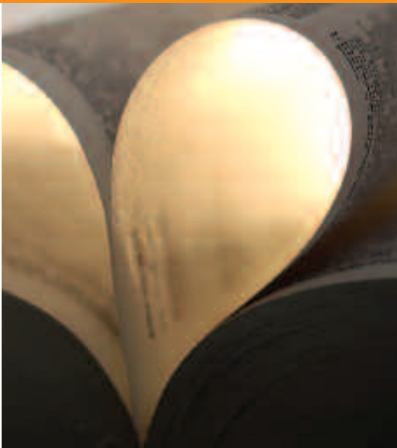


Facilitator's Guide





Introduction

In Preparation for This Day

During the last fifty years, Jewish life has witnessed a renewed passion for Jewish study in general and the study of Talmud in particular. Early on, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz understood that many Jews, especially in Israel, yearned to have access to Talmud study, but required a text that was more accessible to a modern reader. This desire for accessibility without sacrificing authenticity gave birth to a lifelong project known worldwide as *The Steinsaltz Talmud*. The project was nothing short of revolutionary. The readable Hebrew translation alongside the vocalized and punctuated Talmud gave access to many for whom the Talmud was a closed book. Jews from all walks of life awaited each successive volume with tremendous enthusiasm. After over forty years, and tens of thousands of learners later, this daunting task is about to be completed. Fueled by his passionate axiom “Let my people know,” Rabbi Steinsaltz has completed this amazing gift to the Jewish people.

The Global Day of Jewish Learning was conceived in order to celebrate this monumental achievement. Because so many Jews have been enriched by this work, it is only fitting that representatives from the entire Jewish community come together to mark this special day. In keeping with Rabbi Steinsaltz's vision, we have endeavored to make this curriculum accessible to those who have never studied Talmud before as well as to those who are seasoned scholars. The only thing required to bring to the text is one's unique life experience. This is the context necessary for delving deeply into the passages that have been selected for today's learning.

Your primary goal as facilitator is to guide the student to understand the text on its own terms, and to make the study of the text central to the class. These texts have been chosen for their relevance to human experience, but in the end, the true purpose of the day is to give each student a familiarity with and an appreciation for the study of Talmud.

With great care, we have selected texts that provoke thought, but do not assume beliefs or practices by the reader. Everyone who engages with the text seriously will be provoked to think not only about the meaning of the text but the meaning of their lives as well. This engagement with meaning is critical for the success of these classes.

Begin each class with the text, and then guide the discussion to personal examples. Only then should you bring the discussion back to understanding the Talmud. Engagement with learning is not something relegated to the stereotypical Yeshiva student alone; the Talmud, once the barrier of language has been removed, is truly for everyone. By keeping the classic Talmudic format in English, we have endeavored to keep that flavor of learning so when students prepare the page, they can move from the centerpiece to the margins and then back to the centerpiece as one would do if learning the text in the original language.

Sometimes, the text in the margins offers parallel texts from the Hebrew Bible. One might also find parallel sources from Rabbinic literature. Navigating questions facilitate the learning of the text. How much or little you avail yourself of the guiding questions is totally up to you. We encourage you and the students to engage in your own questions when learning.

When a phrase in the centerpiece is marked in red, look for a poignant commentary in the margin that is directly related to that passage, repeated in red so that it is easy to locate. Just as the Steinsaltz Talmud did for so many, in this guide we have endeavored to alleviate the frustration that comes from engaging in a new discipline.

Introduction

The Difference Between a Facilitator and an Instructor

The packet is designed to be used in a variety of formats from which you are free to choose. All of the proposed formats can be easily applied to the material without any adaptation. Classes can vary in length, but we assume that they will be approximately an hour. Each text is rich with nuance, and a serious reckoning with the text will certainly yield new perspectives and meaning.

Beyond a text-by-text 60-minute discussion, here are some alternative formats you might consider:

- Have the students prepare together in pairs, by discussing the texts with the provided questions. Give them 20 to 30 minutes to prepare the sources and then bring them back together to share their insights. Monitor their progress so you know how many sources they have covered. Often you will find that they say they didn't have enough time (this is a good thing!). You can also let them know that they have simulated a classical Beit Midrash, which is the way the Talmud has been studied for millennia.
- Divide the class into small groups and assign a source or two to each group. For each question provided on the worksheet, ask them to come up with a matching question to share with the group when they get together. Give each group 10 to 15 minutes to work together and then reconvene the entire class and ask each group to share their insights.
- Divide the class into small groups and have the entire class learn one or two sources (depending on the length) for 5 to 7 minutes. Then bring them back for a debriefing that will also be 5 minutes at most. Do that for all the sources, leaving time for a 5- to 7-minute summary at the end.

These formats have the advantage of empowering students to grapple actively with the texts themselves instead of hearing a lecture. You may also choose a combination of these formats.

Included in this guide are specific suggestions for you to consider, but the aforementioned formats can easily be applied to most of the classes offered. Your creative approaches to the classes are welcome as long as they serve the goal of deeper understanding of the material. Therefore, you should consider creative presentations using different media when you see that these approaches will be beneficial to understanding the text and finding it meaningful. The hope is that both these goals will be realized and that the Talmud will have gained hundreds of students as a result of this great day.

A Final Word

One of the few things that still unifies the Jewish people is the study of Torah. Even though there is disagreement regarding the Torah and the Talmud's authority, its centrality is undeniable. For this alone, this is a day for all Jews to celebrate and cherish.



Models of Leadership

The purpose of this class is to delve into the question of whether leadership is an innate quality, or something that can be cultivated.

Ask the group to make a large list of what they consider the essential qualities for leadership. Once you have the list, prioritize and choose the five most essential qualities. Ask people to justify their answers either anecdotally or historically.

Carolyn McCarthy's story is brought as a slight challenge to V. A. Howard's assumption that leadership is innate. If Howard is correct, why was it that Carolyn McCarthy was so blind to her potential; why wasn't it realized before? Can people think of other examples where an unknown personality emerged "out of nowhere" and dazzled everyone with his leadership potential?

In this context, what does it mean when it says in Pirkei Avot: "in a place where there is no one person [to do what is needed,] endeavor to be that person"?

The next Mishnah gives a unique role to "the special ones," and the commentary in the margins examines how a "special one" is designated. What are the criteria? Can one determine this status independently, or does it need to be corroborated by others?

In this context the fine line between an honest self-assessment, confidence, and arrogance is being examined. What would be the pitfall of one designating oneself as a "special one" when this perception was not shared by the community? Can anyone think of any examples in their own lives when this has happened?

What gave Carolyn McCarthy the credibility to be viewed as a "special one"?



Leadership and Humility

Before beginning the lesson, make sure everyone has pen and paper. Give them the following instruction: “Please list three non-negotiable qualities every good leader must have.”

Give the group 3 minutes to write down their lists, and then quickly go around the room and list their qualities on a white board or a large paper tablet. This part of the class should take 5 to 7 minutes.

Once the qualities are listed, pass out the text sheets. The purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate how different a Classic Jewish model of leadership is from conventional definitions of leaders in all spheres of life.

When studying the text, don't assume that everyone means the same thing when they use the term “humility.” Part of your job as facilitator is to get a group working definition of the term in this particular context.



A Tale of Two Rabbis

The following story has all the elements of a Talmudic narrative. Its characters include conflicted rabbis, angels' voices, and an ambiguous, unresolved ending. For some, ambiguous endings are the source of great frustration because we desire to know "what happened?" The Talmud, however, invites us in to help resolve the story by bringing our own questions and solving them within the context of the narrative. We get to create a satisfying ending as long as it is in harmony with the facts of the story. The narrative gives clues, but leaves more up to the reader than the reader may be used to.

Choose a group of people, preferably ones who can bring a dramatic edge to their presentation, and send them out of the room to study the story and familiarize themselves with their lines. While they are preparing their presentation, study the text using the questions in the margins as your guide. Once the discussion is completed, bring in the cast and let them present the narrative as a play. After they have completed their performance, ask Rabbi Yochanan to leave so that you can interview Ilfa.

Ask Ilfa the following questions:

- What did you feel when Yochanan chose to return?
- Why do you think he chose to do so?
- You were upset when they told you that you could have been the leader; what were you trying to prove when you climbed the mast and challenged people to ask you questions?
- Did you think you were more worthy than Rabbi Yochanan?
- Do you wish you would have stayed?
- Did you think there was anything symbolic or significant in what you were asked by the old man, and if there was, what was the significance?

Now ask Ilfa to join the class and bring in Rabbi Yochanan:

- Why do you think you heard the voice and Ilfa didn't?
- Were you still worried about being poor after you heard what the angels said?
- Did you know that people thought Ilfa was a more talented scholar than you, and they would have made him leader had he stayed? Did you think so, too?
- If you knew that the angels, but not the people, thought you were the best man for the job, would you have tried to convince Ilfa to come back with you?
- Why do you think the angels chose you as the leader, and not Ilfa?

Bring out personal experiences regarding leadership roles that have been admired, and how that reflects what they have learned from Ilfa and Rabbi Yochanan.



Exemplars of Empathy

Extreme piety, especially when it comes in the form of selfless devotion to others, often makes one feel uneasy. The cases of Nahum Ish Gamzu and Abba Hilkia are no exception. One gateway into these texts is to hit this discomfort with their behavior head on.

- Is one not supposed to expect some pleasure out of life?
- How was Nahum Ish Gamzu supposed to know the man was about to die?
- Who was the suffering for, ultimately? Was it for Nahum Ish Gamzu, and if so, would he have consider it suffering?
- As for Abba the Surgeon, do you believe that there is a correlation between one's skill and one's character?
- If you were going to a surgeon would you look for the most skilled, or the best person?

Because there are three different narratives, this would be an opportunity to either introduce each narrative with a different format, or assign each narrative to one third of the class and let them decide how to present the material for discussion. The class can be encouraged to see their presentation as including how they have understood the material.



The Man Who Would Give Too Much

Tzedakah may be the least controversial concept in Judaism. All world religions commend those who contribute their resources to helping those who are less fortunate. But the Talmudic tradition and its Rabbinic successors view the whole enterprise of giving as more complex than one might think. They discuss the amount and manner of giving tzedakah, and describe the desirable qualities of who should be the collectors. The Talmud concerns itself not only with those who are reluctant to give, but also with those who, left to their own designs, would give too much.

Before one looks at the following pages, have a brief conversation about the motivation for helping others. Think of a particular person you know, or have known, whom you see as a model of generosity—or as one would say in Hebrew, a Ba'al Tzedakah (master of tzedakah), and explain how that person exemplified the value of tzedakah.

The following page starts with a quotation from the Torah dealing with the obligation of giving tzedakah. The quotations are selections from the Rambam (Maimonides) who echoes the Biblical mandate. He not only elucidates what communal structures are required, but he speaks of the very nature of Jews and their relationship to giving. He hints that it is in our very nature to give tzedakah. How do you understand him when he says this? Is he saying that our genetic makeup is different from that of others?

After discussing Maimonides for a few minutes, read the Talmudic excerpt from tractate Ta'anit (left column). The passage relates the story of a man who literally gives whatever he has for tzedakah. Is he supposed to do that? If not, why is the Talmud telling us this story? If so, what sources is he relying upon in order to be allowed to put his family in jeopardy? To fully understand this story, please reserve judgment and give a sympathetic reading in order to see what might be the rationale of this narrative.

Next read the right-hand column and see how the Talmudic passage from Ketubot challenges or disapproves of this man's generosity. Yet, doesn't the story seem to give Divine approval for his behavior? Why might you think this person is an exception to the rule? What makes him different?

Here are two exercises:

1. In the narrative in Ta'anit, the family members have very minor roles, but they are the ones who endure the consequences of Rabbi Elazar ben Birta's actions. If you were going to write them into the narrative, what might they say? Expand the narrative to include their voices.
2. On the one hand, God performs a miracle and rewards the Rabbi's generosity. On the other hand, the Rabbi refuses to enjoy the bounty that God has given him and has denied it to his daughter as well. Is the narrator approving or disapproving of Rabbi Elazar's behavior? Use only the text for proofs.



Keeping Commitments and Tzedakah

Most curricula regarding tzedakah cut right to the chase. Questions such as “how much should one give?” and “What is the best way to give tzedakah?” are certainly practical questions that need to be addressed, and that one needs to know. Aside from generosity, there are many other aspects of being a Ba'al Tzedakah (a master of tzedakah). A Ba'al Tzedakah is sensitive to the dignity of the person he is helping. He is one who keeps his promises and commitments in all things, and not only when his pledge is of public knowledge. These are issues of character that go well beyond discreet acts of generosity and benevolence. Giving tzedaka is the Jewish tax system. Building communal institutions and helping individuals were both considered ways to fulfill one's obligation of giving ten percent of one's income.

Simply put, one cannot expect to receive God's favor if one does not behave as a good steward of distributing His bounty. If we are fortunate to not know hunger, and we enjoy the warmth of hearth and home, we have been entrusted by God to take care of those who are hungry, and require shelter.

This is a sacred trust that has its roots in the Tractate of Ta'anit. In Israel, there is no more precious commodity than rainfall. Without water, one cannot live; anyone who has visited Israel is immediately struck by the “mighty” Jordan River that often looks more like a quiet stream. Rain and the withholding of rain were considered primary ways that God demonstrated how He was feeling about His people. The withholding of rain aroused a complacent population to prayer, and fasting. The Rabbis of the Talmud wondered what behavior brought the rain, and what behavior would cause the rains to cease. It is this relationship to rain that reminds us that we all are the recipients of tzedakah. Without the gift of rainfall in Eretz Yisrael, we would perish. How could we ensure God's favor so that the rains would come in due season?

The following passage is concerned with this issue. The story of the rat and the well was presumably so well known at the time that the Talmud only alludes to it, but does not tell us the story at all. The commentator Rashi gives one version, the Ba'alei Tosaphot gives another, while the author of the Arukh (a Hebrew Aramaic Talmudic lexicon), Natan ben Yechiel—an Italian contemporary of Rashi—has the most extensive rendering. This is meant to be a lesson not only on tzedakah, but also on how different versions of the story may evoke different meanings.

Starting with Rashi, continuing with Tosaphot, and then ending with the Arukh, analyze each story separately. What is the moral of Rashi's version of the story, and does one draw the same conclusion in Tosaphot's version? If not, what changes? Then compare both Rashi and Tosaphot's version to the version of the Arukh.

Now go back to the Talmud and see how each version illustrates the point the Talmud was trying to make—i.e., that keeping promises ensures that ample rain will be provided. It is the Arukh's version that has the most potential for dramatic presentation. After studying Rashi's and Tosaphot's recounting of the story, ask for volunteers to present their version of the Arukh's story with complete license to embellish as much as they would like, providing that they don't contradict any part of the story as presented in the original. While the group is preparing their presentation, discuss the story with the remainder of the class. After about 15 minutes, the group presents a 5-minute or less presentation, after which the class will discuss how the story has been understood.



What's in a Miracle?

Anytime one feels a prayer has been answered, would that be considered a miracle? Does a miracle have to have a supernatural component to be considered “miraculous”? This class should spend the first 5 minutes creating a working definition of what constitutes a miracle, after which, these stories should be studied. Feel free to use any of the formats discussed in the beginning of this packet, since there are several different narratives here.

It may very well be that you have encountered some of these texts in another class, but as often happens in the Talmud, the same story can be used for an entirely different purpose, which then gives us a dramatically different understanding of the story itself. How context alters meaning is central to understanding how the Talmud works, and therefore, repetition of material has been introduced to demonstrate what occurs.



Miracles as Signs and Wonders

In order to provide a context for this class, a trigger is appropriate. Let the students offer definitions for the word “miracle.” See how many students feel they have experienced something of a miraculous nature, and how many have not.

Is believing in miracles problematic?

Once these questions have been considered, they can be revisited after the texts have been studied. Students should be encouraged to analyze why Maimonides is suspicious of miracles and how that might apply to contemporary circumstances.

Many of the questions on the study sheet will revisit these questions, but it will be helpful for the student to have considered them beforehand.



Who Needs Miracles?

“We do not rely on miracles . . . “ is a popular Talmudic axiom. People, to the best of their ability, are to care for themselves. If nature is distorted in order to achieve a miracle, there is discomfort that such dramatic action was necessary. When miracles occur, there is often an assumption that they will not be repeated. Praying for a miracle is sometimes seen as a sign of resignation that, as in the case of Hanina ben Dosa, is seen as tantamount to spiritual failure.

These surprising stories introduce an aspect rarely considered when pondering the miraculous. Miracles indicate a certain failing in humanity to govern their lives. Miracles, in these circumstances, are borne out of desperation and powerlessness.

In the case of Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, he is not ready to throw in the towel; he begs for a miracle to take back the miraculous gift he has been given.

In the subsequent stories, one sees variations on the theme of miracles with a double edge. Often lost in the gratitude for miracles is the anguish that prompted the miracle in the first place. These stories remind us of the suffering that necessitated the intervention of a supernatural God, and the accompanying stigma for needing it.



Love and Marriage

Begin the class by saying, “Before we study a bit about how things used to be done, let us take a moment to analyze the way we do things now. Let’s write down and discuss all the complaints we have about contemporary conventions of dating.” Once you have spent 5 to 7 minutes having this discussion, it is time to introduce in a neutral way what the expectations of a relationship were in the Talmud. Marriages were arranged by the two sets of parents, but as evidenced in the sources there was also a romantic component that is acknowledged.

No subject fuels the imagination more than romantic love. Innumerable songs, poetry, books, and paintings depict the euphoria of love lost found and the tragedy of love unrequited or love lost. Romantic love is often depicted as fleeting, and difficult, if not impossible, to sustain.

For a religious tradition, however, what is the purpose of the passions released when one is caught in the thrall of romance? How is one supposed to assimilate these feelings and use them for a sacred purpose?

Beyond the hormonal response and the biological necessity for propagation of the species, what does the experience of love teach us about our relationship with each other and our relationship with God?

The Torah teaches us to “love our neighbor as we would love ourselves.” We are also enjoined to “love your God” as well as the stranger. Are these commandments that legislate feelings, actions, or both?

The following Mishnah, the last one in the Tractate of Ta’anit, introduces us to a little known holiday, Tu B’Av—the 15th day in the month of Av. We are told that it is, along with Yom Kippur, the best of the best of festivals. Yom Kippur and Tu B’Av share a staged event where single boys and girls meet for the purpose of marriage. The Sages had an interest in making sure that these interactions were supervised appropriately, so that the sacred purpose of these contrived encounters would not be ignored.

Love for the sake of love was not a concept that the Sages entertained. For them, love must have a purpose, and the purpose is marriage, Kiddushin, a sacred context for sanctifying the union between husband and wife. Thus, even courtship was orchestrated with marriage in mind. That’s what made the following Mishnah so interesting.

The description of the ceremony includes many clues for divining the norms of courtship two thousand years ago. Let us create a conversation with this Mishnah where we supply both the questions and the answers. This speculation is not entirely arbitrary. The answers have to make sense and not contradict anything else in the Mishnah.

It is easy to see how differently things were done “back in the day,” but what hasn’t changed, and what does that teach us about relationships between men and women?

Beauty: Asset or Liability?

From *The Village Voice*, a tale of being too beautiful:

Everything about Debrahlee Lorenzana is hot. Even her name sizzles. At five-foot-six and 125 pounds, with soft eyes and flawless bronze skin, she is J.Lo curves meets Jessica Simpson bust meets Audrey Hepburn elegance—a head-turning beauty. In many ways, the story of her life has been about getting attention from the unwanted kind. But when she got fired last summer from her job as a banker at a Citibank branch in Midtown—her bosses cited her work performance—she got even hotter. She sued Citigroup, claiming that she was fired solely because her bosses thought she was too hot. This is the way Debbie Lorenzana tells it: Her bosses told her they couldn't concentrate on their work because her appearance was too distracting. They ordered her to start wearing turtlenecks. She was also forbidden to wear pencil skirts, three-inch heels, or fitted business suits. Lorenzana, a 33-year-old single mom, pointed out female colleagues whose clothing was far more revealing than hers: **"They said their body shapes were different from mine, and I drew too much attention," she says. (Elizabeth Dwoskin, "Is This Woman Too Hot to Be a Banker?" *The Village Voice*, June 6, 2010).**

The question of "who is responsible" is a matter for the courts and American law, but the question of "what is realistic to expect" is a matter for discussion. The advantage, and now the disadvantage, of beauty in a meritocracy raise interesting questions.

- Can beauty be a distraction, and can it be controlled?
- Are there objective standards for beauty?
- When is beauty an advantage, and when, other than the case mentioned here, is it a disadvantage?
- How might beauty inhibit one's own intellectual potential?

The following Talmudic passages (Ta'anit 7a-7b, Gitin 58a, and Nedarim 66a) raise these issues from the perspective of spiritual growth and how beauty may enhance or detract from one's potential.

There is also the question of objective and subjective beauty, which is addressed on the following page (Ketubot 16-17a). These are things we often think about. Ask the group whether the statement "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" is completely or partially accurate, and why. One can conclude from the discussion of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai that both agree that what is beautiful and what isn't is an empirical question. Beit Hillel, however, chooses to spare the feelings of the bride by giving a uniformly affirmative answer. The Maharal understands that Beit Hillel is not abandoning truth in the interest of sensitivity. He is, however, redefining what is meant when we compliment a plain-looking bride.



Three Keys: Hannah's Prayer

What is significant about God being directly responsible for something instead of an emissary? Why these three things? What do they indicate about God's relationship to the community? Once that discussion has occurred, go to the left-hand margin and read the first chapter of Samuel.

It is not common knowledge that Hannah, the mother of Samuel, was a major influence on how Jews have prayed together for at least the past two thousand years. Moreover, this Talmudic passage is a straightforward example of how a structure of Jewish practice is derived from Biblical narrative. In this case, the rules of how the silent devotion is practiced come from the Sages' examination of exactly how Hannah behaved.

The purpose of the exercise found in the lower right-hand margin is for the class to experience the relationship between the Talmudic tradition and the Hebrew Bible. Assign them to create a list of rules from the first chapter of the Book of Samuel, before they look at the Talmudic passage in Brachot. Discuss the rules they came up with and make sure they back them up with proof texts. Following that discussion, have someone read the Talmudic passage from Brachot aloud.

Discuss what is similar and what is different between the readings of the class and the way the Sages chose to read this chapter.

One of the salient points of the Rabbinic reading is that Hannah enunciates the words so quietly that Eli only sees her lips move. Hannah tells him that she is not intoxicated, but merely embittered, yet the Sages learn that this is something every Jew should do when praying. What is the purpose of doing it this way?



What Causes Prayer to Work?

Stories of Prayers That Get Results and Prayers That Don't

The following examples in Section One come directly from the Torah. These are two of the earliest examples of prayer that we have. Much of later liturgy refers to the selections quoted here.

Section One offers the Biblical context for prayers for forgiveness. Section Two also illustrates how contrition might rectify an abnormal situation. The presumption is that it is abnormal for the Creator to withhold adequate rainfall to those created in His image.

Section Two contains some texts from the Talmudic period. Over sixteen hundred years old, these stories demonstrate how the lessons learned from the Torah were applied to less dramatic but equally critical situations. Drought threatens everyone, and therefore indicates heavenly displeasure with the human condition.

The class may find that there is too much material for an individual to cover. In that case, split up the class and assign a portion to each group. Make them responsible for presenting how they understood the material and what they thought of it. Your job will be to moderate the questions posed to the group as well as bringing your understanding to the discussion.



To Whom Does God Listen?

This shiur covers the psychology of effective prayer and focuses on the state of mind of the petitioner. In these sources, prayer is not a negotiation between two equal parties, but a petition for mercy where the only recourse is absolute sincerity and contrition. Effective prayer does not allow one to make a case for one's self—in fact, the opposite is true. The assumption is that one is not deserving or good enough, and can rely only on God's mercy. It is only the reckoning of one's inadequacy that makes prayer effective.

Exhibit A: Rebuke

It goes without saying that there are many possible answers to the questions offered on this source. It is clear that the community, after thirteen fasts, is exhausted and has understandably given up. Presumably, Rabbi Eliezer is aware of the weariness of the community. You may wish to explore what's behind his rebuke. Is it a strategy to energize them, or is it a response of genuine frustration?

After the class has studied and answered the questions, this may be a way to get them to think about what we are being taught.

Exhibit B: Self-Deprecation

Once again, we are reminded that acknowledgment of self-worth is not an effective strategy for prayer. When a communal leader acknowledges his inadequacy before the Master of the Universe, and the leader receives an affirmative response from the Master, what is the Master teaching the leader? Is God saying that Yehuda Hanasi is equal to Shmuel, or is God saying something else? If you were Yehuda Hanasi, what would you think if your prayers were answered?

Exhibit C: A Broken Heart

What is the relationship between being truly contrite and being self-deprecating? When one is despairing, what does one think of himself? What is the relationship between a broken heart and humility? Do you think that one can only see the truth about one's self if prepared to believe the worst? Even though qualities like confidence, self-esteem, and assuredness are considered positive, why, in this case, might they be considered impediments to prayer? The values of self-criticism, harsh assessment, and self-deprecation are the tools of choice in times when one feels helpless and powerless. There is no such thing as confidence in times of a drought or a plague. Everyone is at the mercy of God, and there is no room for pretense in times of great need.

Exhibit D: Undeserved Gifts

The previous themes are reiterated in this simple Rashi. When one is asking for favors, it is never good to presume that one is deserving of them. From God, the presumption of entitlement will not get one anywhere. In the end, it will be God who determines who is deserving of favor; all an individual can do is "plead."

Exhibit E: Obstacles to Prayer

A topic for consideration on this source is that the community's past behavior has a direct impact on whether a prayer will be answered. This activist approach assumes that there are misdeeds that may have to be acknowledged before God will accede to any request. This requires one to do an accounting, a moral inventory of the community's behavior to determine if behavior in some way may be found lacking. In this way, a calamity is an opportunity for growth. If people believe that more exemplary behavior would find favor in God's eyes, then everyone wins.

To Whom Does God Listen?

How might it be that the community has moral issues of which they are unaware? What would such a process entail? Think about the formal confession that we make on Yom Kippur, and how that might cause us to become aware of a moral failing that we had yet to acknowledge.

In conclusion, most of these sources are more concerned about what is going on inside the person than outside of him. Beyond whether prayers are answered or not, do they serve another purpose as well? How might a prayerful person be different from one who is not so inclined? What other advantages are there for one who engages in this process sincerely and wholeheartedly?

The sources make it clear that the rituals must seriously reflect the genuinely desperate sincerity of the community, or who the community chooses to represent them. Leaders, are not guaranteed an audience by virtue of their leadership; they are worthy only by virtue of their humility. It is only the broken heart and the depleted spirit that connect in desperate times.



The World Is a Human Responsibility

This class is specifically designed for those who have an interest in the topic and prefer to work directly with the Hebrew text.

The piece is a companion to the “Is a Man a Tree of the Field?” class and makes use of the same verse. Refer to the commentaries brought from that class when appropriate.

Humanity's purpose is an age-old question, and the duality of purpose that is subtly explicated in the two chapters of Genesis reflects this duality.

The Talmudic passage in Sanhedrin that follows elucidates the tension between humanity being “in charge” but at the same time enjoined to view this not as an honor, but as a grave responsibility. There is significance that we were created last, and were preceded by mosquitoes.

The passage in Baba Metziya is the most personally poignant, as the role of empathy in human encounters with the natural world is explored. Rebbe is punished because he harshly rebukes a dumb animal. His suffering is relieved only after he has learned his lesson.

The three notes to hit on this class are:

- The duality of purpose
- The necessity of humility
- The necessity of empathy

More important than what we do is how we go about doing it.



Is a Man a Tree of the Field?

This class, although it makes use of primary Jewish texts exclusively, does not focus on the Talmud, but on genres that draw from the literature of the period. The Midrash Sifre, for instance, is an ancient commentary that was contemporaneous with the earliest section of the Talmud, which is the Mishnah. It is not possible to speak of environmental issues in Judaism without invoking the verse from Parshat Shoftim, “For a man is a tree of the field.” Even though this verse does not appear in Ta’anit, it has had tremendous impact on Jewish legal literature, as evidenced by the medieval commentary surrounding the page.

In many ways the conflict between commentators mirrors the environmental debate today. As stewards of the planet, to what degree may we exploit its riches? What are the parameters of responsibility? As the commentators parse this ambiguous verse, they come out with different conclusions.

It is important to point out that the Hebrew word “ki” has many different meanings.

Rashi sees it as introducing a question: Is a man a tree of the field?

Ibn Ezra views it as a statement: For a man is a tree of the field.

Nachmanides (Ramban) agrees with Ibn Ezra, but learns that even fruit trees at times of need could be used for timber.

The author of Hakatav V’Hakabalah disagrees, and sees that the very nature of fruit trees makes it forbidden to violate that for which they were created.

What makes this argument different than a modern discussion is that it centers on understanding what a verse from the Torah is trying to teach, and through that process it is understood what constitutes appropriate behavior. Even though the process of debate is different, there is still plenty of room for disagreements. Even if the Talmud is somewhat absent from the page, the mode of discourse is quintessentially Talmudic.



Testing God

A Class for Those Who Ponder the Deepest Questions

“Where was God?” Often in our tragic history this question is asked. Behind the question, however, is an expectation that God should have been “there,” or more to the point, an assumption that He was somewhere else. This question has not only always been in the minds of our sages, but has been part and parcel of our earliest history. A covenantal relationship assumes reciprocity. God promises us life and long days in exchange for fulfilling the commandments. What happens when we test the waters? What happens when we do something in order to see how God will respond? Are we allowed to play “gotcha” with God?

Open up a discussion with your class on whether it is fair to test God, and why. This should be a personal discussion. Following this less than 10-minute conversation, take a look at a sampling of Biblical verses that deal with this issue, after which we will stick our toes in the sea of Talmud. We have chosen a selection from the tractate of Ta’anit, along with three giants of Jewish medieval philosophy who are concerned about this question. Put on your thinking caps! This class is not for the easily daunted.

At the center of the first page you will find some verses from the Torah, where the Children of Israel complain to Moses for water, and they doubt whether God is among them. This is followed by a verse from Deuteronomy where it is taught that “testing God” is forbidden. The right and left margins have two opinions of both Nachmanides (Ramban) and Maimonides (Rambam), both of whom are commenting on the verse in Deuteronomy. Nachmanides is relating to the issue of testing God in general, whereas Maimonides concentrates on how one should relate to a Prophet who has met the criteria for being one. You may want to split your group into two teams, each working on one commentator and presenting his opinion to the other team.

The Talmudic passage on the second page brings an exception to the rule about testing God. Also, the banter between the child and Rabbi Yochanan has a provocative edge that deserves comment. Discuss how each of the previous commentators read this story. A further comment on this particular Talmudic passage is brought by Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri. Not leaving room for any practical testing of God, his view might follow Maimonides’.



Arguing with God

How does God lead the world? And how can humanity influence an omnipotent and omniscient being? Logic may dictate that if we mere mortals cannot understand how God operates in the world, how can we have the temerity to influence God's behavior?

From the time of Abraham we have examples of just that: Individuals who managed to influence God's decisions, sometimes modifying them, while at other times seemingly changing them altogether.

To understand God's relationship to His people through a Biblical and Talmudic lens, one must leave certain assumptions aside. God does not view His role as merely the autocratic dictator, but He invites discussion and leaves open the possibility for change. It is a dynamic relationship where the Holy One, the Master, is in charge, but the human, the servant, is more than a silent partner. Perhaps the decision is not final until we have weighed in.

The following passages from the Hebrew Bible and the Talmudic tractate of Ta'anit will provide insight into the Biblical and Rabbinic understanding of this complex relationship. The Talmudic passage on the first page will end as a cliffhanger and discussion of the text is invited. Following the discussion, please turn to page two for the conclusion of the Talmudic passage that gives the Talmud's answer to the dilemma that has been presented.



What is Talmud Torah?

A class by the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School

A Word from...

**Dr. Yonatan Mirvis, FMAMS International Director, and
Judy Mars Kupchan, FMAMS North American Director**

The entire Florence Melton Adult Mini-School family is proud to be a partner and a participant in The Global Day of Learning, in celebration of the completion of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz's monumental work. This is truly a milestone for the Jewish global learning community.

November 7 has additional significance for this community: it is Florence Melton's birthday. Florence, z"l, who passed away in 2007 at the age of 95, left us a rich legacy of Jewish learning for adults, and we are all the beneficiaries.

This lesson from the curriculum which bears Florence's name is but a small glimpse into the results of her extraordinary vision to bring high quality, pluralistic, text-based learning to Jewish adults.

The experience in Jewish learning in which you are about to engage should be attributed to Florence Melton. May her memory be a source of great blessing for us all.



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What is Talmud Torah?

A Word from...

Rabbi Morey Schwartz, FMAMS Director of Curriculum and Faculty Development

On behalf of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-Schools, it is our pleasure to submit a modified lesson from our core curriculum for study as part of the Global Day of Learning 2010. This particular lesson, entitled Talmud Torah (Study of Torah), serves as the concluding lesson of our first year course, *Purposes of Jewish Living*. Our core adult studies curriculum is made up of four courses, all of them text-based. While the texts included in our curriculum span the generations, from biblical texts to contemporary ones, this specific lesson centers on a number of texts from the Mishnah and the Talmud, making it particularly appropriate for this celebration of Rabbi Adin Steinsalz's great accomplishment, his completion of a Hebrew commentary and translation of the entire Babylonian Talmud.

Mini-School faculty members are presented with BOTH texts and analyses as they appear here. The analyses assist the teacher in preparing to teach the lesson, stimulating thought about the texts, their content and organization. The students are given ONLY the texts, and following a close in-class reading they share their own thoughts and further questions on each text. Often students uncover further dilemmas that arise from the texts. Teachers are not required to cover all of the texts in class, but rather they are encouraged to choose texts and that are reflective of their own interests and intellectual quandaries, in a way that will convey to their students their own personal excitement about Jewish text study. Mini-School teaching is NOT frontal. An excellent lesson is one in which the students' voices are heard throughout the lesson. The goal is not to achieve consensus about the meaning of the texts, but rather to raise awareness of the plurality of possible understandings that can arise from engaging study.

This lesson presents for study rabbinic texts that extol the added-value of Torah study. May this *Global Day of Learning* inspire us all to make the study of Torah an even more central part of our lives.



What is Talmud Torah?

Introduction

Through the process of Torah study, we become part of the long chain of Jewish tradition in which learning and teaching, cogitation and reflection, intellectual effort and theoretical pursuit, are esteemed and elevated to the highest ranks of its precepts. It is not for naught that the Jews have been referred to as the “People of the Book”.

Traditionally, Torah study is called in Hebrew *Talmud Torah*. This expression is found in the Mishnah and means “the study of Torah.” *But* why is *Talmud Torah* of such monumental importance in our tradition? Is it because it is a means to increased religious observance or because it sharpens our minds? Is it because of its capacity to elevate and deepen our existence and to enhance our relationship with God?

In this lesson we will explore these questions through the study of traditional texts, most of them emanating from the Mishnah or Talmud, the written recording of much of our oral tradition through the sixth century C.E. In other words, **we will be learning Torah in an effort to understand the importance of learning Torah**. This, we believe, is a fitting way to pay tribute to Rabbi Adin Steinsalz’s completion of his Hebrew commentary and translation of the Babylonian Talmud, a tool that makes Talmud study more accessible and relevant to our generation.

Lesson Outline

In this lesson we wish to explore a number of reasons for *Talmud Torah* occupying such a prominent role in Jewish tradition.

According to **Texts 1-2**, *Talmud Torah* is important primarily because it is a means increased religious observance.

Texts 3-7 present several other explanations of the value of *Talmud Torah*.

Text 8 incorporates, by implication, all the ideas discussed above.

What is Talmud Torah?

Texts and Analysis

Text 1

{ Mishnah, Avot 2:5 }

[Compilation of teachings of 3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE scholars in Eretz Yisrael (Tanna'im); compiled and edited by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi]

He [Hillel] used to say: A boor cannot be fearful of sin, nor can an ignoramus be pious.

משנה אבות ב: ה

הוא הגה אמר: אין בור ירא חטא ולא עם הארץ חסיד.

Analysis – Text 1

In order to understand the meaning of this text, we must explain one of the central features of the Jewish religion. Judaism is, at its core, a religion of law. Even the most cursory reading of the *Torah* reveals hundreds of laws encompassing all aspects of life. We are instructed to observe these laws to the best of our ability. But because the Jewish legal system is so vast and comprehensive one must have a great deal of knowledge in order to know how to act and to be conscious at all times of what is forbidden and what is permitted. An ignoramus will be overwhelmed by the details and nuances of halakhic observance and will not know what to do. And in the absence of proper halakhic observance, the rabbis could not countenance the possibility that a person could ever become truly pious and fearful of sin. *Talmud Torah* is, thus, a prerequisite for halakhic observance and the attainment of piety.

What is Talmud Torah?

Text 2

{ Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 40b }

[Compilation of teachings of 3-6th century scholars in Babylonia (Amora'im); final redaction in the 6-7th centuries]

Rabbi Tarfon and the elders were already gathered in the upper floor of Nitza's house in Lod when this question was posed to them: Is study greater or is practice greater? Rabbi Tarfon answered: Practice is greater. Rabbi Akiva replied: Study is greater. The rest of the elders answered: Study is greater, since study leads to practice.

קדושין מ ע"ב

וְכָבֵר הָיָה ר' טַרְפוֹן וְזִקְנִים מְסֻבִּין בְּעֵלְיַת בֵּית נִתְזָה בְּלֹד נִשְׁאַלָה שְׁאֵלָה זֹו בְּפִנְיָהֶם: תְּלָמוּד גָּדוֹל אוֹ מַעֲשֵׂה גָדוֹל? נֶעֱנָה ר' טַרְפוֹן וְאָמַר: מַעֲשֵׂה גָדוֹל. נֶעֱנָה ר' עֲקִיבָא וְאָמַר: תְּלָמוּד גָּדוֹל. נֶעֱנּוּ כָּלֶם וְאָמְרוּ: תְּלָמוּד גָּדוֹל שֶׁהַתְּלָמוּד מְבִיא לְיָדֵי מַעֲשֵׂה.

Analysis – Text 2

Given the position articulated in the previous text, the question raised here seems rather perplexing. If the purpose of study is that it enables a more rigorous and complete fulfillment of practice, then it should be obvious that practice is greater! This seems to be what Rabbi Tarfon [1st century *Tanna* in *Eretz Yisrael* at the time of the Destruction of the Second Temple] was trying to emphasize in his straightforward reply, "Practice is greater." Rabbi Akiva [full name: Akiva ben Yosef; 1-2nd century *Tanna* in *Eretz Yisrael*], on the other hand, asserts that study is greater. How can the means be greater than the end that it aims to achieve?

Unless, of course, Rabbi Akiva believes that study has value far surpassing its usefulness as a means of acquiring knowledge of *halakhah*. Nevertheless, the rest of the elders seem to reject this possibility, for their reasoning supports the idea that in essence, the ultimate goal is practice.

The problem is that the formulation of the elders is self-contradictory, for if the greatness of study lies in the fact that it leads to practice, does this not imply that practice, which is the ultimate goal, is really superior? Unless the elders' preference for study is meant in a chronological sense: i.e., study is a prerequisite for practice and must, therefore, come first, but it serves as a means to achieve another end—namely practice—which remains axiologically superior.

This ambiguity, coupled with Rabbi Akiva's unequivocal preference for learning over practice, suggests that *Torah* study may indeed have far greater significance than just a means to practical halakhic observance. In the following texts we will try to understand what Rabbi Akiva may have had in mind.

What is Talmud Torah?

Text 3

{ Mishnah, Avot 5:26 }

[Compilation of teachings of 3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE scholars in Eretz Yisrael (Tanna'im); compiled and edited by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi]

Ben Bag Bag said: Turn it over and over for everything is contained within it. Delve into it, grow old and frail in it. Do not depart from it for there is no pursuit better for you than it.

מְשֻׁנָּה אֲבוֹת, ה, כו

בֶּן בָּג בָּג אָמַר: הִפֵּךְ בָּהּ וְהִפֵּךְ בָּהּ, דִּכְלָהּ בָּהּ, וּבָהּ תִּחְיוּ, וְסִיב וּבְלָהּ בָּהּ, וּמְנָה לֹא תִזְוַע, שְׂאִין לָךְ
מִדָּה טוֹבָה הִמְנָה.

Analysis – Text 3

The greatness of *Torah*, according to Ben Bag Bag [1st century *Tanna* in *Eretz Yisrael*] lies in the fact that “everything is in it”. A child can listen and be thrilled by its narratives, and a philosopher of advanced age can ponder it and become inspired by the deep insights contained in it. Through childhood, adolescence and adulthood, as one reaches new levels of understanding, so he will continue to discover fresh insights, revelations and truths in the limitless depths of *Torah*. *Talmud Torah* is, thus, important not only because it leads to observance but because it is the ultimate source of wisdom.

This teacher's very strange name is often explained by way of reference to an anecdote recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Shabbat 31a. Hillel once convinced a convert of the truth of the oral law by proving to him, in a lesson on the Hebrew alphabet, that even the knowledge of the pronunciation and the order of Hebrew alphabet are impossible without faith in their oral transmission through the generations. Perhaps then his son was nicknamed “ben BG-BG,”—son of Bag-Bag—as a reminder of the lesson that Bet and Gimel—as well as all of the other letters of the alphabet—are fixed in terms of vocalization and placement by tradition.



What is Talmud Torah?

Text 4

{ Mishnah, Avot 6:2 }

[Compilation of teachings of 3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE scholars in Eretz Yisrael (Tanna'im); compiled and edited by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi]

For no man is free unless he occupies himself in the study of *Torah*.

משנה אבות, ו: ב

שאין לך בן חורין אלא מי שעוסק בתלמוד תורה.

Analysis – Text 4

The idea expressed in this text seems rather bizarre. Freedom, in the minds of most people, is associated with the absence of effort and responsibility, relaxation and pleasure. How can *Talmud Torah*—which is difficult and demanding—be the ultimate expression of freedom? Perhaps this text is conveying an important insight into the meaning of freedom.

We generally perceive freedom in a negative sense, as an **absence** of activity, the absence of work; it is, in short, freedom “from” something. But with what are we supposed to occupy ourselves once we are free? Golf, television and other forms of recreation? Isn't there something more noble, meaningful and enriching with which we can fill our time? *Torah* study enables us to differentiate between activities that are meaningful and those that are frivolous and empty. We gain greater insight into life and ourselves. In contrast with the idea of freedom “from” other activities, this text highlights the importance of freedom “for” higher and nobler goals, to maximize our lives and our potential.

What is Talmud Torah?

Text 5

{ *Sifrei, Deuteronomy (Devarim) Piska 306* }

[Midrash Halakhah to the books of Numbers (Bamidbar) and Deuteronomy (Devarim); compilation of teachings of Tanna'im, edited in 4–5th century Eretz Yisrael]

“As showers fall upon the tender grass” [Deut. (*Devarim*) 32:2]—Just as these showers fall on the tender grass, causing it to sprout up and grow, so words of *Torah* raise you up and make you grow . . .
 “As heavy rains upon the fully-grown grass” (*ibid.*)—Just as the heavy rains fall on the fully-grown grass, refreshing it and filling it out, so words of *Torah* refresh you and fill you out.

ספרי האזינו, פסקא שו

“כשעירים עלי דשא” (דברים לב: ב), מה שעירים הללו יורדים על העשבים ומעלים אותם ומגדלים אותם, כך דברי תורה מעלים אותך ומגדלים אותך... “וכרביבים עלי עשב” (שם), מה רביבים הללו יורדים על העשבים ומעדינים אותם ומפנקים אותם, כך דברי תורה מעדינים אותך ומפנקים אותך.

Analysis – Text 5

Torah is compared here to rain that nurtures the grass and enables it to grow. Without it, all vegetation withers. *Torah* is nourishment for our soul. We may not always be aware of the extent of our need for it to sustain us, but we are spiritually deficient without it nonetheless. But water not only sustains; it is also refreshing. *Torah* can, likewise, ease the tensions and lighten the burden of pressures and demands of work and daily life and refresh our souls. We spend so much of our time and energy satisfying the needs of our bodies. Shouldn't we spend at least as much time fulfilling the needs of our souls?

What is Talmud Torah?

Text 6

{ Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Kama* 82a }

[Compilation of teachings of 3-6th century scholars in Babylonia (Amora'im); final redaction in the 6-7th centuries]

. . . It was taught: “And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water” [Exod. (*Shemot*) 15:22]. Those who interpret the law metaphorically explain that “water” refers here to the *Torah* as it says: “Ho, everyone that thirsts, come to the water” [Isaiah (*Yishayahu*) 55:1]. Since they had gone three days without *Torah*, they became exhausted.

בְּבָא קָמָא פַּב ע"א

דְּתַנְיָא: "וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּמִדְבָּר וְלֹא מָצְאוּ מַיִם" (שְׁמוֹת טו, כב). דּוֹרְשֵׁי רְשׁוּמוֹת אָמְרוּ: אֵין מַיִם אֶלָּא תּוֹרָה שְׁנֵי אָמַר "הוֹי כָּל צָמֵא לְכוּ לַמַּיִם" (יִשְׁעֵיָהוּ נה: א). כִּינֵן שְׁהֵלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּלֹא תּוֹרָה גְּלֵאוּ.

Analysis – Text 6

The Talmud here explains why *keriat haTorah* – public *Torah* reading – was instituted on *Shabbat*, Mondays and Thursdays. The prophets apparently wished to avoid a situation in which three days would go by without *Talmud Torah*. Their enactment was based on the verse, “And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water”. But where is the reference to *Talmud Torah* in this text? The rabbis suggest that the word “water” should be understood metaphorically. Thus, the Jews were exhausted not because of a shortage of water but because their source of spiritual nourishment had been depleted. This metaphor is developed at greater length in the following text.

What is Talmud Torah?

Text 7

{ Shir haShirim Rabbah, 1:19 }

[Midrash Aggadah to Song of Songs (Shir haShirim); compiled in Eretz Yisrael between the 5–7th centuries]

The words of *Torah* are compared to water... Just as water stretches from one end of the world to the other . . . so *Torah* extends from one end of the world to the other; . . . Just as water is a source of life for the world . . . so *Torah* is a source of life for the world; . . . Just as water falls from heaven . . . so *Torah* is from heaven; . . . Just as water restores the soul . . . so does *Torah*; . . . Just as water purifies man from ritual impurity . . . so *Torah* purifies man from ritual impurity;... Just as rainwater falls drop by drop and together the drops form a river, so with *Torah*—a man learns two laws today and two tomorrow . . . until he becomes like an overflowing stream. Just as water does not taste sweet if man is not thirsty, so *Torah* is not sweet unless one labors in it. Just as water leaves a high place and flows to a low one, so the *Torah* leaves one who is haughty and cleaves to one who is modest. Just as water keeps well not in a vessel of silver or gold, but rather in the most common of vessels, so *Torah* resides only in one who makes himself like an earthenware vessel. Just as with water a great man is not ashamed to say to a simple man, “Give me some water,” so with *Torah* a great scholar is not ashamed to ask a lesser one, “Teach me one chapter, one matter, one verse, or even one letter.”

שיר השירים רבה, פרשה א, יט

נמשלו דברי תורה כמים... מה מים מסוף העולם ועד סופו... כך תורה מסוף העולם ועד סופו... מה מים חיים לעולם... כך תורה חיים לעולם... מה מים מן השמים... כך תורה מן השמים... מה המים משיבים הנפש... כך תורה... מה המים מטהרים את האדם מן הטמאה... כך תורה מטהרת אדם מטמאתו... ומה המים יורדין טפין-טפין ונעשים נחלים-נחלים, כך תורה: אדם לומד ב' הלכות היום וב' למחר, עד שנעשה כנחל נובע. מה מים, אם אין אדם צמא, אינה ערבה בגופו, כך תורה, אם אין אדם עיף בה, אינה ערבה בגופו. ומה המים מניחים מקום גבוה והולכים במקום נמוך, כך תורה מנחת מי שדעתו גבוהה עליו ומדבקות במי שדעתו נמוכה עליו. ומה מים אין מתקיימין בכלי זהב וכסף, אלא בירוד שבכלים, כך תורה אינה מתקיימת אלא במי שעושה עצמו ככלי חרס. ומה המים אין אדם גדול מתבייש לומר לקטן: השקני מים, כך דברי תורה אין הגדול מתבייש לומר לקטן: למדני פרק אחד, דבר אחד, פסוק אחד, ואפלו אות אחת.



What is Talmud Torah?

Analysis – Text 7

The Midrash offers a series of interpretations of the comparison between water and *Torah*. Just as water stretches from one end of the world to the other, so does *Torah*. But what does this mean? Perhaps the Midrash is suggesting that the *Torah*'s laws and values encompass all of life or that its wisdom is boundless (see Text 3 above). Just as water is a source of life in the material world, so too *Torah* is a source of life in the spiritual realm (see Text 6 above). Water descends from heaven. Similarly the *Torah* comes from God who is in heaven. Water restores a tired and overworked body to health and vigor, and *Torah* likewise revives the soul of one whose senses have been deadened by the routine of daily life. Water purifies and *Torah* similarly elevates, ennobles and purifies one's existence. It gives man meaning, purpose and reason to continue living. Rain comes down in drops but eventually forms rivers. Mastery of *Torah* is a gradual process, but if one begins today he is likely to reap the rewards of his cumulative efforts in the future. Just as water can only be appreciated by one who is thirsty, the beauty and richness of *Torah* can only truly be appreciated by those who yearn for a deeper and more meaningful existence. Just as water flows downward from high places, so too *Torah* can only leave its mark on those who are willing to humble themselves a little and venture beyond the accumulation of wealth and material pleasures. Finally, just as water is so vital to our existence that even the most distinguished man is not ashamed to ask for it when necessary, so one should not be ashamed to seek religious instruction even from someone of inferior social status.

What is Talmud Torah?

Text 8

{ Mishnah, *Pe'ah* 1:1 }

[Compilation of teachings of 3rd century BCE – 3rd century CE scholars in Eretz Yisrael (Tanna'im); compiled and edited by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi]

These are the commandments for which no definite quantity is prescribed: *pe'ah* (leaving the corners of the field for the poor), the offering of the first fruits, the burnt offering of the pilgrim to the Temple, acts of kindness, and the study of *Torah*. These are the deeds for which man enjoys the fruits of his labor in this world while the principal remains for him in the World to Come: honoring one's parents, giving charity, and making peace between people. But the study of *Torah* is equivalent to all of them combined.

משנה פאה א : א

אלו דברים שאין להם שעור: הפאה, והבכורים, והראיון, וגמילות חסדים, ותלמוד תורה. אלו דברים שאדם אכל פרותיהן בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא: כבוד אב ואם, וגמילות חסדים, והבאת שלום בין אדם לחברו; ותלמוד תורה כנגד כלם.

Analysis – Text 8

This Mishnah encapsulates much of what we have been discussing. Talmud Torah is of central importance for a variety of reasons. Thus, just as acts of loving-kindness are not quantifiable, so too Talmud Torah. But the Mishnah goes one step further. The qualitative value of Talmud Torah is equal to that of honoring parents, giving charity and making peace between people, combined. Talmud Torah teaches us a meaningful way of life and virtue, it provides us with insights and wisdom and brings us into contact with the divine presence, which is manifest in its words. Thus, many of the values that inhere in other mitzvot are reflected in Talmud Torah as well. It is, indeed, equivalent to all the rest.

What is Talmud Torah?

Summary of Key Ideas

In this lesson we tried to understand why *Talmud Torah* has occupied such a prominent position in Jewish tradition. We encountered a number of different approaches.

Firstly, since Judaism is a complex legal system and applies to all facets of life, a great deal of knowledge is necessary in order to observe it properly. But the value of *Talmud Torah* seems to go far beyond its importance as a means to more rigorous observance. The rabbis, in fact, debated which is greater, study or practice. How could anyone maintain that study is greater if it is just a means to practice?

This led us to explore the additional significance of *Talmud Torah*. According to one view, *Torah* is the source of all wisdom. The more one studies the more he gains insight into the mysteries of life, man and the universe. According to another source, it is the key to true freedom. *Torah* provides substance to the concept of freedom so that it is not just a freedom “from” other activities, but rather a meaningful freedom “for” more noble pursuits.

Numerous ideas emerge from the rabbinic metaphor comparing *Torah* to water. Just as water nurtures, rejuvenates, sustains, strengthens and gives vitality to all forms of physical life, so too *Torah* nourishes, awakens, refreshes, invigorates and sustains the soul. Just as water purifies, so too *Torah* elevates and ennobles one's existence. But in order for *Torah* to have the proper impact one must genuinely seek a deeper existence and must be willing to look beyond material pursuits. He must approach it with humility and be prepared to learn from *Torah* scholars regardless of their social status.

In addition to all of the above, *Talmud Torah* can also be the most profound form of religious experiences. Jewish tradition asserts that the use of our intellect and capacity for reason and understanding in the study of *Torah* can be perhaps the greatest, most enriching of all religious experience.

Key Terms

- **Keriat haTorah.** The public reading of the *Torah* in the presence of a *minyan*.
- **Talmud Torah.** The study of *Torah*. A positive biblical command. The term was adopted by voluntary associations that fostered religious education; it was also applied to their schools, and ultimately to Jewish religious schools in general.