

Tisha B'Av and Birkot HaTorah

Letting the Light of Torah Shine Through

We may have noticed that the morning prayer services of Tisha B'Av are somewhat different than the ordinary weekday services. Most notably, the donning of talit and tefillin is delayed until the afternoon. Additionally, certain passages or berachot are skipped, depending on one's tradition. These omissions are a reflection of the fact that Tisha B'Av is a day of mourning and as such, we observe some of the practices of mourners. Yet *Birkot HaTorah*, the blessings recited before learning Torah, are recited as usual, despite the prohibition on Tisha B'Av against studying Torah. While recitation of *Birkot HaTorah* on Tisha B'Av is normative practice, some earlier authorities recommended omitting it precisely because of the prohibition against studying Torah. What is the nature of this dispute?

Why Was the First Temple Destroyed?

Before we answer this question, let us turn our attention to another aspect of Tisha B'Av relating to *Birkot HaTorah*.

In the haftarah for Tisha B'Av morning, which predicts the destruction of the First Temple and the exile, the verses state:

מי האיש החכם ויבן את זאת ואשר דבר פי ה' אליו ויגדה על מה אבדה הארץ נצתה כמדבר



Rabbi Joshua Flug

Director of Torah Research, YU Center for the Jewish Future

מבלי עבה ויאמר ה' על עזבם את תורתִי אשר נתתי לפניהם ולא שמעו בקולי ולא הלכו בה. ירמיהו ט:יא-יב

Who is the wise person that can understand this? Who does God speak to that can tell? Why was the land lost, [why has it] become parched like a desert with no passersby? God said, it is because they abandoned My Torah that I gave before them and they didn't listen to My voice and they didn't follow it.

Yirmiyahu 9:11-12

The Gemara presents the following interpretation of these verses:

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב מאי דכתיב (ירמיהו ט, יא) מי האיש החכם ויבן את זאת דבר זה נשאל לחכמים ולנביאים ולא פירשוהו עד שפירשו הקב"ה בעצמו דכתיב (ירמיהו ט, יב) ויאמר ה' על עזבם את תורתִי וגו' היינו לא שמעו בקולי היינו לא הלכו בה אמר רב יהודה אמר רב שאין מברכין בתורה תחלה. נדרים פא.

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav, What is meant by the verse "Who is the wise person that can understand this?" This question was posed to the scholars and to the prophets and they couldn't give an answer until God himself gave

an answer as it states, "God said, it is because they abandoned My Torah etc." Isn't this the same as "they didn't listen to My voice and they didn't follow it"?

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav, they didn't recite a blessing on the Torah first. Nedarim 81a

This interpretation requires further clarification. Is it possible that omission of *Birkot HaTorah* is what led to the destruction of the Temple? Does omission of *Birkot HaTorah* warrant such a harsh punishment? Furthermore, the Gemara elsewhere presents a different rationale for the destruction of the First Temple:

מקדש ראשון מפני מה חרב מפני ג' דברים שהיו בו ע"ז וגלוי עריות ושפיכות דמים. יומא ט:

Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because of three offenses that were prevalent there: idol worship, incest and murder.

Yoma 9b

If the Jewish people were violating these three sins, why does the Gemara feel the need to highlight the omission of *Birkot HaTorah*? Isn't that omission

negligible compared to these three sins?

The Midrash sheds light on the apparent discrepancy between the two passages in the Gemara regarding the destruction of the First Temple:

ר' הונא ור' ירמיה בשם ר' שמואל ברבי יצחק אמר מצינו שויתר הקב"ה על עבודת כוכבים ועל גילוי עריות ועל שפיכות דמים ולא ויתר על מאסה של תורה שנאמר על מה אבדה הארץ, על עבודת כוכבים ועל גילוי עריות ועל שפיכות דמים אין כתיב כאן אלא על עזבם את תורתך, ר' הונא ור' ירמיה בשם ר' חייא בר אבא אמרי כתיב ואותי עזבו ואת תורתך לא שמרו, הלואי אותי עזבו ותורתך שמרו, מתוך שהיו מתעסקין בה המאור שבה היה מחזירן למוטב. איכה רבה, פתיחה ב'

R. Huna and R. Yirmiyah said in the name of R. Shmuel son of R. Yitzchak: We find that God forgave [them] for idol worship, incest and murder but did not forgive [them] for the desecration of the Torah as it states, "Why was the land lost?" It doesn't say that it is because of idol worship, incest and murder, but rather "because they abandoned My Torah." R. Huna and R. Yirmiyah said in the name of R. Chiya b. Abba: It states, "They abandoned Me and didn't observe my Torah." If only they would have abandoned Me but observed the Torah, through their involvement in [the study of] Torah, its light would have guided them back to becoming good people.

Eicha Rabbah, Introduction no. 2

This midrash seems to resolve the apparent discrepancy in one of two ways. First, the Jewish people were guilty of the worst transgressions and were deserving of punishment for those transgressions. However, God didn't punish the Jewish people immediately because He hoped that the light of Torah would eventually inspire a teshuva movement. Once the Torah was abandoned and the possibility of a teshuva movement was unlikely, God punished the Jewish people for the terrible transgressions they violated. This approach is espoused by R. David HaLevi Segal, *Taz, Orach Chaim* 47:1, though he doesn't reference the midrash.

Second, the drift of the Jewish people away from the values of Torah was not instantaneous. It occurred gradually and eventually reached a point where violation of the three major transgressions was rampant. The Jewish people were certainly punished for violating these transgressions, but the sages and prophets of the time had difficulty figuring out what led to such a deterioration of morality. To this,



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God responds that if the Jewish people would have embraced the Torah, they would have avoided their deterioration of morality. This approach is espoused by R. Yaakov of Lisa, *Emet L'Yaakov to Bava Metzia* 85b, who also does not mention the midrash.

Birkot HaTorah and the Light of Torah

What these two approaches highlight is that embracing the Torah, specifically through *Birkot HaTorah*, serves as a preventive and corrective measure to combat immorality. What is it about *Birkot HaTorah* that provides these qualities? Rabbeinu Nissim offers the following insight from Rabbeinu Yonah:

אלא ודאי עוסקין היו בתורה תמיד ולפיכך היו חכמים ונביאים תמהים על מה אבדה הארץ עד שפרשו הקב"ה בעצמו שהוא יודע מעמקי הלב שלא היו מברכין בתורה תחלה כלומר שלא היתה התורה חשובה בעיניהם כ"כ שיהא ראוי לברך עליה שלא היו עוסקים בה

לשמה ומתוך כך היו מזלזלין בברכתה והיינו לא הלכו בה כלומר בכונתה ולשמה. רבינו נסים, נדרים פא.

They were definitely involved in [learning] Torah constantly and for this reason, the scholars and the prophets were wondering why the land was abandoned, until God explained Himself that He knows the inner thoughts [of the people], that they weren't reciting a blessing on the Torah first, meaning that the Torah wasn't so important to them that it was worthy to recite a blessing, because they weren't studying it for its own sake and because of this, they were neglectful of its blessing. This is what is meant by "they didn't follow it," meaning that it wasn't with the right intentions and for its own sake.

Rabbeinu Nissim, Nedarim 81a

On the surface, this comment is somewhat puzzling. Does learning with the wrong intentions really lead to the disastrous consequences mentioned above? Don't our rabbis encourage us to learn Torah despite our ulterior motives because that will

eventually lead one to learning with the proper intentions (*Pesachim* 50b)?

R.Shneur Zalman of Lyadi offers the following insight:

ולא אמרו חכמים לעולם יעסוק אדם בתורה ובמצות אפילו שלא לשמה אלא כשמקיים המצות שלומד בתורה ... ויש אומרים שאף על פי כן לעולם יעסוק אדם בתורה כי מתוך שלא לשמה יוכל לבא לידי לשמה ללמוד על מנת לשמור ולעשות שהמאור שבה מחזירו למוטב.

שלחן ערוך הרב, הל' תלמוד תורה פרק ד

Our rabbi only said that one should be involved with Torah [study] and mitzvot even for the wrong reasons when one is fulfilling the mitzvot that one learns in the Torah ... There are those who say that nevertheless, one should always study Torah because studying for the wrong reasons can lead to studying for the right reasons, learning in order to fulfill mitzvot, because the light of [the Torah] will guide one back to becoming a good person.

Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Hilchot Talmud Torah ch. 4

Laws of Torah Learning on Tisha B'av



- The study of Torah is prohibited on Tisha B'Av because Torah brings joy to those who study it. One may study Iyov, Eicha and the somber portions of Yirmiyahu (*Ta'anit* 30a).
- It is also permissible to study the laws of mourning (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 554:2).
- When studying the appropriate portions, one may also study the commentaries (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 554:2) but one should focus on the simple meaning of the text, not the analysis (*Mishna Berurah* 554:4).
- One may read the portions in the siddur that are recited on a daily basis, such as the sections about the korbanot (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 554:4).

According to R. Shneur Zalman's initial approach, we should not encourage Torah learning that is purely an academic exercise when those who are learning have no intention of keeping the mitzvot. However, he then asserts (based on the comments of Rambam and R. Yitzchak Abohab in his *Menorat HaMaor*) that the messages contained in the Torah have the ability to penetrate and influence even those who don't currently plan on observing what is written in the Torah.

How then should we understand Rabbeinu Yonah's comments? They seem to follow the initial approach presented by R. Shneur Zalman. When there is a lack of observance, learning Torah for academic purposes or ulterior motives is not a recommended course of action. As such, Torah learning was not a mitigating factor when God judged the Jewish people for violating the most serious transgressions. Are Rabbeinu Yonah's comments also compatible with the second approach? If the Jewish people were learning, albeit for ulterior motives, why wasn't there a possibility that the light of Torah would shine and cause them to change?

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto seems to follow R. Shneur Zalman's second approach but with one limitation:

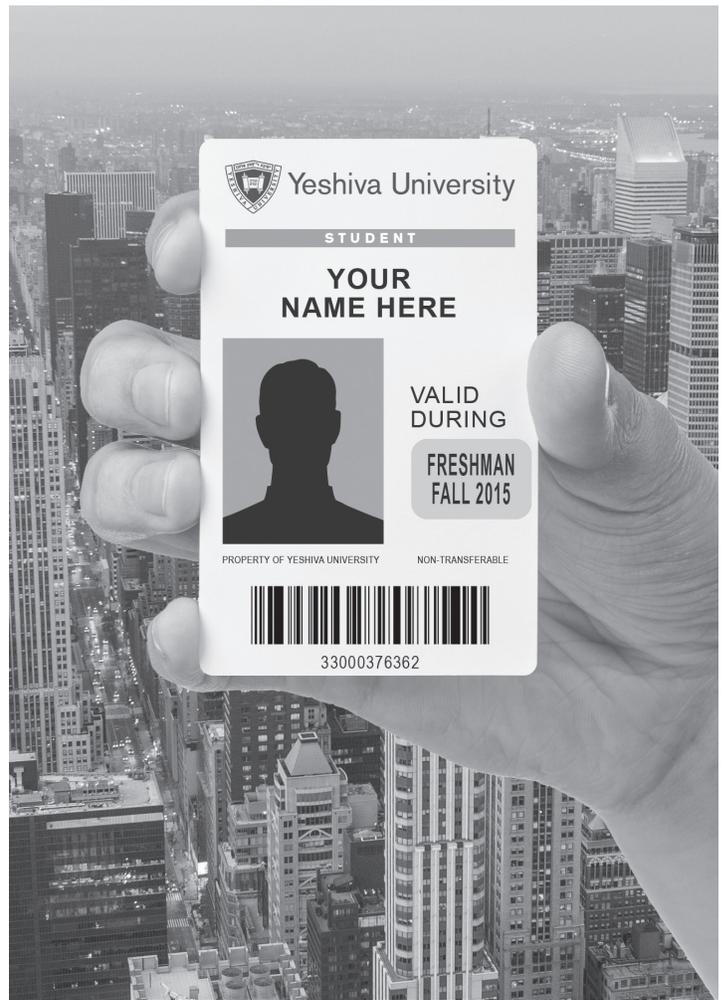
רז גדול גלו לנו החכמים ז"ל, שאלו לא היו הרשעים עוברים את תלמוד התורה, סוף שהיו חוזרים למוטב ... ואמנם פשוט שאין הדברים אמורים במי שיתעסק בה דרך שחוק והתול או לגלות פנים שלא כהלכה אלא שיתעסק בה לפחות כמי שמתעסק בשאר החכמות.
דרך ה' חלק ד' פרק ב'

Our rabbis taught us a great secret: if the evildoers did not abandon learning Torah, it would have guided them back to becoming good people ... It is obvious that this does not apply to those who study in a mocking manner or in order to distort the meaning of the Torah, but rather, one must at least study it on the level that one studies other subject matters.

Derech HaShem 4:2

When Torah learning is purely academic or theoretical, the messages and the values of Torah still have the ability to penetrate. However, when there is antagonism or cynicism involved, it becomes more difficult for the light of the Torah to shine through.

R. Luzzatto expands on this idea in his *Mesillat Yesharim*:



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שכמו שכל מציאות הזהירות תלוי בשימת הלב על הדבר, כן כל עצמו של השחוק אינו אלא מסיר הלב מן המחשבות הישרות והעיוניות, ונמצא שלא יבואו הרהורי היראה בלבו כלל. וטראה קושי הלצון והשחתתו הרבה, כי כמו המגן המשוך בשמן אשר ישמיט ויפיל מעליו החצים ומשליכם לארץ ולא יניח אותם שיגיעו אל גוף האדם כן הלצון מפני התוכחה והמרדות, כי בליצנות אחד ובשחוק קטן יפיל האדם מעליו ריבוי גדול מן ההתעוררות וההתפעלות מה שהלב מתעורר ומתפעל בעצמו מדי ראותו או שומעו ענינים שיעירוהו אל החשבון והפשוט במעשים, ובכח הליצנות יפיל הכל לארץ ולא יעשה בו רושם כלל. ולא מפני חולשת הענינים ולא מפני חסרון הבנת הלב, אלא מפני כח הלצון ההורס כל עניני המוסר והיראה.
מסילת ישרים פרק ה'

Just as the essence of Watchfulness involves applying one's heart to things, so the essence of laughter is the turning away of one's heart from just, attentive thinking, so that thoughts of fearing God do not enter one's heart at all. Consider the great severity and destructive power of levity. Like a shield smeared with oil, which wards off arrows and causes them to fall to the ground, not permitting them to reach the bearer's body, is levity in the face of reproof and rebuke. For with one bit of levity and with a little laughter a person can cast from himself the great majority of the awakenings and impressions that a man's heart stimulates and effects within itself upon his seeing or hearing things which arouse him to an accounting and an examination of his deeds. The force of levity flings everything to the ground so that no impression whatsoever is made upon Him. This is due not to the weakness of the forces playing upon him, nor to any lack of understanding on his part, but to the power of levity, which obliterates all facets of moral evaluation and fear of God.

Mesillat Yesharim ch. 5 (Translation from Shechem.org)

According to R. Luzzatto, there are no active motives required for Torah study to have an impact. As long as there is no antagonism or cynicism involved, we can be confident that the light of Torah will shine through. Perhaps then, Rabbeinu Yonah's assessment that the Jewish people were learning Torah for the wrong reasons was not intended to criticize those who study solely for academic purposes, but specifically those who study Torah out of cynicism or antagonism. When Torah learning reached such a state of affairs, the possibility that the light of Torah would guide them to a path of teshuva was too small for God to ignore their grave transgressions.

While R. Luzzatto doesn't have any active requirements for the light of Torah to shine through, *Taz*, op. cit., suggests that in order for Torah learning to have an impact, the study must involve rigor. In explaining why the Gemara specifically identifies *Birkot HaTorah*, *Taz* notes that the opening blessing contains the term *la'asok b'divrei Torah*, to engage in Torah matters. *Taz* suggests that Torah learning would have spared the Jewish people had they learned Torah with the rigor reflected in the term *la'asok*. However, since their learning was superficial, the merits of Torah learning did not protect them.

***Birkot HaTorah* on Tisha B'Av**

Based on the comments of *Taz*, we can understand the opinion that one should omit *Birkot HaTorah* on Tisha B'Av. R. Tzidkiyah HaRofei, *Shibbolei HaLeket*, *Seder Ta'anit* no. 269, presents the issue as follows:

ויש גאונים ז"ל שאומרים שאין מברכין ברכת התורה שהרי אסורין בדברי תורה והמדרשות בטילין ולי נראה שצריך עיון שהרי הוא רשאי לקרות בתורה ובאיוב ובקינות ובדברים הרעים שבירמיה הלכך מברך ברכת התורה.

There are Geonim who say that one should not recite Birkot HaTorah because there is a prohibition against learning Torah and the study halls are closed. It seems to me that this position is difficult because it is permissible to read the Torah [portion of the day] and Iyov, Kinnot and the prophecies of destruction in Yirmiyah. Therefore, one should recite Birkot HaTorah.

Do we approach Torah study with rigor and passion? Do we walk away from a study session with a sense of inspiration and exhilaration? Are our actions and behaviors reflective of someone who studies Torah? By asking ourselves these questions, we will further enable the light of Torah to shine brightly through.

The argument to omit *Birkot HaTorah* is the prohibition against learning Torah on Tisha B'Av, and the counterargument is that there are portions of Torah that one may learn on Tisha B'Av. The Geonim were certainly aware that one may learn these portions and nevertheless recommended omitting *Birkot HaTorah*. Perhaps the reason for this is that the permissibility to learn these portions is limited. As *Taz*, *Orach Chaim* 654:2, notes, one may only learn the simple meaning of these portions and one may not delve into any analyses of these portions. In other words, one may not study these portions with the same rigor required of ordinary Torah study. As such, the argument to omit *Birkot HaTorah* is that one cannot learn Torah with the rigor reflected in the blessing *la'asok b'divrei Torah*.

Yet common practice is to recite *Birkot HaTorah*. Furthermore, there is no indication that *Taz* requires one to omit it. How can one recite *la'asok b'divrei Torah* when the level of Torah learning that the blessing represents is prohibited? Perhaps *Taz* has a multi-layered approach to the issue. Torah learning, even on a superficial level, is not only part of the mitzvah of *talmud Torah* but is also impactful. When one reads of the trials and tribulations of Iyov or the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, one should be inspired to reflect on self-improvement. We don't need to deeply analyze these portions to be affected by their content. We can confidently recite *la'asok b'divrei Torah* knowing that our study of the simple meaning of the text is rigorous, not necessarily from an intellectual perspective, but in the way it impacts us. Nevertheless, at the time of the destruction of the Temple, there was a generation that was deeply involved

in serious transgressions and a more comprehensive study of the Torah and its messages was necessary. The superficial study of Torah wasn't sufficiently impacting the people and perhaps if they would have taken a more rigorous approach to Torah study, they would have been able to pull themselves out of the darkness in which they were so heavily steeped.

This Tisha B'Av, as we recite *Birkot HaTorah* and study the portions of Torah appropriate for Tisha B'Av, we should be mindful of the impact our learning can have on us. While the Torah's light can shine even on those who study it for purely academic purposes, with no intent of fulfilling it, its greatest impact can be felt when we specifically look for the values and inspirational messages contained within it. Furthermore, we can take a moment to reflect on how Torah study impacts us the rest of the year. Do we approach Torah study with rigor and passion? Do we walk away from a study session with a sense of inspiration and exhilaration? Are our actions and behaviors reflective of someone who studies Torah? By asking ourselves these questions, we will further enable the light of Torah to shine brightly through.