YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

UNDERSTANDING AGGADA

By Rav Yitzchak Blau

In Loving Memory of
Jeffrey Paul Friedman z"l
August 15, 1968 – July 29, 2012
לע"נ יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל ז"ל
כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

Shiur #2: The Integration of Study and Prayer

Abbaye taught: I used to learn in my house and pray in the synagogue. Since I heard that R. Chiyya bar Ami taught in the name of Ulla, "From the day that the Temple was destroyed, God only has in this world the four cubits of Halakha," I pray only in the place where I learn. (*Berakhot* 8a)

Abbaye said: I used to learn at home and pray at the synagogue. Since I heard what David said, "Hashem, I loved the abode of your home" (Tehillim 26:8), I now learn in the synagogue. (*Megilla* 29a)

Several commentators notice the contradiction in Abbaye's two statements - one calls for moving prayer to the study hall and the other advocates moving learning to the synagogue - and suggested various resolutions. Some differentiate between the scholar, whose full-time spiritual home is the study hall, and the common Jew, whose central religious location is the synagogue (see *Arukh Ha-shulchan*, *Orach Chayim* 90:22). *Turei Even* understands these two statements to reflect two opposing traditions, and therefore they need not be reconciled. Yet whatever approach one takes as to the contradiction, these two statements clearly share a certain value. They both assert the need for praying and learning to be integrated and not bifurcated. What do study and prayer represent, and what is accomplished in the union of the two?

R. Zadok Hakohen of Lublin understands the combination in an interesting way (*Zidkat Ha-tzaddik* 211). For R. Zadok, prayer represents human dependency. The religious individual turns to God in prayer to express his needs, and is thereby reminded of human frailty and dependence on the Divine. Torah, on the other hand, reflects human self-sufficiency. The learned individual can utilize the Torah as a guide to life, without making explicit reference to God. Indeed, the human role in interpreting Torah can lead to a feeling of assertive independence not balanced by a healthy sense of submission to the Divine.

Each of these two factors requires the balance provided by the other. A sense of independence devoid of submission lacks a basic aspect of religious life. Even if we do not accept Schliermacher's claim that the fundamental religious experience is one of dependence, we can still assert that dependence reflects a crucial component of the religious experience. The truly devout are full of gratitude to God for creating and sustaining us, and accept His authority as He teaches us the road to a noble existence. At the same time, a dominant feeling of dependence can undermine the human activity and initiative necessary for religious success. The praying individual must also try human naturalistic methods for relieving distress, and is religiously irresponsible if he fails to do so. Thus, R. Zadok offers an intriguing view on the integration of prayer and study.

A more obvious approach might understand Abbaye as calling for a balance of intellect and emotion. While it remains true that prayer involves some cognitive understanding, and that study can be a powerful emotional experience, it still seems reasonable to identify the essence of prayer as residing in the affective aspect of life, and the essence of learning in the cognitive gesture. If so, we must analyze the need for this type of integration.

As mentioned, each activity depends somewhat on the coming together of intellect and emotion. A prayer devoid of serious thought will inevitably incorporate problematic conceptions of God or a shallow conception of religious life. For example, the praying individual might come to conceive of God as a capricious tyrant who responds well to flattery. Only a prayer purified by the intellectual element will allow for the emotional component to exert a powerful influence in a purified form. Conversely, study devoid of emotion becomes a dry intellectual endeavor that fails to foster a sense of connection with divinity. Furthermore, the study itself might generate erroneous conclusions when it does not take place in a context of awe and love for the divine word.

Beyond the issue of the optimum performance of prayer and study, the successful combination of intellect and emotion prevents religious extremism. This is obvious in the case of an emotion untouched by intellect. The powerful passion of religion can lead to immoral behavior when left unchecked. Pagan child sacrifice represents a prime example of this possibility. Recent history unfortunately provides several instances of violence fueled by religious passion. For an example closer to home, we might think of those whose love of tradition leads them to react too harshly to their less knowledgeable or less observant Jewish brethren.

Less obvious is the possibility that intellect devoid of emotion can also engender extreme behavior. In a talk delivered in 1974, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik articulated just such a possibility. It is well known that the Rav evaluated himself as being far more successful in teaching students how to learn than in teaching them the depths of religious experience (see, for example, his comments in "*Al Ahavat Ha-Torah U-geulat Nefesh Ha-dor*"). In the 1974 talk, he reiterated this idea and linked it with the extremism of his students.

I will tell you frankly, the American *ben Torah* or good yeshiva student has achieved great heights on an intellectual level. However, experientially, he is simply immature. When it comes to Jewish religious experience, people of thirty and even forty years of age are immature. They act like children and experience religion like children. As a result, Jewish youth is inclined and very disposed to accept extremist views. They do this to such an extent that my own students examine my *tzitzit* to see whether they are long enough. The youth is very pious but also very inconsiderate. Sometimes they drive matters to an absurdity. Why? Because they have no experience. (R. Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav*,vol. 2, pp. 238-239)

For an illustration of what the Rav means, imagine a young student who chooses to spend almost the entire Rosh Hashana afternoon listening to every type of *shofar* blast imaginable in order to insure fulfillment of this mitzva. From an intellectual standpoint, this position can be easily justified. After all, hearing (or blowing) the *shofar* is a biblical mitzva and eating lunch with one's family or learning Torah are mitzvot that can be minimized on this day, if not pushed off for another time altogether. It is only a healthy sense of the emotional and experiential components of Rosh Hashana that prevents this conclusion. The totality of the day's experience requires festivity and awe, seclusion and sociability, and cannot be achieved by sole dedication to a particular mitzva, however significant.

The extremism generated by pure logic is encapsulated in Samuel Butler's comment that "Only the extremes are logical, but they are absurd." It is easier to remain logically consistent when one has the same answer to every question and the same approach to every problem. Of course, this logical consistency comes at the expense of ignoring subtlety, nuance, context and the balance of opposing values. A robust emotional life prevents an obsession with a narrow logical line of thought.

Thus, in two brief talmudic statements, Abbaye imparts an important message about the need to integrate prayer and study, humility and independence, and intellect and emotion.