YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**TORAH STUDY**

**By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

**Shiur #10: The Experiential Dimension of Torah Study**

**The Experience of the Learner**

In previous *shiurim,* we considered the purpose of Torah study, as well as numerous ramifications of that subject. Today we will turn to the emotional experience of the Torah student. How should we characterize the proper mode of study? In this *shiur*, we will focus on three elements of the studying process: toil (*ameilut),* reverence (*yira*) and love (*ahava)*. Since we touched on the theme in last week’s *shiur*, we will begin with *ameilut*.

**Toil and Self-Abnegation**

Numerous rabbinic sources emphasize the critical importance of *ameilut ba-Torah*. We will cite just a few prominent cases in point.

Rashi at the beginning of *Parashat Bechukotai* cites the classic *midrash* which comments “’If you shall walk after my statutes’ — that you must toil in Torah” (*Vayikra* 26:3, s.v. *Im*). *Sanhedrin* 99b goes so far as to assert that “man was created for the toil of Torah.” The *Midrash Tanchuma* we cited in last week’s *shiur* stresses in particular the importance of *ameilut ba-Torah* in regard to the study of the Oral Torah.

This motif is underscored in *Birkhot Ha-Torah*, which includes the phrase “*la’asok be-divrei Torah*,” “to engage in words of Torah.” Taz (*OC* 47:1) explains that “the primary characteristic of those who engage in Torah is their toil and effort; and it is this they refer to in the blessing of ‘to engage in words of Torah.’”

HaRav Lichtenstein’s trenchant comments make the point vividly:

"To be laboring in Torah" - that is the demand and the expectation; and it is to that commitment that *birkot ha-Torah* relate… I am reminded, in this connection, of an anecdote - I presume it has numerous analogues - told to me by the Rav's mother, Rebbetzin Pesia Soloveitchik z"l - about an ordinary laborer in the town of Pruzhan, who, upon being blessed by well-wishers that he should become a great *talmid chakham* by virtue of miraculous *giluy Eliyahu*, demurred with the rejoinder that he would be most appreciative of supernal assistance in any other area, but as to growth in Torah, he aspired to attain that on his own.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Thus, the blessings recited over Torah study indicate that toil is an essential component of the mitzva, not a mere preference.

A few sources go even further, emphasizing not just the toil but also the self-abnegation of the ideal Torah student. Reish Lakish (*Berakhot* 63b and parallels) derives from the verse, “This is the *torah*: a man who dies in a tent” (*Bamidbar* 19:14) that “the words of Torah are only fulfilled by one who kills oneself for them.” In *Berakhot* 5a, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai states: “The Holy One, Blessed be He, gave Israel three precious gifts, all of which were given only by means of suffering: Torah, the Land of Israel, and the World to Come.’”

Along these lines, *Avot* 6:4 stresses the self-abnegation required of the committed Torah student:

This is the way [to toil 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 and in Torah you toil; if you do so, "happy shall you be, and it shall be well with you" (*Tehillim* 128:2) - happy shall you be in this world, and it shall be well with you in the World to Come.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Also pertinent is the surprising position of Maharil (*Responsa* 201), who contends that one is encouraged to study Torah in depth on Tisha Be-Av, because if one struggles to understand, such discomfiture is consistent with the dour mood of the day.

**Reverence and Enjoyment in Torah Study**

As captured by Rambam (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:1-2) and many others, the dialectic between reverence and enjoyment animates the life of the servant of God generally. As we might expect, this tension manifests itself regarding *talmud Torah*. *Berakhot* 22a, for instance, emphasizes that “just as the Revelation at Sinai was in reverence, fear, quaking, and trembling, so too here, in every generation, Torah must be studied with a sense of reverence, fear, quaking, and trembling.” This is to be expected: as noted, this tension runs through much of religious experience as broadly conceived. What is noteworthy, though, is the emphasis sources have placed on the importance of enjoyment in the experience of Torah study, even among those thinkers for whom enjoyment does not occupy a central position in their larger religious worldviews.

Many sources underscore the importance of enjoyment in Torah study. *Ta’anit* 30a cites the verse “God’s precepts are right, rejoicing the heart” (*Tehillim* 19:9) as a proof text for the prohibition against studying Torah on Tisha Be-Av. The ruling against studying on Tisha Be-Av is rooted in the assumption that Torah study provides one with enjoyment. Similarly, *Eruvin* 54a states

Rabbi Zeira derives it from here: “A person finds enjoyment in giving an apt reply, and how good is a timely word!” (*Mishlei* 15:23) — when does one find enjoyment? When one gives an apt reply.

Here, enjoyment is associated with finding the answer to a difficult question, an experience to which almost any Torah student can relate. Also underscoring the place of enjoyment in Torah study, *Berakhot* 63b teaches that each day of *talmud Torah* is as beloved to its students as the day on which it was given at Sinai.

Deepening the association with enjoyment, the continuation of the *sugya* in *Eruvin* (54b) offers a shockingly erotic depiction of the *talmud Torah* experience:

Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachmani said: What is that which is written (*Mishlei* 5:19): “A loving hind and a graceful roe?” Why are matters of Torah compared to a hind?

To tell you that just as a hind’s womb is narrow and it is precious to its lover, so that every time is like the first time; so too, matters of Torah are precious to those who study them each, and every time is like the first time.

Conversely, on *Sanhedrin* 99b, Reish Lakish compares one who studies Torah periodically to a philanderer. This harsh analogy contrasts with the committed, loving relationship that ideally characterizes Torah and its student.

These romantic depictions of *talmud Torah* may dovetail with Rabbi’s teaching on *Avoda Zara* 19a:

When they came to this verse, “But whose desire for God’s Torah (*Tehillim* 1:2),” Rabbi commented: “One can only learn well that part of the Torah which is one’s heart's desire.”

On the one hand, this may be a pedagogic point, namely that one will only be able to successfully learn that which one is genuinely motivated to master. Indeed, this educational principle, herein endorsed by *Chazal*, is making a major impact in the landscape of contemporary North American yeshiva day schools, which are increasingly emphasizing the importance of choice. However, it may also indicate that it is important for one to feel passionate about a particular area of Torah study, because this will deepen one’s motivation to study. Rabbi’s proof text includes the word “desire,” which evokes the erotic imagery of *Eruvin*; Rabbi may allude to the importance of passion in Torah study. According to this reading, he sharpens the point of emotional engagement in Torah: not just studying generally, but finding a particular discipline, topic or text about which one is most excited.

Of course, *Birkhot Ha-Torah* place a unique emphasis on the enjoyment we aspire to in our studying. We go out of our way to beseech God to “please make sweet the words of Torah in our mouths, and in the mouths of our children.”

Numerous Rishonim and Acharonim also accentuate the role of enjoyment in *talmud Torah*. Rambam (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot,* Positive 3) stresses that studying is a key method for achieving greater love of God. As we will discuss later in our series, Meiri (*Shabbat* 118b) and Bach (*OC* 290) suggest that there is a unique obligation to study Torah on Shabbat as a fulfillment of “delighting on the Sabbath;” both explicitly cite *Tehillim* 19:9. The Taz (*YD* 121) strikingly rules that although there is a general principle that “the *mitzvot* were not given to derive benefit,” this does not apply to Torah study, which specifically was given to us in order to derive benefit.

In his inspiring introduction to *Eglei Tal*, R. Avraham Bornsztain refers to those who claim that enjoying *talmud Torah* contravenes the principle of *Torah lishmah*. R. Bornsztain rejects this position, explaining that Torah was specifically given to be studied joyously. He goes so far as to contend that *talmud Torah* is similar to eating matza, in the sense that deriving benefit is an essential component of the mitzva. One therefore fulfills one’s obligation in *talmud Torah* even without intention: the pleasure that one derives from the Torah study makes the action considered one’s own, and even a *mitasek* (one who performs a mitzva inadvertently) receives credit for having fulfilled the obligation.[[3]](#footnote-3)

At first glance, this emphasis on enjoyment seems to contradict the aforementioned stress on the toil and self-sacrifice involved in Torah study. Suffering and enjoyment, after all, generally do not go hand-in-hand. How are we to resolve this apparent contradiction? Two possible solutions present themselves. First, it is possible that the enjoyment comes only after one has expended considerable toil and effort. While this reading is logically plausible, it does not seem to accord with the sources we have cited, which indicate that the love for Torah is built into the studying experience from the outset. It therefore seems that a second solution is more likely: only one who passionately loves Torah will be willing to sacrifice on its behalf. Seen from this perspective, love and toil are truly two sides of the same coin.

**Torah and Freedom**

In concluding our discussion of toil, enjoyment and Torah study, let us briefly examine the famous statement of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: “There is none who is free but one who engages in Torah study” (*Avot* 6:2). In light of the toil demanded of the Torah student and the rigorous demands of a halakhic lifestyle, how is it that the student of Torah is considered free?

Many answers have been offered, and they complement nicely our discussion above. Rav Kook (*Orot Ha-emuna*), in line with his general view that Torah study enables our deepest individuality to emerge (see our discussion of *Torah lishmah* in the fifth *shiur* in this series), offers a powerful reading. Precisely because Torah study is meant not to stifle individual creativity but to enhance it, engagement with Torah is a profoundly liberating experience.

Our earlier discussion (in our fourth *shiur*) of Rav Soloveitchik’s reading of Torah study as a quasi-Platonic recapturing of one’s deeper identity dovetails nicely with Rav Kook’s approach. If by engaging in *talmud Torah* one recovers one’s inner self, it is fair to view Torah study as a liberating experience.

In light of our earlier discussion in this *shiur*, as well as a careful reading of this statement, we may suggest an alternative reading. Note that *Birkhot Ha-Torah* speak of the directive “to engage in words of Torah” — toiling, as the commentators point out. The blessing is recited not just on the mitzva of Torah study, but upon a more intensive, all-encompassing engagement with the text. Similarly, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, we may suggest, posits that in-depth study is the key to liberation. One who studies without full-fledged intellectual and emotional engagement is likely to find the experience of study stifling; one who is fully engaged in the process, however, will find the experience to be one of renewal and inspiration. The toil of *talmud Torah*, properly conceived, generates the sublime enjoyment captured in this paradoxical maxim.

1. <http://etzion.org.il/en/reflections-upon-birkot-hatorah> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For additional sources and perspectives regarding the importance of intensive toil in Torah study, see R. Michael Rosensweig’s “Intensity in Torah Study,” <https://www.torahweb.org/torah/2009/parsha/rros_bechukotai.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For an elaboration, see R. Yitzchak Blau, “The Enjoyment of Torah Study according to Rav Hutner,” [http://etzion.org.il/en/enjoyment-torah-study-according-r-hutner](http://etzion.org.il/en/joy-torah-study-according-r-hutner). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)