

Is Ongoing Tora Study for All a Realistic Expectation or Mere Pie-in-the-Sky?

R. Yaakov Bieler

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Jewish tradition has always placed a value upon learning and knowledge. Tora study is a Commandment;^{1[1]} to earn the status of "Talmid Chacham" (a scholarly student) is as universally desirable as the determined avoidance of the sobriquet "Am HaAretz";^{2[2]} parents' and teachers' sincerest wishes are fulfilled and their very existences are justified when their children and students become learned Jews who are exemplars of their religious tradition;^{3[3]} and even the Talmudic passage that describes one's final "exit interview" immediately after taking leave of this life includes numerous questions regarding the quantity and quality of study that one engaged in while alive.^{4[4]}

However, it would be disingenuous not to recognize that R. Shimon bar Yochai's radical critique of how most people spend their lives would appear to mitigate against very many of us ever actually living up to the idealistic expectation that we become serious life-long Tora learners.

Berachot 35b

...R. Shimon bar Yochai says: Is it possible for a person to plough at the time of ploughing, plant at the time of planting, harvest at the time of harvesting, thresh at the time of threshing, and winnow at the time of the wind blowing, Tora what is to become of it?...

^{1[1]} R. Shlomo Zevin, in his essay "Talmud Tora VeYediata" (in LeOhr HaHalacha, Avraham Tzioni, Tel Aviv, 5717, p. 204 ff.) lists the following verses as defining the parameters of the Commandment to engage in Tora study:

Devarim 5:1

Ibid. 6:7

Ibid. 11:19

Yehoshua 1:8

^{2[2]} In an article entitled "Am HaAretz VeAm HaSefer), published in the electronic edition of Ma'ariv (<http://www.nrg.co.il/online/11/ART1/427/818.html>), R. Yehuda Brandes notes the different connotations of the term "Am HaAretz" in Biblical and Rabbinic literature. In addition to its popular connotation of illiteracy and ignorance of things Jewish, "Am HaAretz" also is used as a term representing the broad population of the land of Israel (e.g., Beraishit 23:12) as well as the technically specific group of people upon whom one cannot rely for the separation of tithes in general, and specifically Ma'aser (Demai 2:2).

^{3[3]} See for example the prayer customarily said upon lighting Shabbat candles Friday evening (ArtScroll on Siddur, p. 296), as well as the second of the Birchot HaTora (ArtScroll Siddur, p. 16) in light of Bava Metzia 85a.

^{4[4]} **Shabbat 31a**

Rava said: When a man is led in for judgment, he is asked: Did you make business deals with integrity? **Did you fix times for Tora learning?** Did you try to have children? Did you hope for salvation? **Did you engage in the subtleties required to acquire wisdom? Did you try to derive one idea from another?** Yet even so (if one can answer in the affirmative to all of these questions), if (Yeshayahu 33:6) "...the fear of the Lord is his treasure", then yes (he will be admitted to the World to Come) and if not, not.

Although RaShBY is referring to an agricultural context,^{5[5]} his sentiments apply to virtually any busy person during any historical epoch, who contends with myriad professional, financial and domestic responsibilities. And if being so preoccupied during one's waking hours is typical even during peacetime, the problem of being able to devote time to Tora study becomes all the more acute when war is raging, persecutions are a daily reality and many are threatened by terrorist attacks, all phenomena that have frequently plagued the Jewish people from Biblical times until the present. While individual examples throughout our history can always be found who sacrificed dearly in order to be able to continue to study under the most difficult of conditions,^{6[6]} Judaism has never advocated that ideally there be a small, elite priesthood or Rabbinate that is learned, and a proletariat that is not. Universal literacy and education have always been goals for the entire Jewish people, although serious study for many Jews, particularly after the Enlightenment, has not consistently taken the form of devoting oneself to the primary texts of the Jewish tradition.

One approach for dealing with the dilemma of finding time to devote to specifically Jewish learning despite our unending distractions and responsibilities, has been the "Yissachar-Zevulun" model.^{7[7]} Even if one is unable or simply unwilling to dedicate himself to intense Tora study, if he financially supports someone else who is prepared to live such a life, then vicariously he shares in that individual's accomplishments. Enabling someone to learn, proponents of such an approach would argue, is the next best thing to learning for oneself. While vicariously participating in another's studies by making it possible for them to focus on Tora devoid of outside concerns may have metaphysical benefits in terms of guaranteeing that a certain percentage of the Jewish people as a whole dedicate themselves to pursuing Tora study on a high level, in terms of the religious life of the benefactor and his family, it is difficult to posit that Tora study has permeated and influenced his and his immediate circle's quality of spiritual life. What you personally never struggle to understand simply cannot affect you, cannot inspire you, cannot bring you to greater spiritual insight and relationship with the Divine. Regardless of how many holy volumes one may underwrite and how many Yeshiva scholarships one has sacrificially and sincerely established, if the person himself does not engage in his own personal study on whatever level he can, "Talmud Tora" has not touched such

^{5[5]} It is ironic that some of the activities that R. Shimon bar Yochai cites as **distractions** from Tora study, are mentioned in the 2nd paragraph of the Shema prayer as **rewards** for conforming to the Commandments:

Devarim 11:13-15

And it will be that if you surely listen to My Commandments that I am Commanding you today, to love the Lord, your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul.

And I will place the rain of your land in its proper time, the early light rain and the later heavy rain, **and you will harvest** your grain, your wine and your oil (these entities don't usually grow by themselves, and therefore an underlying premise in this verse is that the agricultural activities required to have these crops growing in the fields will also have had to take place).

And I will place grass in your fields for your animals (while some will graze in the pastures, others will require the food to be harvested and fed to them), and you will eat and you will be full.

^{6[6]} E.g., **Berachot 60b** recounts the risks undertaken by R. Akiva that ultimately cost him his life at the hands of the Romans who prohibited the public teaching of Tora. **Yoma 35b** describes Hillel's extreme poverty which did not curtail his extraordinary efforts to learn from Shmaya and Avtalyon.

^{7[7]} **RaShI** on **Beraishit 49:13**

...For Zevulun was engaged in business and provided food for the tribe of Yissachar while they engaged in the study of Tora. It is to this that Moshe alludes, (Devarim 33:18) "Rejoice Zevulun in your going out, and Yissachar in your tents"—Zevulun goes out to trade and Yissachar studies Tora in the tents.

an individual's soul. It is highly questionable if the "enabler" Tora-relationship even fulfills one's individual obligation "BeDiavad" (minimally) with respect to the Commandment to engage in Tora study!

A second approach entails literally embodying R. Shimon bar Yochai's lifestyle, essentially withdrawing from the general world, ignoring anything not directly connected to Tora, limiting the time that one spends with his family, significantly lowering one's standard of living, dedicating no more than minimal effort to earning enough to support oneself and one's dependents, and becoming as much as possible a full-time student of Tora. For individuals who pursue such a life idealistically and whole-heartedly, they appear to take R. Shimon bar Yochai's assumptions to heart and are trying to live consistent, all-encompassing holy lives.

A parallel to RaShBY's approach for how one is to approach Tora study on a daily basis appears in a discussion concerning the observance of Yom Tov:

Beitza 15b

It was taught in a Baraita:

R. Eliezer says: On Yom Tov an individual has the **choice** either to eat and drink or to sit and study (Tora).

R. Yehoshua says: Divide it, a portion for God, and a portion for yourselves.

Said R. Yochanan: A single verse is being interpreted by these two views: One verse states, (Devarim 16:8) "...A solemn assembly for the Lord, your God." And another verse states, (BaMidbar 29:35) "...A solemn assembly for you..."

How is it (to be reconciled)?

R. Eliezer believes: Either entirely for HaShem or entirely for you.

And R. Yehoshua believes: Divide it, part for HaShem and part for you.

R. Eliezer, like RaShBY, apparently also believes that consistency and single-mindedness is the means by which one makes a defining statement about his beliefs and his relationship with HaShem, and that "all-or-nothing" choices in this regard are given to every Jew. While there is a Mitzva to engage in "Simchat Yom Tov" (the happiness of the holy day)—see Devarim 16:14—that requirement can be fulfilled either materially by eating and drinking, or spiritually by learning Tora. And just as R. Shimon bar Yochai weighs in heavily in Berachot on the side of learning throughout the week, so R. Eliezer argues in Beitza that this is the ideal for Yom Tov as well, i.e., if holiness is a value, then it must be pursued in an all-encompassing manner and not only should it push aside everyday concerns during the week, but even on Yom Tov, Tora study should be one's sole preoccupation.

But as we see in terms of R. Yehoshua's dissent from R. Eliezer in Beitza, the Talmud is similarly not loathe to cite a view that disagrees with R. Shimon bar Yochai in Berachot, and the spirit of "Eilu VaEilu Divrei Elokim Chayim"^{8[8]} (these and these are the Words of the Living God) suggests that while R. Shimon's outlook certainly

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Eiruvin 13b

R. Aba said in the name of Shmuel: For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, the former asserting, "The Halacha is in agreement with our views", and the latter contending, "The Halacha is in agreement with our views". Then a "Bat Kol" (a Voice from Heaven) issued announcing, "**These and these are words of the Living God**, but the Halacha is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel."

constitutes one manner in which an individual complies with the Tora's demands about study, it is not the only alternative available.

Berachot 35b

The Rabbis taught: (Devarim 11:14) "And I will Send the rain of your land in its proper time, the early and the late rain, and **you will gather in your grain, your wine and your oil**"—What is the Tora coming to teach?^{9[9]} Since it (also) states, (Yehoshua 1:8) "This book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth",^{10[10]} I might think that this injunction must be taken literally (and one cannot engage in any other activity except Tora study). Therefore it says, "**you will gather in your grain**" implying that you are to combine the study of the words of Tora with a worldly occupation. This is the view of R. Yishmael.

R. Yishmael's proposal, in contrast to where one supports someone else to study, or exclusively devotes himself to his own Tora learning, resonates with R. Yehoshua's approach to Yom Tov, by suggesting that a balance must be struck between engaging in and contributing to the world in which we find ourselves, and devoting quality time to our personal spiritual growth and development via Tora study, an approach referred to by R. S.R. Hirsch as "Tora Im Derech Eretz" (Tora together with "the way of the world").

The debate between RaShBY and R. Eliezer on the one hand, and R. Yishmael and R. Yehoshua on the other can be understood to have been a bone of contention already at the outset of Creation.

Beraishit 2:15

And God took Adam and He Placed him in the Garden of Eden "LeAvda U'LeShamra" (to serve it and to guard it).

A simple reading of the verse would lead one to conclude that man has custodial responsibility for his environment and therefore must engage in developing, settling and protecting its natural endowments. But, in a paraphrase of RaShBY, if you do all that, when will you study Tora? Enter a Midrashic approach to the verse which neatly dovetails with R. Shimon bar Yochai and R. Eliezer:

Targum Yerushalmi

"...LeMehevai Pelach Be'Orayta, U'LeMintar Pekudha" (To serve by [means of studying] the Tora and to guard its Commandments).

^{9[9]} The Talmud's question is based upon the assumption that within the Written Tradition, words are not superfluous. Consequently, since all people, Jews and non-Jews alike, who are engaged in agriculture, will harvest their crops in order to be able to support themselves, what is being added by the Tora's stating this fact? R. Yishmael thus concludes that the Tora is stating that engaging in the sort of activities that will enable one to support himself and his family is not a retreat from spirituality, but in fact part of the spiritual life.

^{10[10]} Generally, verses that are found in the latter part of the Bible, i.e., Nevi'im (Prophets) and Ketuvim (Writings) are considered to occupy a lower rung of Divine Revelation and therefore are not deemed as authoritative as verses in the Tora (Chumash). Consequently, one might wonder why a verse in Devarim 11 has to answer to one in Yehoshua 1. However, R. Nachman Cohen has explained that it is possible that just because an idea is first articulated in written form in a book of NaCh does not mean that the idea was not already extant earlier, at least in oral form. Consequently, verses from Tora and NaCh can be pitted against one another.

Such an approach posits that unceasing Tora study becomes an alternative to and even the preferred method by which to protect and improve the world and the lot of society.

While the danger inherent in R. Yishmael's approach is readily apparent, i.e., if one has a tendency to "workaholism" or simply feels that a great deal of responsibility regarding matters other than Tora has been thrust upon him, the amount of time that will be devoted to Tora study will be negligible at best, R. Shimon bar Yochai's view has a dark side as well, and can give rise to a disturbing level of intolerance and lack of empathy with people less able to always study Tora, as is evidenced by a well-known anecdote concerning RaShBY himself.

Shabbat 33b

So they (R. Shimon bar Yochai and his son) went and hid in a cave (to avoid the Roman persecutions). A miracle occurred and a carob tree and a spring of water was created for them (so that they would be able to subsist)¹¹[11]... The whole day they studied...They dwelled in this manner 12 years...They emerged and seeing a man ploughing and sowing (the very activities that R. Shimon is quoted in Berachot as precluding a person from properly studying Tora), they exclaimed, "They forsake the eternal life and engage in the temporal world!" Whatever they looked at was immediately burnt up...¹²[12]

While regular introspection and the study of ethical tracts might help to mitigate the potential difficulties of the sense of elitism that appears to be indigenous to the RaShBY/R. Eliezer approach, what can an advocate of R. Yishmael/R. Yehoshua do to protect himself from the dangerous extreme of not studying at all? RaMBaM in his delineation of the Commandment to study Tora expands upon the terminology of Shabbat 31a (see fn. 4 above) provides a key to the manner by which neither Tora nor the "world" is short-shrifted when engaged in a balanced rather than monolithic approach to how to spend one's time.

RaMBaM, Mishna Tora, Hilchot Talmud Tora 1:8

Every Jew is obligated to engage in Tora study, whether he is poor, rich, physically healthy or afflicted by infirmity, whether he is young or extremely elderly and feeble, even if he is so poor that he is supported by charity and he goes from door to door begging, and even if he is married and has a family, **he is obligated to fix times for Tora study during the day and in the evening**, as it is said, (Yehoshua 1:8) "...And you will meditate therein (the Tora) **day and night.**"

A literal rendering of the verse in Yehoshua would bring us to R. Shimon bar Yochai's viewpoint, i.e., that the only course that God Desires from us is to constantly and exclusively be engaged in Tora study. And in fact that is a legitimate option for those

¹¹[11] While the Talmud explains how RaShBY and his son were able to subsist during their long exile, we are enjoined, "Ein Somchin Al HaNeis" (one should not rely upon the performance of miracles). How one supports oneself has to be a primary focus of one's time in the event that overt "miracles" are not available. A religious dilemma with which many authors of traditional works on Jewish belief and philosophy grapple is how to create an appropriate balance between "Bitachon" (faith and reliance upon God) and "Hishtadlut" (personal effort and self-reliance).

¹²[12] While this aspect of the story could be taken literally in light of its other supernatural components, it is also possible to understand the effects of the gaze of RaShBY and his son as metaphoric and figurative, i.e., they disparaged and dismissed all behaviors not in keeping with their extreme outlook on life, and reduced all such activity to nothingness and worthy of dismissal.

who choose to pursue it. However, if in fact there was originally a choice regarding how even the most spiritual and religious individual is to allocate his time each day, there has to be at least one other way by which to fulfill the directive of Yehoshua 1:8 as well, i.e., study must regularly take place day and night, but for only "fixed times", i.e., finite increments of time, whose duration and timing will clearly be a function of one's stage of life, economic condition, physical and mental ability, etc.

Consequently, even over the course of a week, let alone a month or a year, the frequency and length of time devoted to Tora study twice each day on the part of a particular individual could vary from day to day. There will be periods when the pressures of earning a livelihood, raising a family, surviving physical threats, etc. will limit how much one can study. While even during such times, some minimal Tora learning is Commanded to take place, nevertheless this type of study will probably be more perfunctory and symbolic than substantive and intellectually and spiritually challenging. But respites from such pressures inevitably come. Everyone takes (or gets) a "break" from the routine, from the tension, from the pressure. While raising children is all-encompassing, there will be a time when those children are in school, camp, or at a relative's or friend's home. Trying to be successful in one's chosen field does require considerable time and energy, and yet there are vacations, weekends, and of course Shabbat and Yom Tov. Similarly, there are periods in one's life when one has more to do and prove; but eventually children mature and become more independent, one becomes more established in one's career, financial and social pressures lighten, and it is then that reassessments can and should be made with regard to the degree and quality of Tora study that can now be engaged in on a regular daily basis.

Although typically, for many Jews more Tora study takes place on Shavuot than on the days of the rest of the year, let us strive for a "spill-over-effect" whereby some of that same commitment and excitement that is generated on the commemoration of our receiving the Tora at Sinai, extend to making a commitment to daily learning 365 days per year.

Chag Sameach!
