



What is Talmud Torah?

A class by the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School

A Word from...

**Dr. Yonatan Mirvis, FMAMS International Director, and
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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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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?

Texts

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 היה אומר: אין בור גרא חטא ולא עם הארץ חסיד.

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

וכבר היה ר' טרפון וזקנים מסבין בעלית בית נתזה בלוד נשאלה שאלה זו בפניהם: תלמוד גדול או מעשה גדול? נענה ר' טרפון ואמר: מעשה גדול. נענה ר' עקיבא ואמר: תלמוד גדול. נענו כלם ואמרו: תלמוד גדול שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה.



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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.

משנה אבות, ה, כו

בן בג בג אומר: הפך בה והפך בה, דכלה בה, ובה תחזי, וסיב ובלה בה, ומנה לא תזוע, שאין לך מדה טובה המנה.

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.



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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

“כְּשֶׁעִירִים עָלִי דָשָׂא” (דְּבָרִים ל: ב), מֵה שְׁעִירִים הִלְלוּ יוֹרְדִים עַל הָעֵשְׂבִים וּמַעֲלִים אוֹתָם וּמַגְדִּילִים אוֹתָם, כִּן דְּבַרֵי תוֹרָה מַעֲלִים אוֹתָהּ וּמַגְדִּילִים אוֹתָהּ... “וְכִרְבִּיבִים עָלִי יַעֲשֶׂב” (שָׁם), מֵה רְבִיבִים הִלְלוּ יוֹרְדִים עַל הָעֵשְׂבִים וּמַעֲדִנִים אוֹתָם וּמְפַנְקִים אוֹתָם, כִּן דְּבַרֵי תוֹרָה מַעֲדִנִים אוֹתָהּ וּמְפַנְקִים אוֹתָהּ.

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.

בבא קמא פב ע"א

דְתַנְיָא: “וַיִּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּמִדְבָּר וְלֹא מָצְאוּ מַיִם” (שְׁמוֹת טו, כב). דוֹרְשֵׁי רְשׁוּמוֹת אָמְרוּ: אֵין מַיִם אֶלָּא תוֹרָה שְׁנַאֲמַר “הוּי כָּל צָמְא לְכוּ לַמַּיִם” (יִשְׁעִיָהוּ נה: א). כִּיּוֹן שֶׁהִלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּלֹא תוֹרָה נִלְאוּ.

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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.”

שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים רַבָּה, פְּרָשָׁה א, יט

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



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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.

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.