

TORAH TABLE TALK – *PIRKE AVOT*

Zen and the Art of Torah Study

(With apologies to the Buddhists)

Parshat Vayakhel-Pekudei, Exodus 35:1- 40-38:1

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

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At first glance, the final *parshiot* in Exodus sound repetitious. They contain a description of the building of the Tabernacle as well as a full accounting of the materials that were necessary for the completion of this project. When they are combined as they are this coming *Shabbat*, *Vayakhel-Pekudei* contains a whopping nine columns of *Torah* to be read in congregations that have not adopted a triennial reading of the *Torah*. In addition to the regular reading, we also read the special portion in honor of *Shabbat Hachodesh*, the fourth of the four special *Torah* readings which are read during the weeks before Passover. This *Shabbat* is also *Shabbat Mevarchim*, when we recite the prayer announcing the new month of *Nissan*. All in all, this *Shabbat* becomes a marathon even for those who enjoy attending services!

So what are we to do with such a *Torah* portion? How are we to find meaning in a seemingly repetitious sections of the *Torah*? *Torah* study as an enterprise is not only about finding meanings hidden in the *Torah* but sometimes it is all about making meaning. *Torah* does not change but we do – each generation finds new ways of reading the *Torah* and applying its lessons to their lives. Even more important is the fact that the importance of *Torah* is not so much in the content but the process of getting their. The study of *Torah* is transformative; it is meant to change us and lift us up. Through *Torah* we stand at Sinai and hear God's voice anew in our generation.

From Pirke Avot Chapter 6

1. Rabbi Meir would say: Whoever engages in the study of Torah for its own sake, merits many things; not only that, but [the creation of] the entire world is worthwhile for him alone. He is called friend, beloved, lover of God, lover of humanity, a joy to God, a joy to humanity. The Torah clothes him with humility and reverence; it equips him to be righteous, pious, upright and faithful; it keeps him far from sin and brings him close to virtue. People benefit from his counsel and wisdom, understanding and strength, as is stated (Proverbs 8:14): "Mine are counsel and wisdom, I am understanding, mine is power." The Torah grants him sovereignty, authority, and the power of keen observation. The Torah's secrets are revealed to him, and he becomes as an ever-increasing wellspring and a never failing stream. He becomes modest, patient and forgiving of insults. The Torah uplifts him and exalts him over all creation.

3. One who learns from his fellow a single chapter, or a single law, or a single verse, or a single word, or even a single letter, he must treat him with respect.

9. Said Rabbi Yosi the son of Kisma: Once, I was traveling and I encountered a man. He greeted me and I returned his greetings. Said he to me: "Rabbi, where are you from?" I said to him: "I'm from a great city of sages and scholars." He said to me: "Rabbi, would you like to dwell with us in our place? I will give you a million dinars of gold, precious stones and pearls." Said I to him: "If you were to give me all the silver, gold, precious stones and pearls in the world, I would not dwell anywhere but in a place of Torah. Indeed, so is written in the Book of Psalms by King David: 'I prefer the Torah of Your mouth over thousands in gold and silver' (Psalms 118:72).

Furthermore, when a person passes from this world neither silver, nor gold, nor precious stones, nor pearls accompany him, only Torah and good deeds, as is stated (Proverbs 6:22): 'When you go it will direct you, when you lie down it will watch over you, and when you awaken it shall be your speech.'

'When you go it will direct you'---in this world; 'when you lie down it will watch over you'---in the grave; 'and when you awaken it shall be our speech'---in the World to Come. Also it says (Haggai 2:8): 'Mine is the silver and Mine is the gold, so says the Lord of Hosts.'

Sources

Robert Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

And, of course, when you discover something like that and it's like discovering a tooth with a missing filling. You have to probe it, work around it, push on it, think about it, not because it's enjoyable but because it's on your mind and it won't get off your mind... Not to deliberately irritate him, but because the irritation seems symptomatic of something deeper, something under the surface that isn't immediately apparent.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a

Rava said: At the time when they bring a person to ultimate judgment, they say to him: Did you deal honestly in business? Did you make time for Torah? Did you procreate? Did you hope for salvation? Did you think about the lessons of wisdom? Did you derive one thing from another? Even so, (that is, even if the answer to all these questions are 'yes') if there is "fear of God" (Is. 33:6), yes (he is rewarded); if not, no.

Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 9a

A person who reviews his subject matter one hundred times does not achieve the same understanding as a person who reviews it one hundred and one times.

Commentary

The study of Torah is not about how far one goes or what knowledge one attains but how one gets there. It is about wedding imagination with content, deep meditation and attention, self awareness and the pursuit of enlightenment. It all about finding ways to turn knowledge into practical wisdom that creates a sense of quality and wellbeing in life. Most of all, it is all about the questions, "why am I here" and "what does God want from me?"

The sixth chapter of *Pirke Avot* is known as the *Braita* of Rabbi Meir, or *Kinyan Torah*, the acquisition of Torah. It is actually not an original part of *Pirke Avot*. It was added to the five chapters of *Avot* by the sages so that there would be six chapters to read in this small volume during the six *Shabbatot* between Passover and Shavuot. The word *Braita* means 'external' or 'outside' since this work is outside of the canonized work of the Mishnah. *Kinyan Torah* is almost entirely devoted to the importance of *Torah* study and what can attain through the study of *Torah*.

Like most other disciplines there are masters and disciples in the study of *Torah*. But one must measure one's knowledge of *Torah* not against others but against oneself. In the world to come we will be asked, "Did you make time for *Torah*?" Study for its own sake is considered to be of great value?

Questions to Ponder

1. In what ways is building the Tabernacle similar to the study of *Torah*?
2. Why did the sages place so much importance on having a master for the study of *Torah*?
3. What would 'a city of sages and scholars' look like today? Do you think it is possible for non-orthodox Jews to create such a place? If so, what would it take?
4. What role does study play in the questions we will be asked in the world to come? Why?
5. How can we find meaning in seemingly difficult and obscure sections of the *Torah* such as the chapters we are reading this *Shabbat*? In what ways is it easier to find meaning in such passages?
6. In what ways should *Torah* study influence people intellectually, spiritually and socially? Have you found this to be true – why or why not?
7. How much time are you willing to devote to the study of *Torah*?

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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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