YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SHAVUOT**

**R. Yehuda Amital on Torah Study**

**By Dr. Aharon Ahrend[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

My mentor, R. Yehuda Amital *zt”l* (1925-2010), served at the head of Yeshivat Har Etzion Hesder Yeshiva in Alon Shevut for some forty years.[[2]](#footnote-2) His views on Torah study and the world of the *yeshiva* remain fascinating and relevant even years after his passing.

**The Importance of Torah Study**

R. Amital often spoke of the importance of studying Torah in our times.[[3]](#footnote-3) In his view, it was essential for every person – even the most simple – to be a *talmid chakham*, a diligent scholar of the Oral Law, and not settle for less by declaring, "I am not a learned person."

The situation today is different from that of the past for several reasons:

1) People today are far more exposed to the outside world and the media than in the past. There is therefore a need to reinforce their fear of heaven, which is done by studying Torah.[[4]](#footnote-4)

2) Nowadays, people have far more free time than in the past, and when time is not devoted to Torah, it is spent on other things.

3) In the secular environment in which we live, confrontations with the secular world constantly arise in the realms of faith, devotion, and religious practice, often even without our awareness. Therefore, one must be armed with strong intellectual weapons based on the Torah.

4) Many people today acquire professions through intensive intellectual endeavor. Therefore, worshipping God as expressed through studying Torah must also be done in an intellectually rigorous way. R. Amital put it this way:

In a world in which the importance of the intellect is so significant, it is inconceivable for people to fulfill their obligation simply by studying something such as the *daf yomi* (daily installment of Talmud study), which does not require significant intellectual effort. The brain, our intellectual strength, is man's most important organ. Can we make do with worshipping the Lord only with our hands, with our limbs—say, by taking a *shofar* in hand and blowing it with our mouth, or by laying *tefillin*, or eating *matza*—while the brain alone sits aside and is not used for worshipping the Holy One?...Are we to reserve our intellect, our mind, for our careers, solely for pursuing academic degrees, while leaving worship of the Lord to be done only by the remaining parts of our body?...In an era in which such great effort is invested in various fields of study, should not the most important organ be just as involved [in Torah study]?! Worship of the Lord in our day will not endure if those who maintain it are not well-educated in Torah. Serious religious life is impossible without thorough intellectual training in the Torah.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Regarding the need to attract young people to studying Torah, R. Amital noted, among other things, the importance of parents setting an example to their children:

The school is a marginal factor in education. Children must receive from the home! One cannot put the entire burden on the school. So what is the father's part in studying Torah? Not to ask his child, "Come, let us study together." Rather, children must see their father devoting every spare moment to study. Then they will know to value Torah study, and this is the main point.[[6]](#footnote-6)

R. Amital believed that women are obligated to study Torah as well. Citing Maimonides’ statement (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, pos. command 5), "And to worship Him (*Devarim* 11:3)—this means to study," R. Amital concluded:

From this we may conclude that in Maimonides' opinion, Torah study fulfills not only the commandment of "teach them to your children" (*Devarim* 11:19), but also the commandment of worshipping the Lord. In view of this, it appears that also women, who are exempt from the command of Torah study, in our day are obligated to study Torah in fulfillment of the command to worship the Lord, for as we said, a central component of worshipping the Lord especially in our times is Torah study, which is worshipping the Lord with our intellect.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**What Should be Studied?**

R. Amital stressed the importance of studying the Talmud over other disciplines in Judaism:

The foundation is the Oral Law. It contains a special mystery, a magical quality. By studying the Oral Law, a person comes in contact with the Holy One, blessed be He…No one understands this mysterious quality, but anyone who attempts a different path, basing their study primarily on philosophy, Bible, or other subjects, ultimately will fail. Everything—from faith, to Torah, fear of Heaven, and love of the commandments—is founded on the Oral Law. Afterwards one must add *aggada* and ethics, Scripture and philosophy.[[8]](#footnote-8)

R. Amital was especially fond of responsa literature.[[9]](#footnote-9) In a discourse that he once gave before the semester break, he suggested that his students spend their vacation studying responsa literature, since this body of writing is particularly interesting and arouses curiosity; the students sees how questions are dealt with, on what responses are based, and what rulings are issued.

In R. Amital's view, one should be open-minded regarding areas of study; a student who has spent several years studying the Talmud and has seen that his personality inclines him towards a different field of Torah should be helped to find his own particular path in Jewish study.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Diligence**

R. Amital encouraged his students to be diligent in their Torah studies. Once, addressing students before they left for vacation, he expressed reservation about seeking adventures, saying that there was no need to look for dangerous opportunities.[[11]](#footnote-11) Then he tapped his hand on the volumes of Talmud lying before him and said, "Whoever wants a challenge for the break – here, let him study the Six Orders of the Mishnah."

When he described the lives of great rabbis, he generally noted how constantly they studied. For example, he told the following story about R. Shlomo Goren (1918-1995):

He used to sit in the *Beit Midrash* (of the Gur *Chasidim*, in Jerusalem's Geulah neighborhood) day and night, studying. His mother would bring him a thermos of tea and several slices of bread, and he would continue studying. His diligence was most extraordinary. Stories circulated about him dipping his feet into cold water so that he would not fall asleep but could continue studying. He studied incessantly…Once there was a family who had suffered a tragedy and needed his intervention to prevent an autopsy from being done...The time was 2:30 a.m., and the family refrained from calling him due to the late hour. Finally, after much hesitation, one of them got up the courage to dial his number. Not even two seconds had passed before R. Goren picked up the phone. It turned out that he was still awake, sitting up and studying.[[12]](#footnote-12)

R. Amital accorded great importance to Torah study in the context of the army. He once succeeded in convincing the commander of a regiment to permit his soldiers one free hour a day for studying Torah.[[13]](#footnote-13) In his description of Sariel Bierenbaum *z"l*, who fell in the Yom Kippur War, R. Amital recounted how he continued studying even on the night after the war broke out:

Everyone rushed to report for duty and assembled at the designated meeting point. The place was dimly lit, men and soldiers running around and calling out names. Then, at that very place, Sariel sat down on his backpack along with a friend and opened the *gemara* to read it in the dim light until his name was called.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**The *Yeshiva* Student**

R. Amital used to say that a person who comes to the *yeshiva* must leave behind the norms of the outside world—superficiality, the media culture, low-level spirituality—and must enter "inwards" to another spiritual world, struggling against mediocrity, adopting a different scale of values, and aspiring to become a *talmid chakham*, a wise scholar of the Oral Law.

Evil inclinations can come to the *beit midrash* from several directions. For example, a student who does not believe he is capable of doing well in his studies might be inclined to "be humble," and this can lead to low self-esteem and mediocrity. A student might be lazy in applying himself fully to trying to understand the Talmudic question being studied. Students must aspire to substantial achievements in their studies, and when a question is difficult for them, they must work hard to understand every little point and not slack off. Each Jew has a "special letter" in the Torah, and it is our duty to find it.[[15]](#footnote-15) Furthermore, students must study out of a sense of responsibility to the *yeshiva* and its student body and must not be cut off from what is going on around them. In R. Amital's words:

Once I heard about someone who designed a unique synagogue in which the seats were arranged in such a way that each person only saw the open woodwork at the front of the prayer hall and could not see the others praying there. When asked why he made such a design, he explained that in prayer each person should commune only with the Holy One, blessed be He. This is a Christian approach, not the way things are in synagogues and *batei midrash*. In the *beit midrash*, each person can see all the others, looks at the others – not physically, but spiritually. A Jew must see his fellow, must have a sense of oneness, of mutual responsibility…One should not shut himself off with a page of *gemara* and build a wall around himself…If a youngster at the *yeshiva* underachieves due to social problems, it is the responsibility of each and every one of us.[[16]](#footnote-16)

R. Amital often noted that a person studying Torah should also see the needs of the Jewish People and should be involved in public service, notwithstanding the spiritual price such service entails.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**Spreading Knowledge of Torah**

Once, while he was teaching, R. Amital said that a person may sometimes derive pleasure and feel honored standing in front of his pupils and teaching, and he frankly admitted occasionally feeling that way himself.[[18]](#footnote-18) However, he thought that one should nevertheless continue teaching and not refrain from doing so out of apprehension about the respect that he will derive from it.

R. Amital believed that the length of the class should be adapted to the audience. On Friday night, he would customarily deliver a short sermon at the *yeshiva*, as he had noticed the audience falling asleep when Friday night sermons dragged on. R. Amital was critical of lengthy written sermons and disliked wordy, verbose writing. He rarely endorsed the books of others,[[19]](#footnote-19) and he wrote very little himself.[[20]](#footnote-20)

**A Bright Countenance**

R. Amital was of the opinion that those who study Torah should be happy and smiling; they should not go around with dark, gloomy faces. He said of R. Moshe Tzvi Neriah (1913-1996), head of Kfar Ha-Roeh Yeshiva:

When I first came to the land of Israel…I found the bright countenance of those studying Torah missing…the feeling of the Torah being "beautiful" missing. With all due respect to the *yeshiva* students whom I met, their faces generally seemed clouded over…But when I met R. Neriah, I discovered a world of beauty, a world of bright countenances. This was a new variety of Torah Jew, a person with openness, with good spirits. Not a defensive stance, but beautiful language, wonderful measured sentences. Revealed before my eyes I beheld the beauty of a Torah scholar…Many years ago, I was asked by R. Frank's son-in-law, R. Landau, "What did you see in R. Neriah?" I answered him: an aesthetic sense. He revealed to me the beauty of Torah, the loving kindness of Torah.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**The *Beit Midrash***

R. Amital was involved in the designing the handsome building of the Har Etzion Yeshiva and its surroundings. This involvement was related to his aesthetic sense, his concern for the *yeshiva* students, and his view that an aesthetic surrounding for studying Torah shows respect both for the Torah and for those who study it.[[22]](#footnote-22)

**Torah Study during the Night of Shavuot**

R. Amital especially valued the practice of studying all night on the night of the Shavuot, joining together with thousands of other Jews who maintain the practice, even though someone who sleeps at night and studies during the day may very well learn more than someone who stays up all night and then sleeps many hours during the day.

(Translated by Rachel Rowen; edited by Meira Mintz)

1. \* Our thanks to Dr. Ahrend and the Bar Ilan University *Parashat Ha-Shavua* Study Center for their permission to reprint this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the life of R. Amital, see Elyashiv Reichner, *Be-Emunato: Sippuro shel Ha-Rav Yehuda Amital* (Tel Aviv, 2008) [hereafter: *Be-Emunato*] [in English, see, [*By Faith Alone: The Story of Rabbi Yehuda Amital*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/159264192X/) (Jerusalem, 2012)]; [*Le-Ovdekha Be-Emet: Le-Demuto U-Le-Darkho shel Ha-Rav Yehuda Amital*](https://www.korenpub.com/maggid_en_usd/leavdecha-beemet.html), ed. Reuven Ziegler and Reuven Gafni (Jerusalem, 2011) [hereafter: *Le-Ovdekha be-Emet*]. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Y. Amital, "*Petachav shel Elul*," *Alon Shevut—Bogrim* 4 (1995), p. 38. See also idem. "*Talmud Torah*," *Daf Kesher* 700 (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On another occasion, he said: "In studying Torah, a person 'takes' the Holy One, blessed be He, along with him and forms a bond with Him. Even if we cannot explain exactly how such a relationship comes into being, history proves that without intensively occupying ourselves with Torah, nothing remains" (*Ve-Ha-Aretz Natan Le-Vnei Adam* [Alon Shevut, 2005], p. 46 [hereafter: *Ve-Ha-Aretz Natan*]). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Remarks in Response,” in *Le-Machashevet Ha-Chinukh Ha-Mamlakhti Dati* (Alon Shevut, 1984), p. 16. Incidentally, on the same occasion, he spoke out against minimizing the study of secular subjects and against the view that reducing the study of these subjects would enhance devoutness. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ve-Ha-Aretz Natan*, p. 45. Cf. *Be-Emunato*, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Petachav shel Elul*, p. 40. Cf. *Ve-Ha-Aretz Natan*, p. 46: "Courses in *gemara* can go on for twenty or thirty years, whereas classes in other subjects generally endure only for a year or two." [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. R. Yoel Ben-Nun, "*Mah Zeh 'Bachur Yeshiva*'?" *Le-Ovdekha Be-Emet*, p. 37, recounts hearing from R. Akiva Ha-Carmi that when R. Amital was studying at the Chevron Yeshiva, "he used to go to bed with a stack of responsa books and read them as if they were *belle lettres*." Cf. R. Yaakov Medan, "*Ein Le-Fached ela Mei-Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu*," ibid. p. 7; Aharon Bejell and Devorah Rahmani, "*Ha-Yeshiva, Ha-Sifriyya, Ve-Chazono shel Ha-Rav Amital*," ibid. p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ve-Ha-Aretz Natan*, p. 60; cf. *Be-Emunato*, pp. 58-60, which recounts his encouraging a student who was inclined towards studying Kabbalah. Also see his remarks in Yair Charlap, *Shirat Ha-Ya"m* (Beit El, 2012), p. 196. Cf. note 14 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In his words, "You do not have to climb up the very pinnacle of the mountain." In the same discourse, he spoke out against the view that one should never repeat a hike or sightseeing in the same location, and he actually recommended doing so. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. R. Yehuda Amital, "*Vai Le-Ara De-Yisrael De-Chaserah Gavra Rabba*," *Alon Shevut—Bogrim* 6 (1995), p. 122. In his eulogy for R. E. M. Shakh ("*Avi Ha-Ezri*," *Alon Shevut—Bogrim* 17 [2002], p. 125), he recounted how the son of R. Aharon Kotler had said to him that he did not know a soul in the world of Torah who was as engrossed in Torah study as R. Shakh. R. Amital recounted further, "Once R. Yitzchak Ze'ev Soloveitchik needed to check something in the middle of the night and instructed his son to go knock on R. Shakh's window. 'Surely he is not asleep.'" [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. R. Shmuel Reiner, "*Gadol Ba-Torah U-Ve-Havanat Ha-Lev*," *Le-Ovdekha Be-Emet*, p. 156. See also our article, "Serving in the IDF in the Teachings of R. Yehuda Amital *z"l*," *Parashat Ha-Shavua Study Center* (*Parashat Emor*),May 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Remarks at his unveiling ceremony, from *Ki Sarita: Sefer Zikaron Le-Sariel Bierenbaum* *H"yd*, ed. A. Benmelekh (Jerusalem, 1997), p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. "*Matarot U-She'ifot Talmidei Ha-Yeshiva*," *Daf Kesher* 668 (1998). Regarding the "special letter," R. Amital saw to it that the *yeshiva* library contains a wide variety of books in order to help every student find the field of Torah to which he could relate. See Bejell and Rahmani, n. 8 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. "*Sichat Preidah*," *Daf Kesher* 18 (1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For example, see the chapter, "*Ha-Issuk Be-Tzorkhei Tzibbur*," in *Ve-Ha-Aretz Natan*, pp. 121-127. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. R. Amital was known for his candidness. At a party in March 1985, celebrating 40 years since his immigration to Israel, his opening remarks were: "I was told that they wanted to throw a party in my honor. I like being honored, but only if it is done subtly, not when they say: Come, take some honor!" [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. He wrote an endorsement (*haskama*) of *Me'or Ha-Torah* by Moshe Moscowitz, director of the Har Etzion Yeshiva, and of a piece written by a relative of one of his *yeshiva* students killed in the Yom Kippur War. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Ha-Ma’alot Mi-Ma’amakim*, ed. Meir Hovav (Jerusalem and Alon Shevut, 1974) is an anthology of R. Amital’s conversations and articles. In the introduction (p. 9), R. Amital expressed reservations about publishing this work. During the *yeshiva*'s first decade, he primarily wrote responsa to soldiers. In the 1980s, his students began to print summaries of his discourses on Shabbat and festivals. R. Amital also wrote several articles on important subjects, such as the status of the secular Jew in our time (1988) and the commandment of rebuking others (1992). In 2005, his students printed a booklet entitled *Ve-Ha-Aretz Natan Le-Vnei Adam* containing his discourses on important subjects. That same year, R. Amital published a scholarly book, *Resisei Tal*. There, too, he wrote in the introduction: "For various reasons, I had many hesitations about publishing this book." Cf. *Be-Emunato*, p. 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. "*Me'or Pannim Ba-Torah*," *Alon Shevut—Bogrim* 8 (1996), p. 184. He described R. Shakh as follows ("*Avi Ha-Ezri*," p. 126): "He was very soft-spoken with people, generally with a smile always on his face. He had a sense of humor that never showed the slightest hint of fanaticism." Also cf. "*Sichat Preidah*": "A person can develop only if he is happy. Someone who is depressed, without *joie de vivre*, cannot develop…What is required of everyone…is not to go around with a frown, but with a smile on his face." Cf. S. Yishai, "*Kol Ha-Chavurah Kulah*," in *Le-Ovdekhah Be-Emet*, p. 376. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. On R. Amital’s aesthetic inclinations, see Devori Karsh, "*Divrei Preidah Mei-Abba*," *Le-Ovdekha Be-Emet*, p. 230; Haim Be'er, "*Yehudi mul Dyukano shel Rembrandt*," ibid*.* pp. 309-310. On building the *yeshiva* out of concern for his students, see Shosh Tal, "*At Nisheret Ba-Yeshiva*!" ibid*.* p. 53. Also see *Be-Emunato*, pp. 53-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)