YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

**By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

**Shiur #17: Private versus Public *Talmud Torah***

Up to this point, we have focused our attention on the individual requirement of Torah study. It is worth exploring, however, whether there is any evidence of a communal facet of this mitzva.

Perhaps the most relevant source regarding this question is the Gemara in *Megilla* 3a-3b.

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: The priests at their [Temple] service, the Levites on their platform, the lay Israelites at their station — all desist from their service in order to hear the reading of the *Megilla*.

It has been taught to the same effect: Priests at their [Temple] service, Levites on their platform, lay Israelites at their station — all desist from their service in order to come and hear the reading of the *Megilla*.

It was in reliance on this dictum that the members of the house of Rabbi were wont to desist from the study of the Torah in order to come and hear the reading of the *Megilla*. They argued a fortiori from the case of the [Temple] service. If the service, which is so important, may be abandoned, how much more the study of the Torah?

But is the [Temple] service more important than the study of the Torah? Surely it is written, “And it came to pass when Yehoshua was by Yericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold there stood a man over against him…” He said to him: Towards evening you neglected the regular afternoon sacrifice, and now you have neglected the study of the Torah.

Yehoshua replied: In regard to which of them have you come?

He answered, “I have come now.”

Straightway, Yehoshua tarried that night in the midst of the valley [*emek*], and R. Yochanan said: This shows that he tarried in the depth [*omek*] of Halakha.

And R. Samuel b. Onia also said: The study of the Torah is greater

than the offering of the daily sacrifices, as it says. “I have come

now.”

Still, there is no contradiction; in the one case the study of the individual is meant, in the other the study of the many.

The fact that the angel stresses that “I have come now,” i.e. in response to the neglect of Torah study at night rather than the neglect of the afternoon offering, indicates that Torah study is more important. This would seem to undermine the reasoning of the school of Rabbi, which assumes that service in the Temple would be more significant. The Gemara answers by distinguishing between private and public Torah study: the former gives way to the Temple service, while the latter takes precedence over the *korbanot*. This Gemara indicates that there is a qualitative difference between public and private study.

What logic underlies this distinction? Most simply understood, from a purely quantitative standpoint, the more people that learn, the greater that event’s significance. When set in comparison with a mitzva such as reading the *Megilla*, communal Torah study is simply too weighty to be set aside for another mitzva.

On the basis of this explanation, we can appreciate a somewhat puzzling halakhic position. Tashbetz (*Responsa* 1:64, cited by Rabbi Akiva Eger, *OC* 687) rules that one who studies with children need not interrupt his learning to hear the *Megilla*, as teaching a class is treated like public Torah study. He bases this ruling on the statement of Rabbi Yehuda Nesi’a quoted by Reish Lakish that “the world only exists due to the breath (Torah study) of schoolchildren,” and that we do not interrupt their study even for the construction of the Temple (*Shabbat* 119b). This ruling can be best understood if we assume that the privilege granted to public Torah study is due to its great importance. According to this logic, a child’s learning, which is viewed as an existential matter, similarly overrides the mitzva of reading the *Megilla*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This makes Rambam’s ruling (*Hilkhot Megilla* 1:1) quite curious:

Everyone is obligated in this reading: men, women, converts, and freed slaves. Children should also be trained to read it. Even the priests should neglect their service in the Temple and come to hear the reading of the *Megilla*.

Similarly, Torah study should be neglected to hear the reading of the *Megilla*. Surely, this applies to the other *mitzvot* of the Torah: the observance of all of them is superseded by the reading of the *Megilla*.

Rambam omits the distinction between private and public Torah study, implying that he rejects this distinction. *Lechem Mishneh* (ad loc.) and others question this position. *Derisha* (to *Tur* OC 687) and *Magen Avraham* (*OC* 687:1) explain that the public Torah study of *Megilla* 3b does not mean that a number of individuals come together to study, but that the entire nation engages in learning. This is the scenario in the case of Yehoshua, who is responsible for teaching the entire nation. Only in such a situation does Torah study take precedence over reading the *Megilla*. Indeed, Rashi (3b s.v. *Ha*), Rabbeinu Chananel (ad loc.), Ran (2b, Rif) and Rabbi Avraham min Ha-har (3b) all emphasize that the Gemara refers to a situation in which the entire nation studies simultaneously. For this reason, *Derisha* and *Magen Avraham* conclude, Rambam omits this law: in the time of the Diaspora, it is no longer feasible for the entirety of the Jewish people to study at once. Thus, the law is no longer practically applicable, and Rambam sees no need to codify the distinction between private and public study.

In light of this redefinition of “public Torah study,” how are we to understand the importance of the entire nation learning Torah together? Some have suggested that the learning of the nation denotes not just Torah study but the transmission of the Jewish tradition. By studying publicly, we ensure the perpetuation of the tradition to the next generation. This takes effect only when the entire nation studies as one.

We may, however, take this suggestion one step further: perhaps public Torah study is nothing less than a reenactment of the Revelation at Sinai. While, generally speaking, one must set aside *talmud Torah* to hear the *Megilla*, if the Jewish nation is reenacting the events of Sinai, we dare not abandon that powerful moment to perform another mitzva, no matter how important. What is more, if this thesis is correct, we may compare national Torah study to a particular instance in which the community comes together to read the Torah in public: *Keriat Ha-Torah* of *Shabbatot*, holidays, Mondays and Thursdays.

There are, indeed, numerous indications that *Keriat Ha-Torah* reenacts the Revelation at Sinai, as Rav Shemuel bar Rav Yitzchak (Yerushalmi *Megilla* 4:1) teaches that the one who reads the Aramaic translation (as was the custom during the Talmudic period) must stand up straight, not leaning, “just as the Torah was given in an atmosphere of fear and reverence.” Similarly, he rebukes a reader for translating as well, for “just as it was given through an intermediary [Moshe], so we must have an intermediary for it.”

Rav Soloveitchik develops this argument, contending that public Torah reading constitutes not just public study, but also a rendezvous with the Divine, much as our forefathers experienced at Sinai. Rav Soloveitchik uses this to explain Maharam’s classic position that one should stand during Torah reading (cited by Rema*,* *OC* 146:4).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Rav Soloveitchik further notes the striking parallels between our obligation and that of *Hakhel*, the septennial national reading. As Rambam (*Hilkhot Chagiga* 3:6) indicates, Hakhel is also a reenactment of *Matan Torah*. Here too, the goal is to educate and inspire the nation in their love and reverence for God, as well as their commitment to *mitzvot*.

Thus, *Megilla* 3b points to a fundamental dimension of Torah study. Properly understood, *talmud Torah* encompasses two elements: the obligation to study per se and the historical consciousness of Sinai that is present when the entire nation gathers to learn. Even if national Torah study can no longer be literally fulfilled as in the time of Yehoshua, it still constitutes a crucial motif in our larger discussion of *talmud Torah*.

1. The importance of public Torah study is also highlighted by the view of *Be’er Sheva* (*Sota* 33a*,* 41a) and *Mishkenot Ya’akov* (Responsum 60), who maintain that when Rav Yehuda (*Berakhot* 21a) establishes that *Birkhot Ha-Torah* are a biblical obligation, he speaks only of a case of public Torah reading. Private Torah study, according to this view, requires a blessing only due to rabbinic legislation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Shiurim Le-zekher Abba Mori z”l*, Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: *Mossad Ha-Rav Kook*, 2005), pp. 227-230ֿ. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)