YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

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**Shiur *#15: Iyun* and *Bekiut***

Last week, we examined the issue of autonomy in the curriculum of *talmud Torah*. This week, we turn to a key question regarding the proper method for learning: quantity or quality, *iyun* (in-depth analysis) versus *bekiut* (broad familiarity with large swaths of data). While many *sugyot* touch on this question, we will focus our attention on a particularly stimulating set of sources.

*Chazal* posit two different paradigms of the Torah scholar. One classic formulation of this dichotomy appears in *Avot* 2:8:

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai had five students: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yosei the Priest, Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel and Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh.

He would recount their praises:

“Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos is a pit covered in plaster that does not lose a drop.

“Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya--happy is the one who gave birth to him!

“Rabbi Yosei the Priest is pious.

“Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel fears sin.

“And Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh is an ever-strengthening fountain.”

[Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai] used to say: If all the sages of Israel were on one side of a balance scale, and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos were on the other side, [Rabbi Eliezer] would outweigh them all.

Abba Shaul said in his name that if all the sages of Israel, including Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos, were on one side of a balance scale, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh were on the other side, [Rabbi Elazar] would outweigh them all.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos and Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh are archetypal: the former represents wide-ranging erudition, while Rabbi Elazar innovates; his distinction lies not in encyclopedic knowledge of the text but in his creative analytical abilities. The Mishna does not express a preference, implying that both methods are important and neither is to be valued above the other.

However, the Talmud (*Horayot* 14a; cf. *Berakhot* 64a) explicitly asks the question of which is preferable: a Sinai,[[1]](#footnote-1) who knows all the texts by heart, or an *oker harim,* one who uproots the mountains and grinds them against each other via innovative analysis?

Rabbi Yochanan says: There was a difference of opinion between Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel and the Rabbis; one said that a Sinai is preferable, while the other said that *oker harim* is preferable.

Rav Yosef was a Sinai; Rabba was an *oker harim*.

They sent a question to [the Land of Israel]: Who of these should take precedence? They sent them word in reply: A Sinai is preferable, for the Master has said, “All are dependent on the owner of the wheat.”

Rav Yosef, nevertheless, did not accept the office. Rabba was dean for twenty-two years and only after this period did Rav Yosef take up the office. Throughout the years of Rabba's service. Rav Yosef would not call to his house even a blood-letter.

Abbayei, Rava, Rabbi Zeira and Rabba bar Matana sat studying together and felt the need to appoint a leader. They agreed that whoever could present an irrefutable argument would become their leader. The statements of all of them were refuted, except for that of Abbayei. When Rava saw that Abbayei held up his head, he called out to him: “Nachmani, begin and say something.”

Sinai and *oker harim* in *Horayot* seem to parallel the cistern and fountain in *Avot*. Moreover, as in the case of the Mishna, the Gemara’s conclusion regarding the question of Sinai versus *oker harim* remains somewhat opaque as a matter of practical *halakha*. On the one hand, the Gemara unambiguously states that a Sinai is preferred, because “All are dependent on the owner of the wheat,” meaning that without the raw materials necessary for study, it is impossible to engage in dialectics. Indeed, Tosafot (*Eruvin* 40a, s.v. *A-data*; see also *Chavot Yair* 94) take for granted that Sinai is preferable. Nonetheless, in the following line, the Gemara indicates that Rav Yosef, the Sinai, declined the position of dean until Rabba, the *oker harim*, left the position. Moreover, the subsequent story, in which the group appoints Abbayei its head owing to their inability to refute his words, also seems to prize analytical prowess over mastery of content.

A few relevant insights among the commentaries speak to the question of the relative merit of the Sinai and the *oker harim*. Meiri (s.v. *Harei*) clarifies that a Sinai should not be entirely lacking in analytical aptitude. Even a Sinai must understand how to properly extrapolate the *halakha*. Mere book knowledge leads to incorrect conclusions and erroneous rulings. Therefore, a Sinai too must possess the ability to compare and contrast different cases. Similarly, an *oker harim* must know the fundamental sources. However, the Sinai’s greater talents lie in breadth of knowledge, whereas the *oker harim* has unusual analytical capacity. Meiri draws the two categories closer to one another, making the important if intuitive point that all agree that a combination of knowledge and analysis are needed; the only question in the Gemara concerns the precise balance between them.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Seeking to resolve a different tension, Rav Yissakhar Ber Eilenburg (*Be’er Sheva, Horayot,* s.v. *Ve-im tomar*) offers an interesting approach to our *sugya*. He points to an apparent contradiction between our *sugya’s* stated preference for the Sinai and two other *sugyot*.

Rava says: When a person is brought in for judgement, one is asked:

Did you deal faithfully?

Did you fix times for Torah [study]?

Did you engage in procreation?

Did you hope for salvation?

Did you debate with wisdom?

Did you derive one thing from another? (*Shabbat* 31a)

Resh Lakish was marking the burial vaults of the Rabbis. But when he came to the grave of Rabbi Chiya, it was hidden from him, whereupon he experienced a sense of humiliation. “Sovereign of the Universe!” he exclaimed, “did I not debate the Torah as he did?” (*Bava Metzia* 85b)

In both cases, *pilpul* (scholarly debate) seems to be of paramount importance. Why then does the first passage tell us Sinai is preferable?

Rav Eilenburg answers that there is a distinction to be drawn between the objective importance of a particular skillset and the reward one receives for that mode of study. *Horayot* 14a focuses on the skills necessary to rule in matters of Halakha. In this respect, Sinai is preferred, because one cannot issue rulings without a broad knowledge base. The other passages, however, address the reward one receives for study. Thus, the Gemara suggests that one receives greater reward for the self-sacrifice of intensive, in-depth study.

Netziv (*Meromei Sadeh,* s.v. *Peligu*) adds another important insight. Rav Yosef declines initially, he explains, because a Sinai takes precedence only when no *oker harim* is present. If both are present, however, the *oker harim* takes precedence, as the dialectician can bank on the Sinai’s knowledge to arrive at the proper conclusion. The Sinai, on the other hand, does not stand to benefit nearly as much from the presence of the *oker harim*, as the Sinai lacks the analytical tools to find creative solutions. Thus, Rav Yosef opts not to serve as dean so long as Rabba is available.

In addition to helping to resolve an otherwise enigmatic passage, Netziv’s comments foreshadow a fascinating contemporary debate. One might contend that the Gemara’s question, or at least its apparent conclusion that Sinai is to be preferred, only applies at a time when many *halakhot* are still preserved primarily in oral fashion. Nowadays, however, the landscape has changed dramatically. Halakhic study has shifted from oral to written form; in the classic formulation of Dr. Haym Soloveitchik, the mimetic tradition has become a textual tradition. We have seen dramatic changes in the mass dissemination of information, first with the introduction of the printing press in the 15th century, leading to the compilation of halakhic information in authoritative compendia such as *Shulchan Arukh*. Technology has continually advanced until the present day, with the Internet revolution; perhaps all would agree that the *oker harim* is to be preferred now. Put in the terms of Netziv, every contemporary student of Torah operates in the presence of a Sinai, which appears in the form of books and online resources.

Indeed, this line of thinking goes back to the nineteenth century*. Pri Megadim* (ibid.) cites *Eliya Rabba*’s ruling (in the name of *Knesset Ha-gedola*) that a halakhic authority has precedence over a scholar of great analytical prowess to receive an *aliya* to the Torah. *Pri Megadim* explains the reasoning based on *Horayot* 14a: a Sinai is preferred to an *oker harim*. Rav Shelomo Kluger (*Hagahot* to *Eshel Avraham,* *OC* 136) demurs:

In my opinion there is no proof from the Gemara, for in their time there were no printed books, which is why Sinai was preferred. Now, however, since after a bit of research one is able to find that which one seeks, and the reasoning that ““All are dependent on the owner of the wheat” is no longer pertinent, the *oker harim* is preferred…

Rav Kluger connects this *sugya* to *Avot* 2:8, which we saw above. Interestingly, HaRav Amital[[3]](#footnote-3) was wont to approvingly cite this comment of Rav Shelomo Kluger (and I have heard others cite HaRav Lichtenstein as having maintained the same view), adding that the matter is all the more true in our times of Internet searches and Bar-Ilan University’s Responsa Project.

Rav Ovadya Yosef (Introduction to *Yabia Omer*; *Yabia Omer* 7:1:8), however, thoroughly rejects the above argument of Rav Kluger, citing a litany of Acharonim, including Maharic (167), Rivash (271) and others in support of his view that the Sinai remains superior nowadays. He goes so far as to claim that Rav Kluger’s position is merely that there is no clear proof from the Gemara, but even he would agree that as a matter of practical *halakha*, the Sinai is preferred.

This, of course, is related to Rav Ovadya’s larger methodological position concerning the best approach to halakhicrulings. Instead of focusing on *pilpul* regarding the opinions of the Rishonim (a style endorsed by others, such as Rav Moshe Feinstein), Rav Ovadya maintains that after the compilation of *Shulchan Arukh,* our primary responsibility is to clarify the position of the Mechabber and the views of later authorities. In adopting this approach, Rav Ovadya champions what he views as the traditional Sephardic approach to halakhic rulings, both in terms of privileging consensus over analysis and assigning greater weight to the positions of *Maran* — i.e. the Mechabber.

What is more, for Rav Ovadya, this is part of a larger polemic regarding the purpose of *talmud Torah* and the most appropriate methodology. As Rav Ovadya emphasizes the importance of learning aimed at establishing the practical halakha, he is an outspoken critic of the tendency of Ashkenazic *yeshivot* to focus on theoretical tractates and areas of study. It is therefore entirely consistent that Rav Ovadya insists that the Sinai remains paramount, contrary to the view of Rav Shelomo Kluger.

From Rav Ovadya’s perspective, in other words, the question of *iyun* and *bekiut* is not just an independent question related to *talmud Torah*. Rather, as with so many other subjects we have encountered, it ultimately hinges on the purpose we assign to the mitzva of Torah study.

1. Rashi explains that the material is as clear to the scholar as the day on which the Torah was given at Sinai. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also Rav Gil Student, <http://www.torahmusings.com/2011/01/technology-and-sinai/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Heard on *Yom Ha-atzmaut* 5759 at Yeshivat Har Etzion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)