**Talmud Torah – Study and Learning**

*Talmud Torah* as a broad commandment referring to all of Jewish study. In

Judaism, knowledge of sacred scripture the responsibility of everyone, rather than of religious leaders only.

Study as sacred, hence our opening blessing for study:

*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid’shanu b’mitzvotav v‘tzivanu laasok b’divrei Torah*.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to busy ourselves in matters of Torah.

When I pray, I talk to God; when I study, God speaks to me. (Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, Conservative 20th century American rabbi)

Morning worship has a prelude of readings and prayers. This one (also in *Pirke Avot*) is found in almost all prayer books, and it is preceded by the study blessing above.

These are the things that are limitless,

whose fruits a person enjoys in this world,

while the principal remains for the person in the world to come;

They are: honoring one’s father and mother,

acts of loving kindness,

arriving early for study, morning and evening,

showing hospitality to guests,

visiting the sick,

providing for the wedding couple,

accompanying the dead for burial,

being devoted in prayer,

and making peace among people.

But the study of Torah encompasses them all (is equal to them all)

[because it leads to them all] (*Shabbat* 127a)

The supreme importance of *Talmud Torah* is further explained:

R. Tarfon and the Elders were once reclining in the upper story of Nithza’s house in Lydda, when this question was raised before them: Is study greater, or practice? R. Tarfon answered, saying Practice is greater. R. Akiba answered, saying Study is greater, for it leads to practice. Then they all answered and said: Study is greater, for it leads to action. (*Kiddushin* 40b)

Study for the sake of doing, rightly and Jewishly informed, in the world.

*Dt*. 6.6 – And these words, which I command you this day, (7) You shall teach them diligently to your children.

*Prov*. 3.1-2 – My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your mind retain my commandments: For they will bestow on you length of days, years of life and well-being.

It is for our own good that we learn Torah and forget it; because if we studied Torah and never forgot it, the people would struggle with learning it for two or three years, resume ordinary work, and never pay further attention to it. But since we study Torah and forget it, we don’t abandon its study. (*Kohelet Rabbah* 1, 13.1)

A system of community education with lots of practical details:

Verily the name of that man is to be blessed, to wit Joshua b. Gamala, for but for him the Torah would have been forgotten from Israel. For at first if a child had a father, his father taught him, and if he had no father he did not learn at all. By what [verse of Scripture] did they guide themselves? – By the verse, “And ye shall teach them to your children.” (*Dt*. 11.19), laying the emphasis on the word “ye.” They then made an ordinance that teachers of children should be appointed in Jerusalem. By what verse did they guide themselves? – By the verse, “For from Zion shall the Torah go forth.” (*Isa*. 2.3) Even so, if the child had a father, the father would take him up to Jerusalem and have him taught there, and if not, he would not go up to learn there. They therefore ordained that teacher should be appointed in each prefecture (town or province) and that the boys should enter school at the age of sixteen or seventeen. . . . At length Joshua b. Gamala came and ordained that teachers of young children should be appointed in each district and each town, and that children should enter school at the age of six or seven.

Rab said to R. Samuel b. Shilath: “Before the age of six do not accept pupils; from that age you can accept them and stuff them with Torah like an ox.” Rab also said to R. Samuel b. Shilath: “When you punish a pupil, only hit him with a shoe latchet. The attentive one will read [of himself] and if one is inattentive, put him next to a diligent one.”

Raba further said: “The number of pupils to be assigned to each teacher is twenty-five. If there are fifty, we appoint two teachers. If there are forty, we appoint an assistant, at the expense of the town. (*Baba Batra* 21a)

Every Jewish man is obligated to study Torah, whether he is poor or rich, whether his body is healthy and whole or afflicted by difficulties, whether he is young or an old man whose strength has diminished.

Even if he is a poor man who derives his livelihood from charity and begs from door to door, even if he is a husband and [a father of] children, he must establish a fixed time for Torah study during the day and at night, as [Joshua 1.8] commands: “you shall think about it day and night.” (Maimonides)

Rabbi Meir would say: Whoever studies Torah for its own sake alone (*Torah* *lishma*), 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, rejoicer of God, rejoicer of humanity. The Torah clothes him with humility and awe; makes him fit to be righteous, pious, correct and faithful; distances him from sin and brings him close to merit. From him, people enjoy counsel and wisdom, understanding and power, as is stated (Prov. 8.14): “Mine are counsel and wisdom, I am understanding, mine is power.” The Torah grants him sovereignty, dominion, and jurisprudence. The Torah’s secrets are revealed to him, and he becomes an ever-increasing wellspring and as an unceasing river. He becomes modest, patient, and forgiving of insults. The Torah uplifts him and makes him greater than all creations. (*Pirke Avot* 6.1)

Rabbi Chiyya, Rabbi Assi, and Rabbi Judah were sent to visit the cities in the land of Israel in order to appoint teachers of Bible and Mishnah. When they came to a city and found no teachers, they said, “Bring us the guardians of the town.” When the people brought the armed guards, the rabbis said, “These are not the guardians, these are the destroyers.” “Who then?” the people asked. The rabbis answered, “The teachers.” (*Yerushalmi Hagiga* 1.7f, 76c)

Random Observations from Joel Grishaver (*Learning Torah*) about study.

**The Alphabet**: For Jewish tradition, letters and words are holy. God created the world through words, which are made up of letters – individual letters/word are part of the mystery of our existence.

*Every letter is a whole world.* – (The Maggid of Mezhhiritch, Dov Ber ben Avraham, 18th century, Poland; disciple of the Baal Shem Tov)

*There is not a single letter in the Torah on which a thousand secrets do not hang.* (Menashe ben Israel; Manoel Dias Soeiro, Portuguese rabbi, kabbalist, writer, 17th century)

*Every single letter has a soul.* (Moses Cordovero; Safed, Israel, 16th century, central figure in development of kabbalah)

**The Book**:

Jewish sacred books tend to give “working answers” and then have you work out the question. (We’re used to books that ask questions and make us find the answers.)

Today, when people come up with new ideas or theories, they write a new book or article. In the traditional Jewish approach, the writer publishes his/her theories as a new commentary added to older commentaries around the major text. The new commentary combined with the older commentary constitute an ongoing dialogue. (My addition: In the secular world, the newest material is the best . . . most up-to-date/authoritative, etc. By Jewish lights, the older is better.)

None of us would ever kiss a copy of the Constitution or an encyclopedia that fell on the floor. But Jews kiss copies of their sacred books when they fall to the floor.

**The Classroom**:

Midrash suggests that Mt. Sinai, where Moses learned Torah directly with God, was the first Jewish classroom.

The great Sanhedrin was the Supreme Court of Israel in the rabbinic period. Members won their membership on it not through election but through knowledge of the Torah. It was both a court and a law-making body, but most of all it was a school. (True of all *yeshivot*, and *batei din*, even illustrated in Reform *responsa*) Hence, Talmud reads as it does . . .)

In ancient Israel, the Torah was read outdoors in the marketplace on both Mondays and Thursdays. Torah was brought to the people wherever they gathered, so the marketplace was transformed into a classroom. (integration of learning with everyday life . . .)

Study of Jewish texts done in pairs, called chavruta (chavrusa), trying to discover its deeper meaning together; learning a team process, student masters a text through the help of a partner. Often individual student also spends time alone with a passage of text, often rocking and chanting it in attempt to put themselves back in the world and experience of its origin.

*Beit Midrash* – the place of study is both a classroom and a synagogue.

Learning as a holy act.

My Attempt at a Short List of Essential Jewish Books

1. Tanach (Hebrew Bible) – most recent JPS edition
2. The Jewish Study Bible – edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler
3. Legends of the Jews – Louis Ginzberg, ed. By Henrietta Szold
4. Studies in the Weekly Portion – Nehama Leibowitz
5. Pirke Avot (Chapters of the Fathers) – edited and translated by Leonard Kravitz & Kerry M. Olitzky
6. Women & Jewish Law – Rachel Biale
7. Carnal Israel – Daniel Boyarin
8. The Essential Kabbalah – edited by Daniel C. Matt
9. Jewish Meditation – Aryeh Kaplan
10. Engenderinng Judaism – Rachel Adler
11. Standing Again at Sinai – Judith Plaskow
12. Jewish with Feeling – Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi
13. As A Driven Leaf – Milton Steinberg
14. Finding God – Rifat Sonsino & Daniel B. Syme
15. The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning – Maurice Lamm
16. Mourning and Mitzvah – Anne Brenner
17. Gates of the Forest – Elie Wiesel
18. Jews, God, and History – Max Dimont
19. Jewish Literacy – Rabbi Joseph Telushkin
20. The Sabbath – Abraham Joshua Heschel
21. Matters of Life and Death: A Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics Elliot N. Dorff

My Faltering Attempt at a Basic Jewish Literacy Quiz (culled from *Jewish Literacy* by Telushkin)

1. What are the three basic sections of the Hebrew Bible and what is the acronym, for them, that Jews use as title of the Hebrew Bible?
2. What are the names, in Hebrew and English, of the Five Books of Torah?
3. What are Mishnah, Talmud, and the Shulchan Aruch?
4. What is the family name of the Maccabees? Who was the Syrian king against whom they revolted?
5. What was the name of the Jewish High Court of ancient Judea?
6. Who were Yochanan ben Zakkai, Rabbi Akiba, Josephus, and Maimonides?
7. What happened at Masada in 73 C.E.?
8. What is the significance of these dates: 586 B.C.E., 70 C.E., and May 14, 1948?
9. Explain the difference between Written Torah and Oral Torah.
10. Define the words: halacha, aggadah, and midrash.
11. Name the 3 Jewish pilgrimage festivals and say something about what they celebrate/represent.
12. What is Kabbalah and what does the word, literally, mean? Name a major kabbalistic text.
13. Name the three major denominations of Judaism and briefly sketch out their philosophies and differences. Bonus points if you can do the same for one other minor denomination.
14. Name three modern (from 1800 to the present) Jewish thinkers and state a central tenet or two of their thought.
15. Name three Israeli writers.
16. Who were Alfred Dreyfus and Theodor Herzl? What is their connection?
17. What revival is Eliezer ben Yehudah responsible for?
18. Define: aliyah (not to the Torah . . .), chalutz, kibbutz, and moshav.
19. Who was the first Prime Minister of Israel? Who was Israel’s first (and only, so far . . .) female Prime Minister?
20. Name and sing (or say the words) of Israel’s national anthem.
21. How many members are in Israel’s Knesset?
22. To whom do the terms Ashkenzim, Sephardim, and Mizrachim refer?
23. What was Kirstallnacht and when did it occur?
24. Name 5 concentration camps from the Nazi Shoah.
25. Who was Leo Frank?
26. Name 3 major U.S. Jewish organizations and give a brief summary of who they are/what they do.
27. Name 3 Jewish Supreme Court justices, at least one of whom is not presently serving on the Court.
28. When was the first woman rabbi ordained, by each of the major U.S. denominations, and what are their names?
29. Define mitzvah/mitzvot. What is the traditional number of mitzvot; how many are negative and how many positive?
30. What are the Noahide laws? How many are there? Can you list them?
31. Define and explain the concept *pikuach nefesh*.
32. How many months are there in the Jewish calendar? Name six of them and the holidays that occur within each.
33. Name 3 Sabbath rituals.
34. What is Havdalah?
35. What are the siddur, mahzor, and haggadah?
36. Recite three major Jewish prayers and explain their themes.

*Pirke Avot* 6.6 – The Talmud says that a good student must do, have, and be these things. Note that being a “good” student depends on one’ character.

1. Study out loud.
2. Clear pronunciation
3. Understanding
4. Understanding of the heart
5. Awe
6. Reverence
7. Meekness
8. Cheerfulness
9. Serving scholars
10. Good friendship with other students
11. Discussions with other students
12. Sedateness
13. Knowledge of the Bible and the Mishnah
14. Moderation in business
15. Moderation in outside interests
16. Moderation in pleasure
17. Moderation in sleep
18. Moderation in conversation
19. Moderation in laughter
20. Self-discipline
21. A good heart
22. Faith in the wise
23. Accept criticism
24. Understand one’s place
25. Rejoice in one’s portion
26. Guard one’s words
27. Claim no self-merit
28. Being loved
29. Loving God
30. Loving people
31. Loving justice
32. Double-check
33. Avoiding honor
34. Not boastful of knowledge
35. Not enjoy making judgments
36. Share others’ burdens
37. Judge fairly
38. Show others truth
39. Showing others to peace
40. Be organized
41. Ask
42. Answer
43. Hear and adding onto
44. Learn in order to teach
45. Learn in order to do
46. Make one’s teacher wise
47. Pay attention
48. Cite the source of a quotation

*Kaddish d’Rabanan* (The Scholar’s *Kaddish* or The *Kaddish* for Study). *Kaddish* is not originally a mourner’s prayer. It is a doxology (formulaic praise to God). One *Kaddish* was recited at the end of a session of study. It then came to be used at the funeral of a scholar. And then, eventually, at all funerals. (The text of the mourner’s *Kaddish* and the study *Kaddish* are similar but not identical.

*Kaddish d’Rabanan* emerged in an oral form in the first or second century. Like other forms of the *kaddish*, it is an elaborate praise of God (doxology), calling for the coming of God’s ultimate dominion. Its name – *Kaddish d’Rabanan*, Kaddish of the Rabbis) reflects its central paragraph, acknowledging/praising those who study Torah, indicating the role of Torah as both an intellectual and a spiritual activity. This *Kaddish* concludes text study. Here is an English text; you can find it in our prayer books, *Mishkan T’filah* (p. 47, for example)

For our teachers and their students,

and the students of the students,

we ask for peace and lovingkindness,

and let us say, Amen.

And for those who study Torah

here and everywhere,

may they be blessed with all they need,

and let us say, Amen.

We ask for peace and lovingkindness,

and let us say, Amen.

(*Kaddish d’Rabanan* – *Kaddish* of the Rabbis)

Google Debbie Friedman’s version and have fun singing along, as you end your study session!