

Miut Sheinah: Studying Torah While Sleep Deprived

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The *beraisa* in *Avos* delineates 48 pathways to acquiring a substantial relationship to the study of Torah. Among the list are a series of habits that are intended to diminish our indulgence in physical needs and desires. One of the more striking suggestions is “*miut sheinah*,” curtailing one’s sleep. It is striking that Chazal would recommend a tactic that seemingly compromises one’s awareness and alertness, which are essential elements to success in intellectually mastering the complexities of Torah. It is well established that a healthy sleep regimen correlates with increased focus and memory capacity. What is so crucial about studying Torah at night, that we would seemingly compromise the productivity and integrity of our study the remainder of the day?

The first individual in the Torah with whom we associate a pronounced commitment to Torah learning at night is Yaakov Avinu. Among the most climatic moments of Sefer Bereishis is Yaakov’s angelic dream at the peak of Har Hamoriah:

And he reached the place and lodged there because the sun had set and he took the rocks from that place and placed them under his head and he slept in that place.

Bereishis 28:11

וַיִּפְגַּע בְּמָקוֹם וַיִּלְוֶן לָשֹׁם כִּי בָא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וַיִּקַּח
מֵאֲבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם וַיִּשָּׁם מֵרֹאשֵׁיתוֹ וַיִּשְׁכַּב בְּמָקוֹם
הַהוּא.
בראשית כח:יא

The Divine vision evolves from a deep sleep that overwhelms Yaakov upon finally succumbing to the exhaustion that grips his daily life experience. Rashi explains the source of this overwhelming fatigue:

He slept in that place: This language comes to exclude. He slept in that place, but for the fourteen years that he served in the house of Ever, he didn’t sleep at night because he was engaged in Torah [study].

Rashi, Bereishis 28:11

וישכב במקום ההוא: לשון מיעוט באותו
מקום שכב, אבל ארבע עשרה שנים
ששמש בבית עבר לא שכב בלילה, שהיה
עוסק בתורה.
רש"י, בראשית כח:יא

Yaakov Avinu’s dedication to *talmud Torah* (Torah study) in Yeshivas Shem VaEver eclipsed his attention to provide for his most basic needs of physical functioning. The Gemarah in *Sukkah*

53a, writes that an oath to refrain from sleep for more than three days is invalid because it is physically impossible. It is likely that Yaakov indeed slept occasionally to reinvigorate his attention and strength, but never engaged in “*shechivah*”—in the settled and relaxing state of indulgent slumber. His commitment to *talmud Torah* entailed a comprehensive devotion that encompassed both day and night. He viewed the entire 24-hour period as a critical unit to accomplish his goals in *talmud Torah*. Yaakov Avinu, in what is described as the first formal Torah learning enterprise, devotes considerable time and energy to the study of Torah at night. In fact, the eternal mandate to regulate one’s daily Torah study is formulated to accentuate this span of dedication during both daytime and nighttime:

*This book of Torah shall never leave your lips and you shall study it **day and night** in order that you observe everything that is written in it because then you will be successful in your ways and then you will prosper.*

Yehoshua 1:8

לא ימוּש סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה מִפִּיךָ
וְהָגִיתָ בוֹ יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה לְמַעַן תִּשְׁמֹר
לְעֲשׂוֹת כְּכֹל הַפְּתוּיִם בּוֹ כִּי אֲזַ תִּצְלִיחַ
אֶת דְּרָכְךָ וְאֲזַ תִּשְׁפִּיל.
יְהוֹשֻׁעַ א:ח

What is so unique about the study of Torah at night?

Contemporary advances in technology and communication have essentially equalized the daytime and nighttime hours in their potential for productivity. Traditionally, however, the nighttime posed many pragmatic barriers to efficiency. The centrality of *talmud Torah* to Jewish life demands that we transcend these challenges and devote ourselves to Torah learning, even when conditions make it difficult. The Gemarah (*Menachos* 99b) writes that one fulfills the minimal requirement for Torah study by learning a section of Torah in the day as well as in the night. The Rambam (*Hilchos Talmud Torah* 1:8) codifies this basic obligation to study Torah daily as encompassing both the daytime and nighttime hours. It would appear from the Gemarah and the Rambam that the significance in *talmud Torah* at night is found in its balancing contribution to the obligation to study during the day. The *Shulchan Aruch* writes:

One must be scrupulous about studying at night more than during the daytime and one who neglects this is punished severely.

Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 238:1

צָרִיךְ לִיזָהָר בְּלַמּוּד הַלַּיְלָה יוֹתֵר
מִבַּשֶּׁל יוֹם, וְהַמְבַטְלוֹ עוֹנֵשׁ מִרְבּוּבָה.
שׁוּלְחַן עֲרוּךְ, אֹרַח חַיִּים רֵלַח: א

The *Shulchan Aruch* formulates one’s obligation to study at night as even greater than during the day. This approach is rooted in the many statements we encounter throughout Chazal that seem to promote a disproportionate emphasis upon the study of Torah at night. The Gemarah in *Chagiga* (12b) writes that one who engages in the study of Torah at night is endowed with an additional dimension of *chessed* (kindness) during the day. In *Eiruvin* (18b), the Gemarah writes that a home permeated with the study of Torah at night will never be destroyed. In *Menachos* (110a) the Gemarah compares rabbis who engage in Torah study at night to those who served in the Mikdash itself.

The Gemarah in *Tamid* (32b) writes that anyone who studies Torah at night will merit the presence of the *Shechinah*:

R. Chiya taught: Anyone who studies Torah at night does so opposite the Divine presence as it states (Eicha 2:19): “Arise and

תָּנָא רַבִּי חֵיִיא כּל הָעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה
בְּלַיְלָה שְׂכִינָה כְּנֹגְדוֹ שְׂנֵאמַר קוּמִי

sing at night, when it first becomes dark, pour out your heart like water in the presence of God.”

רוני בלילה לראש אשמורות שפכי
כמים לבך נכה פני ה'.

The Rambam, subsequent to codifying the requirement to study Torah at night in the first chapter of *Hilchos Talmud Torah*, reintroduces the concept of Torah study at night in an entirely different context in the third chapter:

Even though there is a mitzvah to study day and night, most of one's knowledge is learned at night. Therefore, one who wants to earn the crown of Torah should be cautious about one's nights and not lose even a single night to sleeping, eating, drinking, conversation or other things. Rather, one should [dedicate] one's nights to Torah study and words of wisdom. Our rabbis taught: The song of Torah only comes about at night as it states, "Arise and sing at night."

Rambam, Hilchos Talmud Torah 3:12

אף על פי שמצוה ללמוד ביום ובלילה
אין אדם למד רוב חכמתו אלא בלילה
לפיכך מי שרצה לזכות בכתר התורה
יזהר בכל לילותיו ולא יאבד אפילו
אחד מהן בשינה ואכילה ושתיה
ושיחה וכיוצא בהן אלא בתלמוד
תורה ודברי חכמה אמרו חכמים אין
רנה של תורה אלא בלילה שנאמר
קומי רוני בלילה.
רמב"ם, הל' תלמוד תורה ג:יב

While the fundamental mitzvah of *talmud Torah* is to study both during the day and at night, the “crown of Torah” can only be acquired through devotion to study at nighttime. In this context, the Rambam quotes the verse in Eicha that compares nighttime Torah learning to a song. What is the source of the Rambam’s romanticized depiction of *talmud Torah* at night?

In his commentary on *Maseches Brachos*, Rav Avraham Y. Kook (*Ein Ayah* to *Brachos* 3b) reveals the grandeur of *talmud Torah* at night. The Gemarah (*Brachos* 3b) compares David Hamelech’s sleep at the beginning of the night to that of a horse, and his sleep at the conclusion of the night to that of a lion. Rav Kook explains that the horse is an animal whose strength is rooted in man’s capacity to utilize it for a higher purpose. Horses can be trained to maximize their contribution in the contexts of work and of war. The lion’s strength is internal. It possesses a reservoir of courage and vigor that can be unleashed independent of human direction. Rav Kook explains that David Hamelech functions in two capacities. First, his strength and leadership is a product of the people he serves. *Ein melech belo am*, there is no king without a nation. By virtue of his leadership role within the greater Jewish people, David projects a vitality and virtue that promotes the values and ideals of Torah. He metaphorically rides the horse of his nation and conquers the enemies of his people. As the night gets darker, an additional dimension of David’s spiritual personality emerges. The lion’s vigor represents one’s internal capacity to project the world of *talmud Torah* and transform the landscape of our spiritual reality.

The internal spiritual fortitude required to conquer the overpowering feeling of exhaustion with a commitment to the study of *d’var Hashem* (the words of God) is the pathway to adorning ourselves with the crown of Torah. The accolades celebrated by Chazal relate to the transformative effect of exuding a personal devotion to Torah that transcends the more natural structures and frameworks for Torah growth symbolized by the clarity of daytime. Yaakov Avinu recognized that to achieve the spiritual heights of his ancestors, he needed to access a deeper and more personal source of dedication that can only be realized through piercing the darkness and challenge of growing at night.

Jewish education is devoted to creating the curriculum, structures, and frameworks of *talmud Torah bayom*, daytime study. The goals, instruction, and assessments that are necessary to shape a learning environment of accountability and achievement are core to the development of our children. However, our tradition recognizes another dimension to learning as well. It is found outside the parameters of the “required” learning of “*vehagisa bo yomam valayla*,” the daily requirements of Torah study. It is the journey to discover what the Rambam describes as the “*rina shel Torah*,” the song of Torah, the personal and melodious experience of Torah learning emerging from within the depths of one’s own heart and soul. The recognition that beyond the basic requirements of accumulating the knowledge of *yahadus* is the effort to discover the passion and music of Torah learning. It can be found in the late night *mishmars* of yeshivos and seminaries, where students project their own motivation in embracing a higher dimension of dedication to Torah learning. It can be found in the Torah learning of summer kollels and camps, when students strive to uncover the magic of the Torah learning experience, beyond the accumulation of substance and information.

It can also be found in the late hours of Shavuos night as we rub the exhaustion from our eyes and pour one more cup of coffee so that we can demonstrate our love of Torah in anticipation of re-experiencing its revelation. Many wonder why a custom would evolve to remain awake the entire night, thus compromising our ability to focus on *tefilah* and *talmud Torah* for the remainder of the holiday. Perhaps this approach, of “*miut sheinah*,” is intended to concretize that Shavuos is not only about receiving the essence of *talmud Torah*. In fact, if we were looking for a holiday that celebrates our achievements in the public study of Torah, we should look toward Simchas Torah. Shavuos has a different goal. The Gemarah (*Shabbos* 88a) tells us that when the Jewish people expressed their commitment of *na’aseh venishma*, we will do and then we will listen, angels descended and placed “crowns” on their heads. Shavuos is about acquiring our *kesser Torah*, our crown of Torah. It is about discovering our personalized “song” of Torah. Shavuos is an opportunity to transcend the practical and reach for the ideal. It is an all night *mishmar*—where the motivation comes from within.

It is certainly true that curtailing one’s sleep is a striking tactic to *kinyan HaTorah*, the acquisition of Torah. However, sometimes we have to be willing to sacrifice some space in the normative requirements of *talmud Torah* to inspire a broader lifetime commitment to the passion and motivation in reaching for the crown of Torah. To truly “acquire” a deep and lasting relationship to *talmud Torah*, we must continue to identify and embrace opportunities that cultivate a love and a pride for the substance and song of our tradition.