

Torah Study: Results Are Also Important!

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Torah study plays a prominent role in the holiday of Shavuot. There is a tradition to spend the entire night of Shavuot studying Torah and many synagogues provide additional opportunities to study Torah on Shavuot. In this article, we will explore some of the aspects relating to the mitzvah of *talmud Torah*, the mitzvah to study Torah.¹¹

How Much is One Required to Learn?

The Mishna, *Pe'ah* 1:1, lists *talmud Torah* as one of the *mitzvot* that has no set amount. The Talmud Yerushalmi, *Pe'ah* 1:1, explains that these mitzvot have no minimum amount and no maximum amount. The Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), *Sh'not Eliyahu* ad loc., applies this comment to *talmud Torah* and notes that one can fulfill the mitzvah by learning a single word of Torah. Yet, no matter how much one knows, there is always an obligation to continue one's studies and actively pursue more knowledge.

This dichotomy is expressed in the resolution of an apparent contradiction between two statements of R. Shimon B. Yochai. The Gemara discusses the requirement that the *Lechem HaPanim* (showbreads) maintain a constant presence in the *Beit HaMikdash*:

The Beraita stated: R. Yosi said: it is valid even if one removes the old [breads] in the morning and places the new [breads] in the evening. How do I understand (the verse, Shemot 25:30) "Constantly in front of me"? That the table should not go the entire night without bread. R. Ami stated: From the words of R. Yosi we learn that even if a person only studied one chapter in the morning and one chapter in the evening, he has fulfilled the commandment (in the verse, Yehoshua 1:8) "This Torah shall never leave your lips." R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon bar Yochai, even if he only read Sh'ma in the morning and Sh'ma in the evening, he has fulfilled this mitzvah.

Menachot 99b

תניא רבי יוסי אומר אפי' סילק את
הישנה שחרית וסידר את החדשה
ערבית אין בכך כלום אלא מה אני
מקיים לפני תמיד שלא ילין שלחן
בלא לחם א"ר אמי מדבריו של ר'
יוסי נלמוד אפילו לא שנה אדם
אלא פרק אחד שחרית ופרק אחד
ערבית קיים מצות לא ימוש (את)
ספר התורה הזה מפיו אמר רבי
יוחנן משום ר"ש בן יוחי אפי' לא
קרא אדם אלא קרית שמע שחרית
וערבית קיים לא ימוש.
מנחות צט:

¹¹ This article is an expanded version of an article written for yutorah.org.

According to R. Shimon bar Yochai, one can fulfill the commandment to constantly study Torah by reciting *Sh'ma* in the morning and *Sh'ma* in the evening. Yet, R. Shimon bar Yochai seems to take the exact opposite approach. The Gemara cites a dispute between R. Yishmael and R. Shimon bar Yochai regarding how much time should be devoted to *talmud Torah*:

Our rabbis taught: [The verse (Devarim 11:14) states] "You shall gather your grain." What does this teach? Since it states "This Torah shall never leave your lips," one may think that this should be taken literally; therefore the verse states that you shall gather your grain- follow the ways of the land. R. Shimon bar Yochai states: Is it possible for someone to plow at the time of plowing, plant at the time of planting, harvest at the time of harvesting? ... What becomes of (his study of) Torah? Rather, when the Jewish people follow the will of God, their labor is performed by others ... and when they don't follow the will of God, they must perform the labor themselves.

Berachot 35b

ת"ר ואספת דגנך מה ת"ל לפי שנא' לא ימוש ספר התורה הזה מפיו יכול דברים ככתבן ת"ל ואספת דגנך הנהג בהן מנהג דרך ארץ דברי ר' ישמעאל ר"ש בן יוחי אומר אפשר אדם חורש בשעת חרישה וזורע בשעת זריעה וקוצר בשעת קצירה ודש בשעת דישה וזורע בשעת הרוח תורה מה תהא עליה אלא בזמן שישראל עושין רצונו של מקום מלאכתן נעשית ע"י אחרים שנא' ועמדו זרים ורעו צאנכם וגו' ובזמן שאין ישראל עושין רצונו של מקום מלאכתן נעשית ע"י עצמן שנא' ואספת דגנך ולא עוד אלא שמלאכת אחרים נעשית על ידן שנא' ועבדת את אויביך וגו'.

ברכות לה:

R. Yishmael is of the opinion that although the verse states that the Torah shall never leave your lips, one must follow the ways of the land (*derech erez*) in order to earn a livelihood. R. Shimon bar Yochai disagrees and maintains that if one were to spend his whole day earning a livelihood, he will never be successful in his study of Torah. How is it possible that the same R. Shimon bar Yochai, who states that recitation of *Sh'ma* fulfills the mandate of the mitzvah of *talmud Torah*, does not subscribe to R. Yishmael's opinion that this mandate allows one to earn a livelihood?

R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), *Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Kuntrus Acharon, Hilchot Talmud Torah* 3:1, explains that there are two aspects to the mitzvah of *talmud Torah*. The first aspect is to constantly learn Torah such that the Torah never leaves one's lips. Regarding this aspect, R. Shimon ben Yochai teaches that constancy can be achieved through consistency. If one learns a small portion of Torah in the morning and a small portion in the evening, one achieves constancy.¹² This first aspect of *talmud Torah* represents the idea that there is no minimum for *talmud Torah*.

The second aspect of *talmud Torah* is to master Torah to the best of one's ability. Mastery is a never ending process. Even if one learned the entire Torah, he must constantly review it in order not to forget anything that was learned. R. Shimon bar Yochai's objection to R. Yishmael's opinion is not regarding the requirement for constancy. His objection is that the more time one spends earning a livelihood, the more difficult it will be to master the Torah. This dispute focuses on the idea that there is no maximum for *talmud Torah*.

¹² R. Shimon bar Yochai learns this from R. Yosi's opinion that although the *lechem hapanim* require constancy, if one removes the old breads in the morning and replaces them in the evening, it is nevertheless considered constant. Similarly, one who studies Torah in the morning and evening is considered to be constantly studying Torah.

R. Yishmael doesn't disagree with R. Shimon bar Yochai's principle. He too is of the opinion that one must attempt to master Torah. However, he is of the opinion that one must master Torah while factoring in his obligation to sustain himself and his dependents. In fact, Rashi (1040-1105), *Berachot* 35b, s.v. *Minhag*, explains that R. Yishmael is of the opinion that one who is poverty stricken cannot focus on his learning and won't learn to the best of his ability. R. Yosef Karo (1488-1575), *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 156:1, rules in accordance with the opinion of R. Yishmael.

Choosing between *Talmud Torah* and performance of a mitzvah

R. Shneur Zalman notes an important difference between the first aspect of the mitzvah and the second. Rambam states:

If one has the opportunity to perform a mitzvah or to study Torah, if it is possible for the mitzvah to be performed by someone else, one should not interrupt one's study. If not, one should perform the mitzvah and continue studying.

Rambam, Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:4

היה לפניו עשיית מצוה ותלמוד תורה אם אפשר למצוה להעשות ע"י אחרים לא יפסיק תלמודו. ואם לאו יעשה המצוה ויחזור לתלמודו.
רמב"ם הל' תלמוד תורה ג:ד

If one is learning Torah and there is a mitzvah to perform that can only be fulfilled by the individual who is learning, he must break from his learning to perform the mitzvah. Rambam's ruling is codified in *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 246:18.

There are a number of Talmudic discussions which seem to present a challenge to the idea that one should stop learning Torah in order to perform a mitzvah. First, the Gemara, *Kiddushin* 29b, cites a dispute as to whether one should learn Torah and then get married or whether one should get married first and then learn Torah:

Our rabbis taught: If one has the option of studying Torah or getting married, he should study Torah and then get married but if he can't study without a wife, he should get married first and then study Torah. R. Yehuda said in the name of the Shmuel: The law is that one should get married and then study Torah. R. Yochanan said: How can he study Torah properly with a yoke on his neck? And there is no dispute (between Shmuel and R. Yochanan)- there is a difference between them and us.¹³

Kiddushin 29b

ת"ר ללמוד תורה ולישא אשה ילמוד תורה ואח"כ ישא אשה ואם א"א לו בלא אשה ישא אשה ואח"כ ילמוד תורה אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל הלכה נושא אשה ואח"כ ילמוד תורה ר' יוחנן אמר ריהיים בצוארו ויעסוק בתורה ולא פליגי הא לן והא להו.
קדושין כט:

¹³ According to Rashi, s.v. *Ha Lan*, the residents of Babylonia would travel to Israel to study and were not burdened by the needs of their family when in Israel. Therefore, it was preferable for them to marry first and then go to Israel to study. The residents of Israel would stay at home and therefore, it was preferable to study prior to getting married. According to Rabbeinu Tam (cited in *Tosafot*, ad loc., s.v. *Ha Lan*), the residents of Babylonia should study first because they can't leave their families to study in Israel once they get married. Furthermore, the residents of Babylonia were not as wealthy. The residents of Israel should get married first because they can remain close to home and they have the financial resources to study while married.

The argument presented against getting married first is that it will be too difficult to learn Torah with all of the responsibilities of marriage. One can ask: according to Rambam's principle, one should not forgo the mitzvah of getting married (or the mitzvah of having children) in order to perform the mitzvah of *talmud Torah*. Why then, does the Gemara conclude that in certain situations it is permissible to delay marriage in order to learn Torah? Furthermore, Ben Azai (cited in *Yevamot* 63b) states that he never got married because he had a desire to learn Torah. Rambam, *Hilchot Ishut* 15:3, and *Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer* 1:4, both rule that if one is steeped in Torah like Ben Azai and he never gets married, he doesn't violate any transgression. How can one totally abrogate the obligation to get married because of a desire to learn Torah?

Second, the Talmud Yerushalmi records the following incident:

R. Avahu inquired regarding his son R. Chanina who was studying in Tiberias. They told him that his son is spending his time helping to bury the dead. R. Avahu responded: Are there not enough graves in Caesaria that I had to send you to Tiberias?

Talmud Yerushalmi, Pesachim 3:7

רבי אבהו שלח לר' חנינה בריה
 יזכי בטיב ריה אתון ואמרון ליה
 גמל הוא חסד שלח ומר ליה המבלי
 אין קברים בקיסרין שלחתיך
 לטבריא.
 תלמוד ירושלמי פסחים ג:ז

R. Shneur Zalman asks: if in fact there were no other people available in Tiberias to perform these services, why was R. Avahu bothered by his son's actions? Shouldn't his son break from learning in order to perform a mitzvah that cannot be performed by anyone else?

R. Shneur Zalman answers that the principle that one breaks from learning in order to fulfill a mitzvah only applies to the first aspect of *talmud Torah*, the daily obligation to learn Torah. It does not apply to the second aspect of *talmud Torah*, the obligation to master the Torah. Therefore, one must break from his learning in order to perform a mitzvah that arises on an occasional basis. However, if performance of the mitzvah is going to significantly impact one's ability to master Torah, one should not perform the mitzvah. This is why the Gemara entertains delaying marriage in order to study Torah. Since marriage will significantly impact how much one is able to learn, he may delay performance of the *mitzvot* associated with marriage in order to continue his studies. Furthermore, if one's dedication to Torah is on the level of Ben Azai, he may forgo these *mitzvot* altogether.

R. Shneur Zalman further explains that the reason why R. Avahu was bothered by his son's decision to perform burial services is that his son was at a stage in his learning when daily performance of burial services would significantly impact his ability to master the Torah. Therefore, even if there was nobody else available, his son should not have performed these services on a consistent basis.¹⁴

Quantity vs. Quality

The dual nature of the mitzvah of *talmud Torah* is relevant to other discussions.

¹⁴ According to *Kesef Mishneh, Hilchot Talmud Torah* 3:3, R. Avahu's argument was invalid and his son was acting properly because there were no other people to perform these services.

A person should always split his years into thirds: One third for the study of Tanach, one third for the study of Mishna and one third for the study of Talmud. How is one to know how long he will live? Rather it is referring to days.

Kiddushin 30a

לעולם ישלש אדם שנותיו
שליש במקרא שלישי במשנה
שליש בתלמוד מי יודע כמה
חיי לא צריכא ליומי
קדושין ל.

Tosafot, *Kiddushin* 30a, s.v. *Lo Tzricha*, understand that the conclusion of the Gemara is that each day one should split one's learning between Tanach, Mishna and Talmud. According to Tosafot, the requirement to split one's learning into thirds seems to be a function of the requirement of the mitzvah to learn Torah on a daily basis.¹⁵

Rambam seems to view this obligation differently. Rambam writes that the obligation to split one's learning into thirds only applies at the beginning of one's studies. Once one has advanced, one can focus on Talmud while reviewing Tanach and Mishna periodically. Rambam seems to view the obligation to split one's learning into thirds as a function of the obligation to master Torah. For this reason, there is no obligation to split one's learning once one has mastered Tanach and Mishna.

Second, R. David HaLevi Segal (c.1586-1667), *Taz, Even Ha'Ezer* 25:1 discusses the practice of those who sleep very little because of their dedication to Torah study. He notes that there is no advantage to sleeping less when one can get more sleep and be more alert for one's studies. Why does *Taz* state that there is no advantage for the person who sleeps less? Wouldn't that person have a greater fulfillment of the mitzvah of *talmud Torah* simply by spending more time dedicated to the mitzvah?

The answer to this question is addressed in a comment of R. Yisrael Salanter (1810-1883), *Ohr Yisrael* no. 27, who states that the mitzvah of mastering Torah supersedes the mitzvah to constantly study Torah. He notes that the mitzvah to constantly study Torah would not provide an allowance for someone to seek out a means of improving the quality of one's study such as travelling to a yeshiva in another town or sleeping more in order to focus. It is only because of the mitzvah to master Torah that one can spend less time studying in order to focus on the quality of one's studies. As such, one can explain that *Taz* is of the same opinion and therefore, if sleeping less is going to impact the quality of one's studies, quality should not be sacrificed for quantity.

R. Yisrael Salanter notes that the mitzvah to master Torah only supersedes the mitzvah to constantly learn Torah when the individual is someone who has refined character traits and *yirat shamayim* (fear of heaven). This is because the mitzvah to master Torah is focused on the result more than the actions taken to achieve that result. If one has mastered the Torah but is not a refined individual, his mastery of Torah is devalued and all of the time spent focusing on quality didn't produce the proper result. For this individual, it would have been better to focus on quantity. *Talmud Torah* is not simply a means of collecting information. It is part of a process of becoming a complete individual who lives the ideals of the Torah.

¹⁵ Tosafot also note the opinion of Rabbeinu Tam that the Talmud Bavli contains Tanach, Mishna and Talmud and therefore study of Talmud Bavli fulfills this requirement.