

WHY SHOULD ONE LEARN TORAH?

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The questions why one should learn Torah and what benefit one receives from learning Torah are the most basic that one can ask about Judaism. Since Judaism establishes as its central mitzvah the study of Torah, it follows that an understanding of these questions carries with it an understanding of the philosophy of Judaism. This philosophy must bring to light the ultimate good that man is to attain from an adherence to the way of life of Torah.

Judaism is not simply a religion. By religion I mean that which satisfies the religious instinct in man. (1) Many forms of this satisfaction are strictly prohibited in Judaism and even deemed the worst evil. Judaism considers its greatest adversary the unbridled religious emotion of man. This reaches its ultimate manifestation in idolatry. Judaism is a unique metaphysical and philosophical system. Its insistence on knowledge as the only means of determining its practice and worship distinguishes it most exclusively from any other forms of religion. Judaism demands of man a certain level of knowledge. Falsehood is equated with evil—the good with true knowledge. (2) It is precisely for this reason that we were given the Torah. As Maimonides explains in the laws concerning conversion, when we speak to a prospective convert we tell him, "there is no such thing as a truly righteous person other than he who is a possessor of knowledge who keeps the laws and understands them (Laws Concerning Prohibitions of Intercourse Chapter 14, Law 3)."

Judaism is the only religion that views knowledge as indispensable for its practice and maintains that man finds his deepest fulfillment in knowledge. "Say unto wisdom thou are my sister and to understanding shalt thou call a close relative (Proverbs 7:4)." Countless passages of the Torah and the prophets attest to this fact. For this reason the Jews were not supposed to believe in the Torah without witnessing the event at Sinai. (3) Two passages of the Torah make this point exceedingly clear: "Behold I will reveal myself to you in the thickness of the cloud in order that the nation shall hear when I speak with you and also in you will they believe forever (Exodus 19:9)... " Also, "The day that you stood before your God in *Horeb* when God said to me gather for me the nation and I will let them hear my words in order that they shall learn to fear me all the days that they live on the land and unto their children will they teach (Deuteronomy 4:10)."

The Prophet never criticized the recalcitrant Jews because they lacked in religiosity but because they abandoned the beneficial and knowledgeable ways of the Torah for

nonsense and folly. (4) Jews are often rebuked for their misguided religiosity as in Isaiah 1:11-15, 48:1-6. Falsehood is the enemy of Torah, knowledge its stronghold. "God Almighty is True (Jeremiah 10:10)."

Judaism does not fear honest scientific inquiry. The most absurd idea imaginable to Judaism is to suggest that we deny our senses or our minds. It would mean the denial of the event of Sinai, the very basis of our Torah. No true Torah scholar has ever suggested the denial of what we see with our eyes and what is conclusively proven with our minds.

The true religion can only find support from all sources of knowledge as all knowledge has as its source one Creator. What Judaism does scorn is pseudo-intellectualism, rash decisions stemming not from man's "*Tzelem Elokim*," his divine gift of intellect which the Creator has endowed him with, but from alien sources which lie deeply rooted in man's instinctual nature. All roads of true inquiry lead to one conclusion, the existence of the Creator and the realization of our inability to comprehend His greatness. As Albert Einstein has stated, "Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the universe—a spirit vastly superior to that of man and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble." (5)

There is one portion of the Torah that is singled out from all others in terms of religious significance—the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 4:4-9). We are required to recite it twice daily. We are further required to bind this portion to our arms and to our heads and to place it on our doorposts. It is obvious, therefore, that of all the portions of the Torah, this one is considered to contain the most crucial and fundamental message. The first statement, "Hear O Israel the Lord is our God the Lord is One," contains three ideas: the existence of God, His Oneness, and the fact that He relates to us. The second statement, "And these words..." further enjoins us to study the Torah. Rashi tells us that this third statement teaches us how to accomplish the injunction contained in the previous statement. Rashi states, "And what is this love? Because through this, the study of Torah, one will come to recognize the Holy One blessed be He, and you will cling to His ways." Rashi's source is the *Sifri*. Maimonides in his "*Sefer Hamitzvot*," Book of the Commandments, in the third positive commandment elaborates: "He commanded us to love Him, may He be exalted. This means that we should analyze and ponder His commandments, His words, and His works until we comprehend it and we enjoy in its comprehension the ultimate delight." (6)

This is the love that is obligatory upon us. The words of the *Sifri* in this matter are, "It says 'and you shall love the Lord your God', but I do not know how one loves God. The Torah therefore tells us, 'these words which I command you shall be upon your heart.' This refers to the study of Torah, because through it you recognize the One

who spoke and caused the universe to come into existence." This *Sifri* is an interesting one. For the *Sifri* the commandment to love God presented a serious problem. "How can one love God?" asks the *Sifri*. The *Sifri* was perplexed and could not take the commandment at face value. Why not? The answer is rooted in Judaism's idea of God.

The God of Israel is inherently unknowable and undefinable. "To whom can you liken me that I may be compared, saith the Holy One (Isaiah 40:25)." His essence is removed from any created existences that man can know. How then can we direct the emotion of love to an unknowable entity? Love requires an object. For the *Sifri* the very commandment to love God was a monumental dilemma. The *Sifri* explains that the Torah anticipates this question and gives us a solution. It is true that we cannot apply love to God as one would to an ordinary object. There is, however, a path we may take in order to fulfill this commandment. When we study God's Torah and when we contemplate His works we become filled with ecstasy over his wisdom. As Maimonides continues to explain, "Behold we have made clear to you that through study and contemplation you will attain knowledge and you will then attain the delight and enjoyment and the love will necessarily follow." This concept of the love of God is unique. It is not like the love of an object as God is not an object that is apprehended by the mind. It is only similar to love in the sense that one is drawn towards God, longs for Him, and desires to approach Him. This desire can only be attained through the study and appreciation and delight in partaking of God's infinite knowledge. If one does not study Torah, if one does not take delight and marvel at the beauty of God's wisdom, one cannot be overcome with the longing to reach forth towards the source of all wisdom and knowledge—the Creator of the Universe. It is for this reason Maimonides states in the conclusion of his laws concerning repentance that the love of God is in direct proportion to one's knowledge—"And according to the knowledge will be the love if great, great and if small, small." It cannot exceed his knowledge for it is only the experience which results directly from knowledge that is defined by the Torah as the love of God. All other emotional expressions of love are extraneous and are not considered as a component of the mitzvah.

In this commandment we have a singular phenomenon. The injunction cannot be carried out directly. We cannot will ourselves to love God. Here the performance of the mitzvah and the fulfillment of the mitzvah are two separate entities. The performance is the study, the analysis, the understanding of God's laws. The fulfillment is found in the enjoyment and delight one experiences while learning, which causes one to turn towards God, to long for Him. (7) As Maimonides expresses it through the words of King David, "My soul thirsts for the Almighty the living God (Psalms 42:3)."

Why should one study Torah? Because it is only through Torah that one can fulfill the one commandment that is the end goal of the entire Torah—the love of God. Why

should one study Torah? Because the study brings man close to the source of all reality—the Creator of the Universe. Why should one study Torah? Because through the study of Torah man attains the highest possible state of human existence—the very purpose for which he was created. It is for this reason he was endowed with the "*Tzelem Elokim*," his divine element. All else that a person may do in life is only a means for the state of mind derived from the learning of Torah. It is the most satisfying state of human existence attainable; one that gives man his true happiness. According to Judaism man's psyche was specifically designed for this experience. In it, all psychic energies are involved in a sublime joy and appreciation of intellectual beauty. As such it is the most gratifying experience possible for man.

ADDENDUM I

The Torah consists of the written Law, which is the Bible, the oral Law given to Moses, (8) a systematic formulation of the commandments, and the unique method of analysis which has been taught from generation to generation. The latter two are generally included in the term Talmud. Although the oral Law has been committed to writing for fear of it becoming lost, the particular method of analysis has always required verbal transmission from teacher to student to this day. In order to become a Talmudic scholar one has to have studied personally under the guidance and tutelage of another Talmudic scholar. The unique method of Talmudic analysis with all its intricacies requires years of personal tutelage and cannot be acquired from written words. All who have attempted to do so, perhaps most notably historians, have failed in their endeavor, revealing their ignorance in their writings.

The study of Torah is an intellectual activity; it engages the same part of the mind that is employed in the study of natural science and mathematics. In contrast to mathematics its emphasis is on inductive rather than deductive reasoning. I do not mean that there is quantitatively more inductive rather than deductive reasoning in the process of learning Torah but that the beauty of Talmudic thought is revealed through the inductive process. Talmud employs a very definite type of categorical thinking which when mastered remains as a model in the mind of the Talmudist. All ideas, no matter how creative, original, and insightful will always conform to this model. The model, however, is not responsible for creative thought. Creative thought stems from the intellectual abilities and the work of the individual.

When one studies Torah one is not merely involved in the accumulation of facts (I mean, of course, the study of Torah on a scholarly level) but in the creative process of understanding and formulating *halachic* structures. The *halachic* structures are objects of great beauty. The Rabbis tell us that if a scholar's rendition of a particular Talmudic point or issue is not intellectually beautiful he should refrain from expounding it. "If it is not as sweet as milk and honey, keep it under your tongue." (9) In the study of Torah

one is engaged in comprehending God's ideas. As such they must be aesthetically appealing. This reminds one of the great physicist Dirac who used to say it is more important for one's theory to be in line with beauty than with one's experiments.

Because the study of the Talmud is the study of God's thoughts, it has an epistemological value. ⁽¹⁰⁾ The unique method of Talmudic analysis is intellectual *modus operandi par excellence*; it is employed when approaching any area of knowledge. Every subject becomes translated into the categories of Talmudic thought. A Talmudic scholar is not satisfied until all of his knowledge attains the precision and clarity of a Talmudic formula.

ADDENDUM II

The importance the Talmud places on the beauty of ideas gives a different meaning to the process of induction. The process of induction derives its power of conviction from repetition for most logicians. Commonly the process of induction is seen as deriving its power of conviction upon the human mind from repetitiveness. If an experiment is performed many times and if the same result is obtained each time, the experimenter concludes that the result will always follow. Thus the essence of induction is construed as resting on the fact that one observes repeated occurrences of the same phenomenon and concludes the phenomenon will always recur. The fact that the sun will rise tomorrow is considered an induction based on its having risen daily in the past. ⁽¹¹⁾

The Talmudic concept of induction is different. Here the power of conviction lays not in the repetition but in the beauty the intellect perceives in the formulation of the ideas. ⁽¹²⁾ True, repetition and consistency are necessary in order to test the idea—to demonstrate its veracity; however, they are not the essential source of conviction that the theory is a true one.

The difference between the two concepts of induction can clearly be seen in the case of the sun's rising. According to the common view this is a case of induction, i.e. that the sun will rise tomorrow based upon its rising each day in the past. According to the Talmudic view it is not. There is no less intrinsic beauty in the idea that it can rise only a fixed amount of times, that fixed amount not having as yet been reached than the idea that there is some principle at work which will cause it to rise indefinitely. (According to present scientific knowledge, the former is the case). Again, according to the Talmudic view an induction may be constructed out of even one case if the theory conforms to beauty of thought, simplicity, while according to the common view it cannot.

In the Talmudic view the intuitive intellect is at the heart of the inductive process. It can be argued that even in the most scientifically controlled experiment repetition alone cannot be responsible for scientific knowledge and advancement. In any experiment there are myriads of factors at play. In order to obtain a cohort of data a process of isolating factors is necessary. But from where does this process stem? How does the scientist determine what to isolate in setting up and interpreting his experiments? The scientist sets up his experiments with only a suspicion of the cause and effect they involve. Here we must make recourse to a type of intuition that grasps certain relationships without even knowing why. The Talmudic model of induction merely carries this sense, this intuition, to its full conclusion. It bases the validity of an induction on its degree of theoretical beauty.

For some the Talmudic model may seem more tenuous. One feels more secure basing his theory on concrete physical evidence rather than upon abstract intuition. But any sense of security we may gain from the fact that we base our ideas on physical evidence is short lived when we realize the classical weakness of induction, namely that there is always the possibility that we simply do not have enough evidence. The two positions are embodied in the antimony of materialism vs. mentalism. (13) The Talmud opts for the latter.

We are now approaching an understanding of one of the foremost institutions of the Talmud, the *machloket*, or argument. This institution is often the bane of the religionist permeating him with a sense of insecurity, but it is the very lifeline and *joie de vivre* of the Talmudist, opening up worlds of theoretical speculation for him. A Talmudic argument occurs when two theoretical paths are open to a given set of *halachic* phenomena. If evidence is adduced that proves one path to be correct over the other, the dispute is resolved. If no evidence can be used to support one view or refute the other, the argument remains. But *halacha* has practical relevancy as well as theoretical relevancy. How then does one practice in the case of a dispute? Here the scholar has a right to follow his own reasoning. (14) Why does the Torah permit him to do so when the view of his colleague is equally tenable? The Torah permits him to rely on his own intellectual intuition. He is only bound to follow the *halacha* according to the way his mind sees it. This license is granted only to one who has great knowledge of Torah. Everyone's intuition is not equal. Intellectual intuition is only recognized by Torah in one who has perfected himself intellectually and knows well the ways of the Talmud. As Maimonides states, "Man's intuitive power is especially strong in things which he has well comprehended, and in which his mind is much engaged (Guide for the Perplexed Part II Chapter 38)." An ignorant person's intuition is worthless. Maimonides contrasts the intuition of the scholar with that of the layman. He attributes the former to the intellect while the latter he attributes to the faculty of imagination and previous experience. Thus there are two

distinct types of intuition stemming from two different parts of the mind (Guide, Part I, Chapter 73, note on 10th prop.).

The institution of *machloket* or argument comes about when two scholars, both erudite in Talmud, differ in their intuitive grasp of a particular Talmudic point. ⁽¹⁵⁾ Each one is entitled to follow his own sense of what is the correct formulation. Does this make one's religious practice tenuous and less authentic and secure? This depends on one's definition of religious practice. If one is seeking in religion a sense of salvation that is guaranteed him by the performance of a particular religious act then naturally he will feel threatened by a system based on human rationale and inquiry. In Judaism it is the commitment to the system which brings one salvation. This system has as its hallmark the recognition of man's highest activity—his ability to search for truth and knowledge.

POSTSCRIPT

An example of what we are discussing can be gleaned from Bertrand Russell's essay, "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism." Here Russell investigates what we mean when we say a proposition is true. He contends that true means the proposition corresponds to some fact. False then would mean it does not correspond to any fact. Russell then realizes that this is all fine with positive statements, i.e. we can say it either does or does not correspond to some fact in the world. But what about negative statements? If I say for instance, there are no elephants in this room, what do I mean if I am to say this statement is true? According to our previous definition it would have to mean negative facts. But here things become a bit murky. A discussion follows as to whether there are or are not negative facts. To quote Russell, (lecture III) "Are there negative facts? ... One has a certain repugnance to negative facts; the same sort of feeling that makes you wish not to have a fact 'p' or 'q' going about the world. You have a feeling there are only positive facts, and that negative propositions have somehow or other got to be expressions of positive facts. When I was lecturing on this subject at Harvard I argued that there were negative facts, and it nearly produced a riot: the class would not hear of there being negative facts at all. I am still inclined to think that there are." After an examination of the pros and cons of such an idea, Russell finally concludes, "on the whole I do incline to believe that there are negative facts... "

This is precisely the sort of thinking that would not do for the Talmudist. Russell's problem is that he is dealing with an idea (a very basic one at that) that is intuitively unclear. He needs this idea in order to get on with his system. One senses here an urgency to resolve problems. It becomes a type of reasoning all too familiar to us in works of modern day epistemologists where the system justifies the premises. The Talmudist would be aghast at such an affair. For him every idea must be exceedingly

clear and appealing to the human intellect. It must strike the mind in a way that one senses that great light and clarity has been brought to the subject. The Talmudist would rather withdraw from his inquiry in admission of ignorance than to push through an idea for the sake of a desired goal. Reb Chaim used to say; "from a question one does not die"! His meaning was that solutions must flow naturally and not from the desire to produce answers.

There is a difference in this between science and philosophy. Such a state of affairs may be possible in science but intolerable in philosophy. ⁽¹⁶⁾ Let us take for example Newton's idea of gravitation. As physicists have stated Newton taught us a strange thing, namely that one body can act upon another although there is no contact between them. This is called action at a distance. In science this is tolerable. The correspondence of the mathematical equations to reality show us that there is something here that cannot be disregarded. It is an advancement over our former knowledge. ⁽¹⁷⁾ True, the basic idea may be unpalatable but our minds are now directed, due to the evidence, to this phenomenon. We admit ignorance of the most basic point of our inquiry. This is good. The Talmudist often does the same. In clarifying an issue he may reach a point where he finds himself confronted by a basic premise which seems paradoxical. He is nevertheless satisfied with his exposition in that he has advanced his knowledge, though it leads him to a dilemma he admittedly cannot explain. He reacts like the physicist. In philosophy and certainly in epistemology where our goal is comprehending, when our basic premises are unclear the essence of our inquiry has been undermined. In the one case we recognize our idea is unclear and are guided by it to further investigation; in the other we are telling our minds that an unclear idea is a good explanation. We should never forget that all epistemology must ultimately rest on the innate appeal of an idea to the human mind. We cannot go outside our minds to investigate the mind.

END NOTES

1. In this we are in staunch opposition to the doctrine of Blaise Pascal who states in his Preface to his *Pensees*, "God orders all things with gentleness and His way is to plant religion in the mind by argument and in the heart by Grace." For Judaism the religion of the heart is not to be identified with the religion of the mind.
2. That ignorance and falsehood are evil is an implicit tenet in the works of Maimonides. Note especially *Guide for the Perplexed* Book III Chapter XI.
3. see "Torah from Sinai" by the same author.
4. As Jeremiah states very typically, "You forgot me and relied on falsehood (Jeremiah (13:25))."
5. Albert Einstein's conviction about the existence of God rests not on a formal logical proof but on an inner intuitive cognition which stems from an

intellectual appreciation of the beautiful harmony that is revealed through the laws of nature and the recognition of our own ability to perceive this harmony. This intellectual intuition is what Judaism refers to as the "*Tzelem Elokim*," the divine aspect of human nature given to man as a supreme gift by the creator. But just what is intellectual intuition? In discussing mathematical reasoning, Dr. Morris Kline, professor of Mathematics at NYU writes, "In the domains of algebra, calculus, and advanced analysis especially, the first rate mathematician depends upon the kind of inspiration that we usually associate with the creation of music, literature, or art." The composer feels that he has a theme which when properly developed will produce true music... Similarly the mathematician surmises that he has a conclusion which will follow from the axioms of mathematics... Essentially both mathematicians and composers are moved by an afflatus which enables them to see the final edifice before a single stone is laid... There is no logic or infallible guide which tells the mind how to think... When creating a mathematical proof, the mind does not see the cold ordered arguments which one reads in texts but rather it perceives an idea or scheme which when properly formulated constitutes the deductive proof. The formal proof, so to speak, merely sanctions the conquest already made by the intuition... There is the prevalent but mistaken notion that scientists and mathematicians must keep their minds open and unbiased in pursuing an investigation. They are not supposed to prejudice the conclusion. Actually the mathematician must first decide what to prove and this conclusion not only does, but must precede the search for the proof, or else he would not know where to head." As Dr. Kline further states, "we do not know just what mental processes may lead to correct insight," but that it exists there is no doubt. (*Mathematics for the Non-Mathematician*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. pp.53-54.)

Similarly, in writing of Albert Einstein's intuition, his collaborator and biographer Banesh Hoffman states, "It may seem ridiculous to talk about beauty and near miracle... Let us therefore ask a question. How did Einstein manage to find the equations? ... That is where the beauty and near miracle come in... We begin—but only begin—to see here the true stature of Einstein's intuition." He further states, "Yet when we see how shaky were the ostensible foundations on which Einstein built his theory, we can only marvel at the intuition that guided him to his masterpiece. Such intuition is the essence of genius... By a sort of divination genius knows from the start in a nebulous way the goal toward which it must strive." Hoffman, Banesh. *Albert Einstein Creator and Rebel*. New York: New American Library. pp.122, 127. This intuition could not be separated from his concept of a universe in which God reveals himself through the beauty and harmony of its laws. In the words of the Psalmist, of nearly 3,000 years ago, "The heavens declare the Glory of

God and firmament tells of his handiwork." According to Judaism the undistorted and untainted intuitive intellect will necessarily arrive at this sublime recognition.

6. The frame of mind of the scholar in studying Torah is not one of serious religious conscientiousness— instead it borders on the amusing. The Rabbis would often begin a study session with a joke. The study of Torah is an intellectual adventure, not a ceremonious religious ritual. King David refers to the study of Torah as a plaything (Psalms 119, 16, 24, 70,92). One looks forward to the study of Torah as to an enjoyable adventure and is drawn to it much as a child is drawn to a plaything. The true lover of Torah need not coerce himself to learn Torah. He is attracted to it naturally by his appreciation of its logical and theoretical beauty and finds himself engaged in it unwittingly. "Thy Laws have been to me as music (Psalms 119:54)." This aptly describes the attitude of the learned towards Torah. (Although the Rabbis state that King David was criticized for this statement, in no way did they mean that it is not true. The passage is as true as any other passage of Psalms. The attitude King David describes towards the study of Torah is a correct one. The only criticism of the passage is that the entity of music is not a fitting object of comparison to Torah, so that while the import of the statement is true, a fine sensitivity would prohibit the use of such an analogy).
7. It is interesting to note that this commandment, the foremost of the Torah, is inextricably bound with aesthetic appreciation. In the blessing we recite daily before the study of Torah we ask God for this appreciation. "... make the words of the Torah sweet to us." In no other commandment do we find such a formulation. Judaism, which generally decries cultural aestheticism as in the arts, rests its entire foundation on intellectual aestheticism.
8. Every commandment of the written law is systematically treated by the oral law.
9. Medrash, Song of Songs 4:2
10. Soloveitchik, Joseph B. *The Halachic Mind*. New York: 1986, Seth Press.
11. See for example Morris Kline *ibid.* p.40
12. The repetition of related phenomena only serve to alert one to the possibility of theoretical formulation.
13. It is interesting to note that Sir James Jeans in his "Physics and Philosophy" describes the progress of science as proceeding from the former to the latter. Biologists to this day however remain rooted in the former, so their positions are often contrary to those of Torah.
14. For one who is not a scholar there is a system of laws which guide him as to his practice. Also in the case of Sanhedrin we go by majority rule and even the scholar must follow the final decree of the Sanhedrin.

15. The reason Bais Hillel were usually more lenient is that on the whole they relied more heavily on their intellectual intuition. In order to establish leniency one must break away the particular case in point from the general prohibited category, as all which is not prohibited is permissible. In so doing one must rely on one's theoretical formulation. Thus the Talmudic dictum: "The strength of leniency is greater—*Koach dehetaira odif.*"
16. By philosophy I do not mean the subject but the process of explaining underlying principles.
17. Newton was himself aware that the idea of action at a distance was intellectually unsatisfying but was unable to resolve the paradox.