

Learning Offline in an Online World

For members of a nation known as “The People of the Book,” living in the Information Age is a dream come true. We have unprecedented access to not only trillions of bytes of general information, but to seemingly endless entryways into our sacred Torah through numerous new and expanded mediums.

With apps on smartphones, we can hold libraries of *seforim* in the palm of our hand. Using YUTorah.org and other audio sites, we can endlessly stream diverse *shiurim* from world-famous roshai yeshiva and scholars wherever we are in the world. With the proliferation of Torah newsletters and email subscriptions, we have access to complex and sophisticated insights on parsha, holidays, business ethics, and Jewish law, all in our mother tongue. Comprehensive *seforim* on nearly every topic with extensive footnotes allow us to research nearly any area that may be of interest. Artscroll and Mesivta versions of the Talmud enable us to peruse generations of penetrating insights and analysis on each page of the Talmud, without having to open more than one book.

There can be no doubt that the Information Age has expanded our access to Torah and the frequency and ease with which it can be learned. Having the opportunities to learn so readily is an amazing blessing that



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we should take full advantage of and be proud when we do. However, the Information Age also poses numerous challenges to our sacred tradition of Torah study. I would like to briefly reference two of them, expand on a third, and offer some suggestions and solutions.

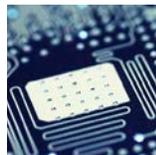
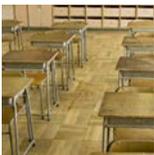
Experiential Knowledge, Not Just Information

In another article on a similar subject,¹ I referenced a *Harvard Business Review* article, “The Internet Makes You Think You’re Smarter Than You Are,” and a recent book by David Weinberger called *Too Big to Know: Rethinking Knowledge Now That the Facts Aren’t the Facts, Experts Are Everywhere, and the Smartest Person in the Room Is the Room*, to show the danger of having endless information at our fingertips in the span of a millisecond. The Information Age leads to a false sense of confidence and to conclusions based on knowledge in a vacuum, not as part of a system or community.

Halacha and hashkafa have never

been formulated by analysis of stark information or knowledge alone. Our sacred *mesorah* (tradition) has always placed great emphasis on the accumulation of experiential knowledge and sensitivities, and placed a premium on guidance from those who have amassed the wisdom of life and serve as loyal conduits of the wisdom of prior generations. A brilliant scholar who is familiar with vast amounts of Torah but has never been *meshameish talmidei chachamim* (i.e., “apprenticed” with Torah scholars) is not qualified to issue opinions deserving of communal deference. The Talmud (*Berachos* 7b) tells us that, “*gedola shimusha yoser milimuda*,” being mentored by a talmid chacham is even greater than the learning of his Torah. According to the *beraisa* in the sixth chapter of *Pirkei Avos*, one of the 48 ways that wisdom is acquired is through *shimush chachamim*. The *ratzon Hashem*, the will of the Almighty, on any given issue cannot simply be Googled or searched on the Bar Ilan digital library.

With the proliferation of daf yomi learning online, more people are



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learning the daf, but fewer are attending daf shiurim in person.

Even after being written down, study of our sacred *Torah She'ba'al Peh*, the Oral Tradition, demands the fusion between content and personalities, between exposure to information and participating in a chain of transmission and the continuity of a *mesorah* community.

There is nothing wrong with listening to classes online, reading printouts and digests, or even learning *seforim* by oneself. Indeed, these are wonderful and virtuous fulfillments of learning Torah. They deserve to be lauded, encouraged, and promoted. However, we must be careful that these opportunities for *talmud Torah* complement the experience of sitting with a teacher, developing a relationship with a rebbe, and being part of a *mesorah* community, and that these impersonal methods of learning never replace them.

Attention and Concentration Deficit

It is likely not coincidental that among the most popular classes on YUTorah are the “10 Minute Halacha” and “5 Minute Halacha” series. Not only are the speakers and their topics excellent, but the length is just right for a generation that struggles to concentrate for lengthy periods of time.

Technology and the internet have unintentionally waged war on our attention span. The new reality is posing a great challenge to teachers and educators across the spectrum, from public school² to the Chareidi community,³ which recently held its first conference to address the problem of concentration in yeshivas.

A Washington Post article entitled “Serious Reading Takes a Hit from Online Scanning and Skimming” describes the newest research from neuroscientists.⁴ These neuroscientists warn that: “humans seem to be developing digital brains with new circuits for skimming through the torrent of information online. This alternative way of reading is competing with traditional deep reading circuitry.” Andrew Dillon, a University of Texas professor who studies reading, notes that: “We’re spending so much time touching, pushing, linking, scrolling and jumping through text that when we sit down with a novel, your daily habits of jumping, clicking, linking is just ingrained in you. We’re in this new era of information behavior, and we’re beginning to see the consequences of that.”

Torah learning has always been about much more than just exposure to information. It aspires to leave one with the feeling that they have been in the presence of the Almighty. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “In prayer we find God by speaking; in study we find God in listening.”⁵ Hearing His messages and feeling His influence, however, are predicated on our capacity to pay attention and concentrate.

אֶת-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה דִּבֶּר ה' אֶל-כָּל-קְהַלְכֶם
בְּהָר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ הַעֲנָן וְהַעֲרָפֶל קוֹל גָּדוֹל וְלֹא
יָסַר וַיְכַתְּבֵם עַל-שְׁנֵי לְחֹת אֲבָנִים וַיִּתֵּן אֵלָיו.
These words Hashem spoke to your assembly on the mountain out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a great voice, and it went on no more. And He wrote them on two tablets of stone, and gave them to me.

Devarim 5:19

The simple meaning of the words *v'lo yasaf*, as explained by the Ibn

Ezra, the Rashbam, and others, is that the voice and experience were “not to be repeated.” This was a onetime only event, an exceptional and transcendent moment in human history, never to be replicated. Onkelus, however, translates *v'lo yasaf* not as never repeated, but rather as *v'lo p'sak*, God’s voice never ended or ceased. The Ramban cites a few *pesukim* as evidence that *v'lo yasaf* can mean “never stops.” According to this interpretation, God spoke at Sinai thousands of years ago, and His voice and message continue to carry and echo until today. Which interpretation is correct? Has Hashem’s voice stopped carrying or can it still be heard today?

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה עֲלֵה אֵלַי הַהָרָה וְהִיָּה שָׁמָּה
וְאֶתְנֶה לְךָ אֶת לְחֹת הָאֲבָנִים וְהַתּוֹרָה וְהַמִּצְוָה
אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתִּי לְהוֹרֹתָם.

Hashem said to Moshe, “Ascend to Me to the mountain and be there, and I shall give you the stone tablets and the teaching and the commandment that I have written, to teach them.”

Shemos 24:12

Commentators are bothered by the seemingly superfluous phrase in Hashem’s invitation to Moshe. After Moshe is directed to ascend the mountain, it surely was unnecessary for Moshe to also be directed “*veheyei sham*,” and “be there.” Obviously, once Moshe ascends the mountain he will necessarily be there.

Veheyei sham, be there, means be in the present. Don’t be distracted, interrupted or unfocused. Hashem is telling Moshe that He does not want to compete for attention, even for the most noble of distractions, such as caring for the Jewish people. “Put them aside when you are with Me, and be with Me.”

Perhaps the definition of *v'lo yasaf* is

ultimately up to us. If we are distracted and unfocused while we learn Torah, God's voice and message cannot resonate deeply or in a lasting way. But if, like Moshe, *v'heyey sham*, we are fully present and paying attention, we can continue to hear His voice and heed His message.

Preserving the ability to be fully present demands not only disconnecting at times from technology, but also maintaining and strengthening our ability to connect through traditional learning. Reading books and patiently studying full texts that are more than sound bites are instrumental to maintaining our attention span. Reward your children for reading and set goals for yourself, not just on Shabbos when technology is not an option, but throughout the week as well.

Acquiring Torah Only Through Toil and Diligence

Perhaps the most insidious impact of the Information Age on Torah learning is how easy it has made it. No longer does acquiring Torah knowledge require great effort and exertion. Previously, one had to physically make their way to a shiur; now one can listen while driving, exercising, shopping or cooking. I vividly remember struggling to make my way through the Gemara often trying to understand each word or phrase based on context or the insight of a commentary or by looking it up painstakingly in the Jastrow dictionary. Today, Artscroll and Mesivta serve as crutches, spoon-feeding not only the explanation of all of Shas, but walking the student through Tosafos with ease. Technology and information have made Torah study easier and have removed much of the struggle, but

that is not necessarily a good thing.

Rashi, in the beginning of *Parshas Bechukosai*, quotes Chazal who say that "*Im b'chukosai teleichu*," if you walk in my statutes, means "*shetihiyu ameilim baTorah*," you should toil to learn Torah. Similarly, the Gemara *Berachos* 63b, teaches:

אמר ריש לקיש ... אין דברי תורה מתקיימין
אלא במי שממית עצמו עליה.
*Reish Lakish said: ... words of Torah
only sustain with those who kill
themselves over it.*

The Gemara in *Megilla* 6b, states:

אמר ר' יצחק אם יאמר לך אדם יגעתי ולא
מצאתי אל תאמן לא יגעתי ומצאתי אל תאמן
יגעתי ומצאתי תאמן.
*R' Yitzchok said: "If someone tells you
I labored [in Torah study] but did not
find it (i.e. I was not successful), do not
believe him. If he tells you, I have not
labored in Torah study, yet I did find
it, do not believe him. If he says I have
toiled and I have found it, believe him."*

The *Taz* (*Orach Chaim* 47:1) summarizes well the attitude of our rabbis to Torah study:

שהתורה אינה מתקיימת אלא במי שממית
עצמו עליה דהיינו שעוסק בפלפול ומשא ומתן
של תורה כמ"ש על בחקותי תלכו ע"מ שתהיו
עמלים בתורה משא"כ באותם שלומדים
ד"ת מתוך עונג ואינם יגעים בה אין התורה
מתקיימת אצלם.

*The Torah is retained only by those
that kill themselves over it, by toiling
in it diligently and with great intensity,
as our rabbis said, "shetihiyu ameilim
baTorah," you should toil to learn Torah.
Those who study Torah casually —
amid comfort and without toil — will
not retain it.*

Clearly, effort, toil, and diligence are prerequisites to authentic Torah study, but why?

כי אם בתורת ה', חפצו; ובתורתו יתנה, יומם
ולילה.

*He desires the Torah of Hashem and in
his Torah he meditates day and night.*

Tehillim 1:2

Rashi notes:

בתחילה היא נקראת תורת השם ומשלמה
וגרסה היא נקראת תורתו.

*In the beginning it is the Torah of
Hashem, but after he toils in it, it
becomes his Torah.*

Rashi, Kiddushin 32b

There is a superficial encounter with Torah in which we passively hear a nice idea or even read a meaningful thought. Such learning is valuable, but likely fleeting and probably not transformative. We haven't worked for it and so it remains Hashem's. However, when we toil and struggle and exert great effort to understand and to review Torah, we acquire it. We have paid for it with our time, our energy and our effort. It becomes *Toras* — our Torah, part of who we are.

In the Information Age, it is easier than ever to learn Hashem's Torah, but it is becoming increasingly more difficult and unusual to find the resolve and tenacity to acquire Torah with the *ameilus*, effort, and *yegiah*, toil, it requires. Our generation has become accustomed to knowledge and information that come comfortably and easily. To satisfy our curiosity or complete a research paper, we need not make our way to the card catalogue at the library and proceed to find the book and look it up. We can speak to our smartphone, which spits back thousands of results in the blink of an eye. If we, or our children, struggle to understand a subject, there are countless websites with tutorials and educational videos to make it simple to understand.

These advances are wonderful, and embracing them undeniably enriches our lives. But while the modern Age of Information places a premium on the result and not the process, the pursuit of Torah demands an emphasis on the educational method, not just acquiring the knowledge.

At the completion of a significant portion of learning, in the *Hadran* we recite:

אנו עמלים והם עמלים. אנו עמלים ומקבלים
שכר והם עמלים ואינם מקבלים שכר.
*We toil and they toil — we toil and
receive reward while they toil and do not
receive reward.*

The Chafetz Chaim famously explains (*Chafetz Chaim Al Hatorah, Bechukosai*) that in all other disciplines and activities, the result is what matters. If you struggled to solve the math equation but came up with the wrong answer, the effort was a failure. In great contradistinction, however, when it comes to Torah, though we care passionately about a positive result and comprehension of the subject, even if it is unattained, the effort and exertion in its pursuit were not wasted time. They were transformative and impactful nonetheless.

The *beraisa* in *Pirkei Avos* tells us that when a person learns Torah for its own sake, *machsharto lihiyos tzadik*, it prepares one to be righteous. Rav Chaim Volozhener in his *Ruach Chaim* 6:1, explains that the word *machsharto*

comes from *machshir*, or to kasher. Just like we kasher a pot by purging it of the foreign tastes that have been absorbed in it, so too Torah study has the power to kasher us and purge foreign ideas and experiences that have previously been absorbed. This is accomplished just through the process of diligent study, even if we fail to ultimately retain what we learned.

Perhaps this is why the beracha we make is *la'asok b'divrei Torah*, to be occupied with Torah study and not *lilmod divrei Torah*, to learn and comprehend Torah. When it comes to Torah study, the process and the effort are critical.

While the term “edutainment” was first coined by Robert Heyman in 1973 while producing documentaries for the National Geographic Society, it has become the standard not only for teachers in school, but for educators of every age. Our overexposure to technology and multimedia has rewired our brains, and makes it difficult to learn without being stimulated and entertained in the process. We satisfy this new paradigm with PowerPoint presentations, smartboards, and fancy source sheets. These are all wonderful tools to help communicate and learn Torah, but they must not replace the traditional method of effort and toil.

If, in the Information Age, we lose the ability and the will to toil in study, we will have unprecedented access and

mediums for Torah learning that will remain superficial, fleeting and in the domain of Hashem. If we want Torah study to expand not only in its breadth but also in its depth, we must cultivate within our children and ourselves the strength to toil in Torah and appreciate the satisfaction of making it our own.

The capacity and will to toil are necessary ingredients for creativity and authenticity in Torah learning. Creativity and authenticity are the catalysts for finding joy in Torah learning not just for those aspiring to be scholars, but for all of those seeking to be uplifted and inspired by the encounter.

Toil and effort are integral to learning itself. Every Jew should have a taste of genuine scholarship and have the language and the tools to be an insider to learning, even though few will go on to be outstanding scholars. If you use secondary Torah resources, you can learn about Torah, but you can't be a student of Torah. Only through effort and exertion is learning turned into an encounter with Hashem.

Artsroll/Mesivta/YUTorah are wonderful resources for people who otherwise wouldn't have access to the information, for those using it as a gateway, or for those with limited time who are looking to enhance their learning. However, younger students, who are developing their skills to read and analyze Jewish texts, should embrace the struggle rather than looking for spoon-fed solutions. Even those who are no longer students (in the classical sense) should consider dedicating some of their learning time towards developing skills and learning with greater toil.

Certainly a community seeking to grow should create scholars-in-

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residence programs, speaker series, and diverse classes. But it must never neglect venues and opportunities for traditional textual study in chavrusa or small groups. Building a serious and vibrant beis medrash must be a priority for our communities. In addition to classes that have attractive source sheets that cull from diverse places, communities and their teachers should encourage and facilitate textual study with greater reading comprehension, improving vocabulary, and building analytical skills. Additionally, consider becoming a Dirshu site and giving monthly tests on text based materials with rewards and incentives that will motivate people to review diligently and find the satisfaction that can only come from toiling in Torah study.

Conclusion

In some ways, the Information Age is the golden age of Torah learning. Our communities have been greatly enriched by the myriad of new learning opportunities and unprecedented access to Torah study. Those who are taking advantage of listening to classes online, reading Torah newsletters, and studying Gemara in any language or with any tool should be commended and celebrated for their commitment to Talmud Torah. If only more people would follow their example and access the unprecedented opportunities to learn. However, to remain part of the *mesorah* community, to preserve our capacity for focusing attention, and to experience the satisfaction and authenticity of genuine Torah study, we should challenge ourselves and our communities to be vigilant to preserve the traditional modes and methods as well.

Notes

- 1 Efreim Goldberg, "Technology — Playing with Fire," *Klal Perspectives* (Fall, 2015): 34:46, available at: <http://klalperspectives.org/rabbi-efrem-goldberg-2>.
- 2 Matt Richtel, "Technology is Changing How Students Learn, Teachers Say," *The New York Times*, Nov. 1, 2012, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/01/education/technology-is-changing-how-students-learn-teachers-say.html>.
- 3 Moshe Weissberg, "The First Charedi Gathering for Issues of Attention and Concentration" (Hebrew), *B'Chadrei Charedim*, May 7, 2016, available at: <http://www.bhol.co.il/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=101324>.
- 4 Michael S. Rosenwald, "Serious Reading Takes a Hit from Online Scanning and Skimming," *Washington Post*, April 6, 2014, available at: <http://wpo.st/mfBa1>.
- 5 R. Jonathan Sacks, introduction to *Ten Days, Ten Ways: Paths to the Divine Presence* (2007), available at: <http://www.rabbisacks.org/ten-days-ten-ways-paths-to-the-divine-presence/>.



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