



Talmud Torah: Mitzvah, Mission and Meaning

Shavuot / Parashat Naso, Numbers 4:21 – 7:89 | by Mark Greenspan

“Torah Study” by Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, (pp. 81-97) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

If you had to pick a *mitzvah* that you consider essential for the survival of Judaism, what would it be? Would you choose one of the Ten Commandments or ‘love your neighbor?’ How about a Jewish holiday or Shabbat? Such a choice is a subjective matter but there is no question in my mind which one I would choose: *Talmud Torah*, making time in one’s daily life for the study of Torah. If I could inspire people to do only one thing in their daily lives on a regular basis it would be to study Torah not as a leisurely activity but as a *mitzvah* and a daily discipline. The sages could not say enough about the importance of learning. We begin our day by acknowledging our responsibility ‘to occupy ourselves with Torah.’

A day does not pass that we do not recite passages from the Torah as part of that daily obligation. But Torah is more than the Five Books of Moses. It includes the entire Bible and the oral traditions of Judaism: the discussions of the sages and the insights of the commentators. It is law and lore, poetry, philosophy, and mystical speculation. Torah includes all the ways we seek to discern God’s teachings in our lives. In contemporary times Torah includes historical and critical study of Jewish sources. Figuring out what is God’s will as opposed to what is a product of historical and cultural convention can be confusing. In the words of Rabbi Louis Jacobs, “the search for Torah is also Torah.” As we celebrate Shavuot, the holiday of Torah *par excellence*, let’s spend some time exploring the meaning of this *mitzvah* in our lives.

An entire chapter of [The Observant Life](#) is dedicated to the importance of *Talmud Torah* not as a scholarly pursuit but as a way of life. *Torah L’shmah*, Torah studied for its own sake, is considered to be one of the highest ideals one can strive for. Eliezer Diamond writes: “The key to making *Talmud Torah* part of our lives is to treat it as a “set” or “fixed” obligation of the kind known in the literature as *keva*...to make Torah *keva* means to give it regularity and centrality in our lives... (M Avot 1:15 and BT Shabbat 31a)” More than just an obligation a commitment to *Talmud Torah* is an exciting journey of personal and spiritual discovery.

T’fillah

Praised are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe who sanctifies us with His commandments and commanded us to occupy ourselves with words of Torah. May words of Your Torah, Adonai our God, be sweet in our mouths and in the mouths of Your people so that we, our children, and all the children of the house of Israel may come to love you and study your Torah for its own sake (lishma); praised are you, Adonai, who teaches Torah to His people Israel. Praised are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has chosen us among all peoples by giving us His Torah. Praised are you, Adonai, who gives Torah

- From the Siddur, *La'asok B'divrei Torah* (We are grateful for the gift of Torah)

The Torah Connection

PaRDeS

P’shat – Understanding the plain sense meaning of the text

Without question, life-long devotion to Talmud Torah has been the hallmark of the Jewish people.

Of the five books of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy in particular stresses the importance of study and reviewing the commandments. In the passage that we recite as the first paragraph of the Sh'ma, we are told to "Recite [God's teachings] when at home and when away, when lying down and when rising up" (Deuteronomy 6:7). The monarch of Israel is obligated to have God's teachings (called here simply Torah) written for him on a scroll, which is "to remain with him (so that he may) read it all the days of his life." (Deuteronomy 17:19) At the end of his life, Moses wrote down the divine teachings and gave the scroll to the priests...and commanded them to place it beside the Ark of the Covenant. (Deuteronomy 31:24-26) Moreover, this scroll is not to remain a mere relic. Every seven years during Sukkot, the scroll is to be read in the presence of the men, women, and the children of Israel and the strangers in their midst (Deuteronomy 21:10-13). While this reading may have been ceremonial rather than pedagogical, it implies that all Israelites, and those who have chosen to join them, have an obligation to familiarize themselves with God's teachings.

- Eliezer Diamond, *Talmud Torah, from The Observant Life, editors Martin Cohen and Michael Katz (p. 81)*

Deep is Your love for us, Adonai our God, boundless Your tender compassion. You taught our ancestors life-giving laws. They trusted in You, our Father and King, For their sake graciously teach us. Father, merciful father, show us mercy; grant us discernment and understanding. Then we will study Your Torah, heed its words, teach its precepts and follow its instructions, lovingly fulfilling all its teachings.

- *Siddur Sim Shalom*, Shharit Service, the second *b'rakhab*, before the Sh'ma (we praise God for His gift of Torah sign of His love)

My Commentary: A life-long devotion to the Torah begins in Scripture but finds its fullest expression in rabbinic Judaism. The Rabbis could not imagine a world without studying the will of God. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all spent time in the Yeshiva of Shem and Eber, the grandsons of Noah who founded an academy where people could come and learn the Noahide laws. Judaism is not so much built on faith as it is on learning. For the sages learning was built on a deep belief in revelation, on the idea that God reveals His will to us and it is up to us to discern its significance for our lives. This learning wasn't simply about memorization or rote knowledge of certain truths but the ability to discern, analyze, and question the meaning of these teachings for our lives. No sooner did we canonize the books of the Bible then they became the focal point of study and contemplation. Each generation added its own text that was canonized and then studied as sacred literature. Thus the *Mishnah*, the first codification of the oral law, became the new Torah that was carefully and meticulously studied to seek out the voice of God in the words of human beings. At the core of this learning as we see in our liturgy is the firm belief that God is our Teacher. The Torah is not just a book of learning but a love letter and a sign of God's deep passion for the people, Israel.

- Mark Greenspan

Remez – Allusions: Finding meanings hidden in the text

Words of Torah are compared to water: "Everyone that thirsts come to the water" (Isaiah. 55:1). *As water reaches from one end of the world to the other, so Torah reaches from one end of the world to the other. As water gives life to the world, so Torah gives life to the world. As water is given without cost to the world, so is Torah given without cost to the world. As water is given from heaven, so Torah is given from heaven. As water is given with thunder, so was Torah given to the accompaniment of thunder (at Sinai). As water restores a person's spirit, so Torah restores a person's spirit. As water cleanses a person from uncleanness, so Torah cleanses an unclean person from his uncleanness. As water comes down in many drops and becomes a mighty river, so Torah; today a person learns two Halakhot, tomorrow two more, and so on, until he becomes like a bubbling brook. As water leaves a high place and flows to a low place, so Torah leaves him whose opinion of himself is high and cleaves to him whose spirit is lowly. As water is not kept in vessels of silver or gold, but only in the*

cheapest of vessels, so Torah abides only in one who regards himself as lowly as an earthenware vessel. As when thirsty, a grown man is not ashamed to say to a child, "Let me have a drink of water," so in studying Torah a grown man who is unlearned should not be ashamed to say to a child, "Teach me a chapter or a verse or a word," or even "Teach me a single letter." As with water, if one does not know how to swim in it, he will end by drowning, so with words of Torah: if one does not know how to swim in them and teach them, he will drown in the end.

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: *When a person is on a journey and has no company, let him occupy himself with study of Torah, for Scripture says, "They are to be companions of grace" (Proverbs 1:9). When a person feels pain in his head, let him occupy himself with Torah, since the verse goes on to prescribe "for your head" (ibid.). When a person feels pain in his throat, let him occupy himself with Torah, for the verse likens Torah's words to "a necklace about your throat." When he feels pain in his innards, let him occupy himself with Torah, for another verse says of Torah that "it shall be healing to your navel" (Proverbs 3:8). When he feels pain in his bones, let him occupy himself with Torah, since the verse goes on to describe Torah as "marrow for your bones" (ibid.). When he feels pain in his entire body, let him occupy himself with Torah, since a verse speaks of it as "healing for his whole body" (Proverbs 4:22).*

- BT. Eruvin 54a

My Commentary: Nothing is more basic to human existence than water. We cannot exist without water and the human body is composed of 98% water. By transposing the metaphor, that means we not only need Torah but we are Torah. When the *Midrash* suggests that Torah can be compared to water it also suggests that our very existence begins and ends with Torah. Using the water metaphor as a way of thinking about the power of Torah in our lives, the sages carried the comparison just about as far as they could. Nothing is more ordinary or more essential to human survival than water. But in the classical world, water was also not something one could take for granted. People throughout the Middle East and in the land of Israel in particular lived in a constant state of anxiety of drought.

- Mark Greenspan

Din – Law: Applying the text to life

- *Women, slaves, and minors are exempt from the obligation of Torah study.*
- *Just as a person is obligated to teach his son, so, too, is he obligated to teach his grandson, as [Deuteronomy 4:9] states: "And you shall teach them to your sons and your grandsons." This charge is not confined to one's children and grandchildren alone. Rather, it is a mitzvah for each and every wise man to teach all students, even though they are not his children...*
- *If a person wants to study Torah and he has a son whom he should teach Torah, his [study] takes priority over [that of] his son. If his son is wiser and a more creative thinker and thus capable of understanding what he studies more than he [himself] is, his son is given priority. Even though his son is granted priority, he should not neglect [his own studies]. For just as he is commanded to teach his son, he is commanded to teach himself.*
- *At what age is a father obligated to teach [his son] Torah? When he begins to speak, he should teach him Torah tzivah lanu Moshe... (Deuteronomy 33:4) and Sh'ma Yisrael... (Deuteronomy 6:4). Afterwards he should teach him little by little, verse by verse, until he is six or seven, depending on his health, at which time he should take him to a teacher of young children.*
- *Every Jewish man is obligated to study Torah, whether he is poor or rich, whether his body is healthy and whole or afflicted by difficulties, whether he is young or an old man whose strength has diminished. Even if he is a poor man who derives his livelihood from charity and begs from door to door, even if he is a husband and a father of children, he must establish a fixed time for Torah study during the day and at night, as [Joshua 1:8] commands: "You shall think about it day and night."*
- *The greater Sages of Israel included wood choppers, water drawers, and blind men. Despite these difficulties, they were occupied with Torah study day and night and were included among those who transmitted the Torah's teachings from [master] to [student in the chain stretching back to] Moses, our teacher. Until when is a person obligated to study Torah? Until the day he dies, as (Deuteronomy 4:9) states: "Lest you remove it from your heart, all the days of your life." Whenever a person is not involved with study, he forgets.*

- *A person is obligated to divide his study time in three: one third should be devoted to the Written Law; one third to the Oral Law; and one third to understanding and conceptualizing the ultimate derivation of a concept from its roots, inferring one concept from another and comparing concepts, understanding [the Torah] based on the principles of Biblical exegesis, until one appreciates the essence of those principles and how the prohibitions and the other decisions which one received according to the oral tradition can be derived using them.*

- M. Maimonides, excerpted from *MT, Laws of Torah Study*, Ch. 1

My Commentary: It would have been easier to skip Maimonides' first statement regarding women and Torah study but that would have been dishonest. For Maimonides, women are exempt from Torah study either because they were seen as being intellectually incapable of studying Torah, or because they were exempt from those commandments that might get in the way of familial responsibilities. Whatever the reason for this exemption Maimonides bases his statement on the use of the word *banim*, sons: *v'shinantam livaneikha*, you teach them to your sons. He ignores the fact that *banim* can also mean children, male and female together. More likely, Maimonides is a product of the cultural and social environment in which he lived; it was a world in which women were seen as incapable of engaging in intellectual pursuits. Later in this chapter (I have only quoted part of the chapter here) he acknowledges that while women are exempt, they are not forbidden to study Torah. Since they are not obligated to do so, their reward for Torah study is not as great as that of men, who are obligated to study Torah.

We should not get bogged down by Maimonides' generational prejudice. More interesting are the details of this obligation: We are obligated to teach children (sons) Torah from the time they are old enough to be taught simple verses and we must continue to study Torah until our final breath. Moreover the obligation of parents to educate themselves takes precedence over the education of children. No one is exempt by the social and economic circumstances of one's life. Even a pauper is obligated to study Torah (though Maimonides would not suggest that one should turn oneself into a pauper by only studying Torah to the exclusion of earning a livelihood). Maimonides also suggests that Torah study should include both the written and oral tradition and that one should spend part of one's studying time drawing principles and conclusions from one's studies. As a mitzvah, nothing is left to the imagination: who, when, how, and what.

One thing that appears to be lacking in the Rambams' description of *Talmud Torah* is the social and communal element of this commandment. Although Maimonides speaks of the communal obligation to provide teachers of Torah for the young, *Talmud Torah* appears to be a solitary pursuit and even a philosophical pursuit past an early age. One is obligated to study, but the concept of *bevrutab*, of learning in pairs or in community, does not seem to be something he considered important.

Sod – The Meaning and Mystery of Faith

One cannot overstate the emphasis the sages placed on living a life of learning. Such learning does not even end in this world. The image of Olam Haba, the World to Come, as a great Yeshiva where those who are worthy merit the right to sit at the table studying Torah, is a popular image. The story is told of one man who was given a glimpse of the World to Come. Just a bit disappointed, he asked. "Are these people in heaven?" His host said: "These people who are studying Torah are not in heaven; rather heaven is in them!" So why is there so much emphasis on Talmud Torah? I believe that learning Torah is the doorway to everything else in Jewish life. That is why the Talmud says, "The study of Torah is equal to all the other commandments." (BT, Shabbat 127a) In that spirit I offer the following ten reasons that I believe we cannot live as a people without Torah learning:

1. **Because it's a mitzvah.** *"This book shall not depart from your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night."* (Book of Joshua)
2. **Because understanding Torah allows us to make informed choices about how we practice Judaism.** *"An ignorant person cannot fear God."* (Pirkei Avot 1:)
3. **Because it is wisdom by which we live – it influences the way we act and see the world.** *Studying the codes of Torah law gives us the ability to distinguish between good and evil and separate them from one another ... Thus the evil contained in the four cosmic elements which are the source of the various human character traits is banished. This is the way one can achieve perfection...* (Rav Nahman of Bratzlav)
4. **Because it sharpens the mind and deepens the soul.** *When a person sharpens his mind by studying Torah, his intellect is sharpened and his awareness of the Creator is expanded.* (Rav Nahman of Bratzlav)
5. **Because Torah is the way through which Jews connect to one another both at home and around the world.** *"A talmid habam is not allowed to live in a city that does not have these 10 things: a Beit Din, a Jewish court; a tzedakah fund that is collected by two people and distributed by three; a synagogue; a bath house; a bathroom; a doctor; a craftsman; a blood-letter; a butcher; and a teacher of children"* (BT Sanhedrin 17b)
6. **Because the more Hebrew I know the more I am connected to our culture, civilization, and to other Jews.** *"The Hebrew language will go from the synagogue to the house of study, and from the house of study to the school, and from the school it will come into the home and... become a living language"* (Eliezer ben Yehuda)
7. **When I pray I talk to God; when I study Torah God talks to me!** *"Rabbi Meir taught: Whoever engages in the study of Torah for its own sake achieves a host of merits; moreover, it was worth creating the world for his sake alone. He is called: beloved friend, lover of God, lover of humanity, a joy to God, and a joy to humanity.* (Pirkei Avot 6:1)
8. **Because even if I'm not a believer Torah is the cultural language with which Jews converse.** *"Turn the Torah over again and again. You will find everything in it. Scrutinize it, grow old and grey with it, do not depart from it, for there is no better portion in life than this."* (Pirkei Avot 5:24)
9. **Because I cannot speak intelligently about my heritage unless I have taken the time to understand Torah.** *"Rabbi Elazer taught: Be diligent in the study of Torah so that you will know how to refute the heretic!"* (Pirkei Avot 2:14)
10. **Because I cannot pass on a tradition and the teachings of Judaism to my children unless I know something about it myself.** *"If you truly wish your children to study Torah, study it yourself in their presence. They will follow your example. Otherwise, they will not themselves study Torah but will simply instruct their children to do so."* (Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk)

National Treasures *by Rabbi Mark Greenspan*

Our National treasures
Are not housed
In museums or galleries,

Nor fashioned from marble or stone.
They sit serenely on a shelf
Waiting to be summoned.

Their letters
Rise like an offering
When spoken or sung.

They adorn houses of study and prayer
These are the precious jewels
In our homes, a measure
Of our depth and commitment.

Worn from use and conversation,
Dog-eared from debate,
We don't keep a respectful distance.

Rather, we finger and hold them
Until they can reveal no more
Their words worn thin by our hands.

And then we bury them
In consecrated ground
Along with our loved ones.

But they are not forgotten.
They continue to create memories
And shape character
One word at a time.

Questions to Ponder

1. There are *mitzvos* before which we recite a blessing and others before which we do not do so. How does saying a blessing before Torah study affect the nature of this act?
2. Why does the blessing say “to occupy oneself with words of Torah” instead of “to learn words of Torah?”
3. What keeps you from devoting more time to the study of Torah?
4. Do you think of *Talmud Torah* as an obligation? Why or why not? What religious obligations do you believe we have (if any)?
5. What commandment would you consider essential to Jewish survival?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan