YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

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**Shiur #24: The Personal Quality of Torah**

“But whose desire is for God’s Torah” (*Tehillim* 1:2). Rabbi said: “A man can learn [well] only that part of the Torah which is his heart's desire, for it is said, ‘But whose desire is for God’s Torah.’” Levi and R. Shimon, the son of Rabbi, were once sitting before Rabbi and were expounding a part of Scripture. When the book was concluded, Levi said: “Let *Mishlei* now be brought.” R. Shimon the son of Rabbi, however, said: “Let *Tehillim* be brought.” They overruled Levi and brought *Tehillim*. When they came to this verse, “But whose desire is for God’s Torah,” Rabbi offered his comment: “One can only learn well that part of the Torah which is his heart's desire.” Levi remarked: “Rabbi, You have given me the right to rise.”

R. Avdimi the son of Chama said: “He who occupies himself with the Torah will have his desires granted by the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is said: He who [is occupied] with God's Torah, his desire [shall be granted].”

Rava likewise said: “One should always study that part of the Torah which is his heart's desire, as it is said, ‘But whose desire is for God’s Torah.’” And Rava said: “At the beginning, the Torah is assigned to the Holy One, blessed be He, but at the end it is assigned to the person [who studies it], for it is said, ‘Whose desire is for God’s Torah, and he meditates on his [own] Torah day and night.’” (*Avoda Zara* 19a)

The second verse in the book of *Tehillim* mentions desire in the context of Torah. According to several explanations, this verse conveys that Torah study works best when a student follows his or her inclination in learning, and is motivated and excited to learn. Rabbi and Rava seem to have similar ideas, but the former says “*mi’makom she’libo chafetz*” (from the place that his heart desires) and the latter says “*be’makom she’libo chafet*z” (in the place that his heart desires). Maharsha explains that Rabbi refers to the inclination to study a specific work. The Talmudic story in which Levi applies Rabbi’s interpretation to his own frustrated desire to study *Mishlei*, when he is forced to study *Tehillim* instead, supports this interpretation. Rava, on the other hand, speaks about the desire to study with a specific teacher.

Ben Yehoyada makes a different distinction between the teachings of Rabbi and Rava. Rava adds the word “*le’olam,*” conveying that a person should *always* study that part of Torah which is his heart’s desire. According to Ben Yehoyada, Rabbi applied the principle only to a person learning independently, presumably because such a person does not need to balance his own needs and desires with those of other students. Rava extends the concept even to an individual learning in a group context. Ben Yehoyada does not address the practicality of a group dynamic in which each person insists on getting his way, but his comment still underscores the importance of individual choice in education. .

According to each interpretation, the Gemara grants great weight to personal inclination. When I converse with students, sometimes they think that the *mitzva* of Talmud Torah includes an extremely precise and detailed educational curriculum. Such students express surprise when I ask them which aspect of study they most enjoy, a question which assumes that inclination plays a role in educational decisions. While we clearly must balance personal preference with the need for basic and broad Torah knowledge, Rabbi and Rava instruct us to take student inclination seriously, both regarding choice of work and choice of instructor.

The Levi story humorously underscores this point. Why did Rabbi endorse his son’s choice over that of Levi? Maharsha explains that *Tehillim* precedes *Mishlei* in the order of Scripture in *Bava Batra* 14b. Secondly, *Mishlei* represents wisdom, whereas *Tehillim* exemplifies fear of heaven, and we know that fear of heaven should precede wisdom. Whatever the reason for the decision, this small group of one teacher and two students start *Tehillim* and immediately encounter (based on the second verse they study) Rabbi’s idea that education works best when students study the work of their choice. At which point, Levi declares that he has a right to leave. I assume that Levi did not leave; rather, all three chuckled and then moved on to the third verse of *Tehillim*. Nonetheless, the educational point is made.

R. Yaakov Reisher (*Iyyun Yaakov*) comments that the necessity for the “left hand pushing away while the right hand brings close” (*Sota* 47a) applies even to the evil inclination. The first verse in *Tehillim* praises the person who does not follow the counsel of the wicked and who avoids the gathering of scorners, a person who does not blindly follow appetite and inclination. The second verse, which links desire with Torah, endorses inclination. The same person who subdues inclination regarding more mundane pursuits, lets inclination have freer reign in the world of Torah study. While R. Reisher phrases this idea in terms of the *yetzer ha-ra*, one could formulate the point in a more positive fashion. There is nothing selfish about being drawn to a particular aspect of Torah, since that specific drive and connection reflects an authentic connection to God’s word. Thus, this *gemara* endorses inclination, but a highly positive one, not a *yetzer ha-ra*.

A later section of the *gemara* says that the Torah first belongs to God, and then the person studying Torah takes ownership of it through the process of study. Maharal connects the idea of “*libo chafetz*” with the concept of making Torah one’s own. After all, both ideas appear in the same Talmudic discussion, and both emerge from exegesis of the same verse in *Tehillim*. If we value personalizing and internalizing Torah, then we should also enable a certain freedom of choice for those studying. Personalization does not work smoothly with a curriculum fully coerced from above; it depends upon finding one’s own place in the world of Torah based on proclivity and free choice.

In what sense does this acquisition of ownership take place? *Anaf Yosef* connects our source with a *gemara* (*Berakhot* 35a) about *birkot ha-nehenin* (blessings on deriving benefit) which says that the world belongs to God until we make a blessing, and then belongs to us after the blessing. God allows humanity to achieve ownership of an apple or Torah once we acknowledge, through the medium of blessing, that God provides us with the raw materials. This interpretation appears difficult since *Avoda Zara* 19a says nothing about making a *birkat ha-Torah* (blessing on the Torah).

R. Reisher suggests a potential resolution to the conflict between “God’s Torah” and our Torah; the former relates to the written Torah, whereas the latter refers to the oral law. Certainly, the oral law incorporates far more human contributions, and it makes sense to speak of that component of Torah as belonging to humanity. Nonetheless, the Gemara seems to speak of the same Torah undergoing a transfer of title. In R. Reisher’s approach, each phrase speaks of distinct aspects of Torah, not of one Torah whose ownership changes over time.

We could accept R. Reisher’s idea about the creative human element in Torah study, without drawing the same dividing lines. When a person gives a novel interpretation of a verse in *Shemot*, he makes that verse his own in a profound fashion. At first, he simply encounters information at the surface of the Divine Torah. Striving to comprehend the depth of Torah and arriving at new insights enables a person to make the Torah his or her own.

Yet we should not identify the personalization of Torah solely with coming up with an idea never said before. R. Shalom Carmy makes an important distinction between creativity and originality:

Being original entails saying something that nobody has said before…Creativity, by contrast, reflects the inner experience of the individual overcoming a challenge. Creativity is not diminished when one achieves “by strength and submission,” what has already been discovered, “by men whom one cannot hope to emulate.” To contend with a *sugya* (Gemara passage) or a passage of *Tanakh* and forge in the smithy of one’s consciousness the same understanding that animated Ramban or Seforno or R. Shimon Shkop, is a triumph of human creativity. (*Tradition* Winter 2000, p. 26)

A person who fully appreciates and internalizes an interpretation of Ramban engages in a creative and personalizing process, even though the idea has circulated for centuries. In a deep sense, he makes this Torah his own.

Malbim on *Tehillim* identifies God’s Torah with the world of study, and our Torah with the world of practice. Indeed, human individuality is often made manifest in the application of Torah ideals to the unique issues involved in a particular human life. Orthodox Judaism certainly believes in a good deal of Divinely and rabbinically mandated rules and structure. At the same time, this Talmudic source emphasizes the great value we grant to personal voices, individual inclination, and human creativity. In the realms of both study and practice, we strive to make the Torah our own.