

TORAH TABLE TALK – PIRKE AVOT

Learning Torah: Obligation or Recreation?

Parshat T'tzaveh, Exodus 27:20 – 30:10

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren ז"ל, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

It may sound a bit disrespectful to say this, but the final five *parshiot* in Exodus are not the most exciting passages in the *Torah* unless you are either a builder or an interior decorator. We find in these last fifteen chapters a detailed description of the building of the Tabernacle and its furnishings. The people of Israel are told to build a Tabernacle that God may dwell among the people of Israel; we are then told how the project was carried out and finally the *Torah* goes on to offer an accounting of this massive building project. Of course the sages wrestled to find deeper meaning in these minute details. Is the building of the Tabernacle a response to the worship of Golden Calf? Was the building of the tabernacle a way of helping Israel deal with their departure from Mount Sinai, the nexus of revelation? Is there some deeper mystical meaning to the building of the Tabernacle? The Tabernacle provided a platform for discussing the ways in which we encounter God and make room for God's presence in our lives.

Possibly the most interesting thing about *Parshat T'tzaveh* is what this *Torah* portion doesn't say. This is the only *Torah* portion from the beginning of Exodus until the end of Deuteronomy that doesn't contain the name of Moses. This too became the subject of discussion. Why was Moses left out of this particular *parshah*? Sometimes the space between the words and the silence of the *Torah* offers us ample room to find new meanings in the text. *Torah* study is an exciting journey of exploration and discovery that involves both careful reading of the text as well as imagination. For the next few weeks, therefore, I would like to focus on an important aspect of *Pirke Avot* which discusses the importance of Talmud Torah.

Pirke Avot 1:15 Shammai said: Make your study of *Torah* a fixed practice; say little and do much; and receive all people with a cheerful countenance.

Pirke Avot 2:9 Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai received the tradition from Hillel and Shammai. He used to say: If you have studied much *Torah*, take no special credit for it since you were created for this very purpose.

Sources

Avot D'Rebbe Natan: Chapter 13

Make the study of Torah a fixed practice: how so? This teaches that if one has heard something from the mouth of a sage in the house of study, he is not to treat it casually but to treat it attentively. And what a man learns, let him practice himself and then teach others that they may practice it, as it is written: "That you may learn them, then observe them to do them." (Deuteronomy 5:1) And so to of Ezra, it is written: "For he has set his heart to seek the law of the Lord and to do it," and afterwards, "And to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances." (Ezra 7:10).

Avot D'Rebbe Natan: Chapter 14

Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai received the tradition from Hillel and Shammai. Hillel had eighty disciples. Thirty of them were worthy to have the *Shechinah* rest upon them as upon Moses our Master, but their generation was unworthy of it. Thirty of them were worthy to intercalate the year and twenty were middling. The greatest of them all was Jonathan ben Uzziel; the least of them was Rabban Jochanan ben Zakkai. They tell of Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai that he did not neglect scripture or Mishnah, Halachah, Aggadah or the Tosefta, the subtleties of scripture and the subtleties of the scribes, or any of the sages rules of interpretation – Not a single thing in the Torah did he neglect to study confirming the statement, "That I may cause those that love me to inherit substance, and that I may fill their treasuries." (Proverbs 8:21)

He used to say: If you have studied much Torah, take no special credit for it since you were created for this very purpose, for human beings were created only on condition that they study *Torah*.

Commentary

There are literally dozens of statements in *Pirke Avot* emphasizing the importance of *Torah* study in the life of a Jew. Shimon *Hatzaddik*, the last member of the ‘Men of the Great Assembly’ opens this work by stating the importance of *Talmud Torah*: “The world rests on three things: (the study of) Torah, worship and acts of kindness.” (*Pirke Avot* 1:2) Virtually everything in *Pirke Avot* and in Judaism in general falls into these three categories. If we look carefully at Shammai’s statement, we will see that it offers an interpretation of Shimon *Hatzaddik*’s words. Living a Jewish life revolves around the study (‘make your study of *Torah* a fixed practice’), worship in the larger sense of living a godly life (‘say little and do much’), and acts of kindness (‘receive all people with a cheerful countenance.’)

The study of *Torah* is institutionalized into our daily life. A day should not pass without devoting some time to *Talmud Torah*. The morning liturgy begins with a blessing in which we thank God, “Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to occupy ourselves with words of *Torah*.” This blessing is followed by several biblical and rabbinic passages which allow us to begin our day with some *Torah* study even before we have participated in prayers of thanksgiving and supplication. Shammai, then, teaches us that *Torah* study should be *keva*. This word is translated in a variety of different ways: “fixed practice,” “primary occupation,” “habit,” or “fix a period.” More than ‘recreation’ (which is how we tend to think of it these days), it is part of our daily discipline as Jews.

One author on the web site, www.MyJewishLearning.org, writes: Differentiating between two modes of Jewish worship, Professor Louis Finkelstein, a 20th-century Jewish scholar, said, “When I pray, I speak to God; when I study, God speaks to me.” In this vein, *Talmud Torah* might loosely be defined as any Jewish study done with a sense of the sacred. Contemporary *Talmud Torah* might encompass the study of history, poetry, and prayer, as well as that of *Talmud*, Bible, *Midrash* and *Halakhah*. The object of study becomes less important than the mode of study, which strives to foster dialogue between individuals and God.

Questions to Ponder

1. When speaking of *Torah* study, we are not talking just about the five books of Moses but the study of our tradition and culture as Jews. What do we gain from the study of *Torah*? Why should *Torah* study be a part of our daily routine?
2. Why study sections of the *Torah* that seem irrelevant or even distasteful to our modern sensibilities? Should the study of *Torah* focus only on those aspects of our tradition that are relevant and meaningful to the modern world?
3. What does the word *Keva* mean to you? How do the different interpretations of this word affect the place of *Torah* study in our daily lives?
4. Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai was a student of both Hillel and Shammai. How do you think he was influenced by the teachings of Shammai?
5. How do you feel about the statement that we were created for the purpose of studying *Torah*? In what ways is this statement make you feel both humility and pride? Do you believe that each of us was created for a specific ‘purpose’?
6. How can you make *Talmud Torah* a fixed part of your daily life? (Hint – read *Torah Table Talk* every week!)

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*“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart,
a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*

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