

Parashat Bamidbar-Shavuot, 5783, 2023:

*Talmud Torah: A Springboard to Action*

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

*Chazal* describe Shavuot as *zman matan Torateinu*, the time when Hashem gave us His holy Torah. The world-shaping significance of our subsequent acceptance of the Torah (*kabbalat haTorah*) is given powerful voice in *Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Bereishit I*:

And it is taught in a *baraita*, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: “Why does it say in [the verses depicting] the Creation of the Universe, day one (*yom echad*), second day (*yom shani*), third day (*yom shlishi*), fourth day (*yom revi'i*), fifth day (*yom chamishi*), sixth day (*yom hashishi*), and what is the reason for the [seemingly superfluous] letter “*heh*” [in *yom hashishi*]? [After all,] in all other instances the text only states, *yom echad*, *yom shani* and so on. This is coming to teach us that the Holy One blessed be He stated this condition to the entire Universe: ‘If the Jewish people will accept the Torah that is comprised of five books [hinted at by the numerical value of the letter *heh* =5], then all will be good [that is, all that has been created will continue to exist]. If not, however, I will return everything that exists to its pre-Creation state—*tohu vavohu*.’” (Translation my own)

According to this midrash, the continuation of the Universe was contingent upon the Jewish people accepting the Torah. Little wonder, then, that *Chazal* consistently emphasize the singular import of Torah study. One of the best-known examples that gives voice to this idea is *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 127a*:

These are the matters that a person does them and enjoys their profits in this world, and nevertheless the principal exists for him for the World-to-Come, and they are: Honoring one’s father and mother, and acts of loving kindness, and bringing peace between a person and another, and Torah study is equal to all of them—*v’talmud Torah k’neged kulam*. (All Talmud translations, *The Koren Talmud Bavli*, translation, Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz *zatzal*)

If *talmud Torah* is *k'neged kulam*, what is the nature of the relationship between Torah study and other *mitzvot*? This crucial question is addressed in *Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin* 40b:

And there already was an incident in which Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders (*zekanim*) were reclining in the loft of the house of Nit'za, in Lod, when this question was asked of them: Is study greater (*talmud gadol*) or is action greater (*ma'aseh gadol*)? Rabbi Tarfon answered and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva answered and said: Study is greater. Everyone answered and said [that is, the consensus was]: Study is greater, but not as an independent value; rather, it is greater, as study leads to action—*talmud gadol sh'hatalmud mavi l'yedei ma'aseh*.

Rashi (1040-1105) interprets the concluding phrase of our passage, “*talmud gadol sh'hatalmud mavi l'yedei ma'aseh*,” as: “*nimtza shneihem b'yado*—both Torah study and action will be within his grasp.” According to this approach, since *talmud Torah* enables the proper fulfillment of *mitzvot* actions, it complements *ma'aseh*. In other words, while Rabbi Tarfon champions the notion *ma'aseh gadol*, and Rabbi Akiva ostensibly argues and states, “*talmud gadol*,” they are not actually in disagreement. Instead, both of these Torah giants agree that study is greater, but not as an independent value; rather, it is greater because it leads to action.

In his *Chidushei Aggadot* on *Kiddushin* 40b, the Maharal of Prague (Rabbi Yehudah Loew ben Bezalel, 1512 ca-1609) advances our understanding of the ultimate value of *mitzvot* actions:

*Ma'aseh gadol*: [This statement of Rabbi Tarfon] means that action is indispensable, whereas the Torah that one learns in order to perform [a particular act] is not as fundamental as the *ma'aseh* [itself], as the ideal outcome [of Torah study] is the proper fulfillment of [the *mitzvot*]. This is the case, since man is not exclusively an intellectual entity, for, [only if he was] completely cerebral would his Torah be his very being... therefore, action is the essence [of humankind] ... (Translation and brackets my own)

According to the Maharal, while *talmud Torah* is a central part of Jewish living and a powerful component of our intellectual makeup, it is nonetheless insufficient if it does not lead to *mitzvot* observance. This is congruent with the well-known axiom in *Pirkei Avot*: “*v’lo hamidrash ikkar elah hama’aseh*—Torah study is not the essence, but rather, the deed.” (1:17)

With Hashem’s help, may we be *zocheh* to attain the ideal stated by Rabbi Yishmael, son of Rabbi Yossi: “*V’halomed al manat la’asot*—And one who learns in order to do is given the opportunity to learn, teach, observe and do.” (*Pirkei Avot* 4:5, translation, Rabbi Yosef Marcus). *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Sameach*,

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Please contact me at [rdb718@gmail.com](mailto:rdb718@gmail.com) to be added to my weekly email list.

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\*\*\* I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)