says, ‘A retreat for the Lord your God.’ What should one do? Give part of it for Torah study, and give part of it to eat and to drink.

In other words, whether it is for ideological or practical reasons, the Godly aspect of both Shabbat and *Yom Tov* cannot be denied, and so Torah study is a necessity.

While this is clearly true for Shabbat and *Yom Tov*, days on which all or most weekday labor is forbidden, what about *Chol Ha-mo’ed*, the intermediate days of Pesach and Sukkot? Sefer Ha-chinnukh and Arukh Ha-shulchan sound similar motifs to what we have seen in regard to Shabbat:

The intermediate days of the festival were not set to occupy oneself with labor, but rather to rejoice before God. This means to gather in the study halls and to hear the pleasantness of the book of laws of Pesach on Pesach, laws of Shavuot on Shavuot, laws of Sukkot on Sukkot. (*Sefer Ha-chinnukh,* Mitzva 323)

Included in holiday joy is Torah study. After all, even on *Yom Tov* we require that half of it be dedicated to God, all the more so on the intermediate days. And if one engages in commerce, one will neither benefit from holiday joy nor study Torah. (Arukh Ha-shulchan, *OC* 539:4.)

*Shabbatot* and holidays, then, are particularly propitious times for Torah study. There is no question that the timing of *talmud Torah* is significant when it comes to our weekly and yearly calendar. In the next *shiur*, we will explore the unique daily significance of *talmud Torah* during the nighttime hours.