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The Mitzvah To Speak and Think of Torah

It is our merit here to learn, with *siyata d'shmaya*, about the fundamentals of learning Torah, and the *avodah* of a person regards the ways of *iyun* (in-depth study) of the words of Torah. We will attempt, with assistance from Heaven, to begin from the very first steps, and solely, we will try, with *siyata d'shmaya*, to gain more direction, towards the *sugyos* (sections of Gemara) which we learn.

When a person is born, it is not within his capability to develop the power to study the words of Torah. In order to learn Torah, one needs to develop two different abilities of the soul: the ability to speak words of Torah, and the ability to think about words of Torah. Some of the *Rishonim* are of the opinion that besides for the *mitzvah* to speak in the words of Torah, there is also a separate *mitzvah* to think about words of Torah, and not just to speak of Torah. There is a dispute in the *Poskim* if thinking words of Torah is a *mitzvah* or not. In any case, the *mitzvah* of Torah study divides into two parts: **speaking** and **thinking** about the words of Torah.

When a person is born, he does not have the capability to learn. He can barely think. All he can do is make sounds and cry. He can't even talk. It is not possible for him to study Torah then. One of the Sages, when he was infant, was placed by his mother in a crib in the *Beis Midrash*, so that the words of Torah could enter his ears, but a person cannot actually learn Torah when he is in infant, because he cannot speak or think.

The *mitzvah* of learning Torah is not possible for a child, because the Rambam defines the *mitzvah* of learning Torah as learning the "wisdom" of the Torah and the *mitzvos*, meaning that one learns the Torah in order to know how to do the *mitzvos*. This isn't possible for a child, because a child isn't able to learn for the purpose of knowing how to act, for a child isn't obligated to do the *mitzvos*.

That is the outline here. To summarize, when a person is born, he cannot speak words of Torah. He can make sounds, but he can't speak, and this isn't enough to learn Torah. According to some opinions, there is a *mitzvah* to think words of Torah, and this isn't either possible for a child. A child cannot either learn Torah in order to know how to act properly, because he is not yet obligated in the *mitzvos*.

At a later point in childhood, the father is obligated to teach Torah to his child. The Gemara^[1] [1] says that as soon as a child knows how to talk, the father should teach him the verse "*Torah tzivah lanu Moshe*" ("The Torah was commanded to us by Moshe"), and the first verse of the *Shema*, which is,

"Shema, Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad" (Hear, Yisrael, that Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is one"). This is the beginning stage of learning the words of Torah. The child himself is not yet obligated in learning Torah, and it is the father's obligation to teach Torah to his child.

Is The Elementary Stages of Learning Torah Also Included In The Mitzvah of Learning Torah?

As the child develops further, he can begin to understand more, and the father teaches him to say the words in front of him. At this stage, though, the child still doesn't understand what he is saying. He doesn't understand the meaning of the words *"Shema Yisrael"*. The question is: Is this merely a preparatory stage for the child, or is it part of the *mitzvah* of learning Torah?

The *sefarim* discuss if one fulfills the *mitzvah* of Torah learning just by reading the words of Torah, without understanding it. In some places in Eretz Yisrael, there are those who have the custom to learn from a *sefer Torah* even without understanding at all what they are saying. This is certainly a *segulah* (a mystical remedy) to the words of Torah, but does a person also fulfill the *mitzvah* of Torah study like this? Usually, a person will understand a little of what he is reading, but in a case where he truly does not understand anything he is reading, does he fulfill a *mitzvah* of Torah study, or not?

From the words of our blessed teachers, it seems to depend on what the definition of Torah study is. The Rambam says that the *mitzvah* of learning Torah is to "study the light of the wisdom of Torah", and it is unclear if this means to learn with understanding or not. If "learning" the Torah means to learn it with understanding, it seems that a child who is being taught Torah is not actually learning Torah, because he doesn't understand it. If that is true, not only isn't the child getting a *mitzvah* of Torah study (and this is beside the fact that he isn't obligated in the first place), but even the father or teacher isn't getting a *mitzvah* of teaching Torah, because the father\teacher himself doesn't understand what he's saying. There is still an obvious point to teaching the child Torah, though, because it is certainly a preparation towards learning Torah. But if there is no understanding of the material, neither the child nor the father\teacher is getting a *mitzvah* of Torah study.

So, back to the question: When a father teaches Torah to his son, such as when he teaches him Shema Yisrael, is he getting a *mitzvah* of Torah study, or is it simply a *mitzvah* of *chinuch* (child education) that he has towards his son? He is certainly training the child to do *mitzvah* of Torah study. But is there an actual fulfillment here of the *mitzvah* to study Torah? It depends if the *mitzvah* requires understanding or not. But even if there is no *mitzvah*, it is the beginning of one's connection to Torah.

It is also explained in the Gemara that a child should be taught Torah from the age he knows how to talk. This is when a person should teach the child the verse of *Shema Yisrael* and *Torah Tzivah Lanu Moshe*. There is also an additional stage, which the *Rema* says to do, based on the ruling of the *Rishonim*: When a child turns three years of age, the custom is to begin to teach Torah to him, by teaching him the letters of the *aleph beis*. This custom is practiced today as well. At the age of three, a child is taught the *aleph beis*. But this is already a later stage of teaching Torah to the child. There must be a first stage which came before this: to teach him *Shema Yisrael* and *Torah Tzivah Lanu Moshe*.

Teaching The Oral Torah Must Precede Teaching Written Torah

There is a fundamental difference between these two stages. The Torah consists of the Written Torah [Chumash] and the Oral Torah [Mishnayos and Gemara]. Which should precede the other? When one begins to teach Torah to his child, what should he teach him first, the Written Torah or the Oral Torah?

A child who begins to talk is usually before the age of three, and we first teach him *Torah Tzivah Lanu*

Moshe and Shema Yisrael. This is in the category of Oral Torah, not the Written Torah, because we are first teaching him these verses by heart, before he knows how to read. Later when he turns three, the *Rema* says that we begin to teach him the letters of the *aleph beis* and how to read them. Here we are teaching him the Written Torah.

When we teach him *aleph beis*, is this also a *mitzvah* of Torah study? Or is it only a preparation towards Torah study? Without understanding the letters of the *aleph beis*, a person cannot read Torah. If he cannot read Torah, he cannot understand it. So is teaching the letters of the *aleph beis* a part of learning Torah, or is it merely a preparatory stage? Certainly the letters of the *aleph beis* are the words of Torah, and therefore, we can define the letters of the *aleph beis* as a part of learning the words of Torah.

To summarize thus far, there are two beginning stages of learning Torah with a child. The first stage is when a child begins to talk, when he is taught two verses: *Torah Tzivah Lanu Moshe*, and *Shema Yisrael*. This is in the category of Oral Torah, because it is by heart. The second step is when the child is taught letters of the *aleph beis*.

Teaching Nekudos (Pronunciation) To The Child

In order for the child to pronounce each letter properly, he must be taught the *nekudos* (enunciation). The child is first taught the letter *aleph*, and how the letters *aleph*, *lamed* and *pei* form the letter *aleph*, and how the letters *beis*, *yud* and *tav* form the letter *beis*, etc. This is called pronouncing the *miluy* (the full spelling) of the letter.

The truth is that at this stage, the child does not yet understand what he is saying. But he is trained to say letters and words, with their correct pronunciation. We begin to teach him the shape of the letters, how to pronounce each letter and how they combine to form words, and how the words are pronounced, with their *nekudos*.

When we teach the *nekudos* to the child, he is usually not yet made aware of what he is learning. He is beginning his Torah learning by learning of abstract concepts that are still mysterious to him. This is what leads to most of the errors in one's Torah learning. If he was first being taught how to understand what he learns, he would first absorb it with understanding, and although he can still make mistakes, at least he is first learning how to understand. But since he is beginning from an abstract, mysterious kind of learning, he is first being taught how to pronounce letters and words, but without any awareness at all, of what he is doing. A child, in his first stage of learning Torah, begins to pronounce words, but he is not aware at all of what he is saying. So the child is beginning his Torah learning from a place that is above his *daas* (understanding).

There is certainly a gain in this, because "the purpose of knowledge is to know that we do not know", [meaning that there is an area outside of the scope of *daas* (understanding), a simplistic level of not trying to understand, which, from a spiritual viewpoint, is on a higher level than *daas*\understanding].

However, we ask Hashem each day that "we and our children should "know" Your Name, and learn Your Torah for its sake", and this implies knowing the Torah. This causes a difficulty. A child is beginning his Torah learning with ambiguity, and he also begins to do *mitzvos* without awareness. Just as there is a *bris* done to the body without the child's awareness, so is the Torah a *bris* which we first do without awareness. We begin Torah learning from ambiguity, and not from understanding. However, since our Torah learning begins with an absence of awareness, our clarity in Torah learning is negatively affected, as a result.

Our task is to recognize all of the stages we have been through until now. We need to return to our

childhood stage of learning and begin everything from the start, as if we have never begun. We need to return to this elementary stage of non-awareness in our Torah learning, and we also need to return to there with a newfound understanding. In this way, we gain two beginning points in the soul (as a hint, the word *beraishis* means *beis raishiyos*, two beginnings): to begin from the place of non-awareness, and to begin from daas\understanding.

To summarize until now, there are two stages of Torah learning – Oral Torah and Written Torah. These are stages that need to be traversed in the soul. A child usually begins either of these stages of Torah learning without any understanding\awareness at all.

Teaching Peirush HaMilim (Meaning of Words) To The Child

At a later stage, a child is taught the meaning of words. The Gemara says that at the age of 6 or 7, a child is brought to a classroom where he can be taught Torah from a *rebbe*. He is first taught *peirush hamilim*, the meaning of words. The child is taught to understand what he is saying.

This is where actual Torah learning begins. If a child is taught the words “Abba” and “Ima” and the teacher intends for the *mitzvah* of teaching Torah, then the teacher fulfills a *mitzvah* of teaching Torah. Without specific intention for the *mitzvah*, there is no *mitzvah* of Torah fulfilled here, if the child is just being taught words. It would be no different than how the gentiles teaching words to the children in a classroom.

One should not try to advance any stage onto a child before he is ready. The Rambam says that a child should be taught more and more verses of the Torah, after he is taught *Shema* and *Torah Tzivah Lanu Moshe*, until the age of 6 or 7, when he can be taught the meaning of words. But the child should not be taught to understand Torah before 6 or 7.

When the child is taught the meaning of words, this is where understanding begins. This is where the actual *mitzvah* of learning Torah begins, according to all views.

We ask Hashem each day, “And give to our hearts understanding, to understand and comprehend.” There are levels of understanding. The Gemara says that a person should divide his Torah learning three-fold: a third of his time for *Mikra* (studying verses of the Chumash), a third for *Mishnah*, and a third for *Talmud* (Gemara).[\[2\]](#) ^[2]

The first part, *Mikra*, is to study written verses of the Torah. *Mishnah* is to understand the laws contained in these verses, which are collected in the *Mishnayos*. The *Talmud* means to understand these laws [via the study of Gemara). This is stated by the Rambam and also in *Shulchan Aruch*. But where does the first stage of understanding begin? We first begin by trying to understand the meaning of words, *peirush hamilim*.

We need to understand this well: when a child is taught the meaning of words, there are some children who understand better, either due to the child himself, or because of the teacher, or because of other external reasons. When the child gets older and matures, what happens? Many people do not understand the meaning of words when they read them. They have a general idea of what they are reading, but they do not actually understand the meaning of the words. They may be able to read a paragraph and even explain well what is written there, but if they were to try and take apart the words, each word by itself, what each words means, they would not be clear at all of what they are saying.

This problem may be manifest in studying the grammar of *Lashon HaKodesh*, and in others, the problem is manifest when they learn Gemara. In either case, an important stage has been skipped. In the case of Gemara, perhaps the child could not understand Aramaic words and what they meant,

and he was only taught paragraphs, not how to read individual words.

P'shat - Understanding The Simple Meaning

Understanding the meaning of words is the first step (of understanding in Torah learning) which must be traversed. Previously we discussed stages which do not require understanding on the child's part. Now we are discussing a stage of Torah learning which requires the ability of understanding. The Gemara says that one should teach his child *Mikra*, verses of the *Chumash*, and what does this mean? It means to teach the ***p'shat***, the simple meaning, of the verse.

What defines teaching *p'shat*? The first step is to teach the meaning of the words, and the second step is to combine the words together so that one gains the *p'shat*, a general understanding, of what is being said. This requires a bit of understanding. Although this part seems simple to most people, anyone who knows a lot of people is aware that a large percentage of people skip this stage: knowing the meaning of words.

Here is an example. A person each week will recite the weekly Torah portion twice with the translation (*shnayim mikra v'echad Targum*) - according to some *Poskim*, one can recite *Rashi* instead of *Targum Onkelos*, if he does not understand the *Targum Onkelos*. But in either case, a person who makes sure to fulfill this obligation each week trains himself to simply recite words, and he doesn't understand most of them. There are Aramaic words in the Gemara, in the *Targum Onkelos*, in the *Targum Yehonasan*, and in the *Targum Yerushalmi*. People are usually not familiar with these Aramaic words. Sometimes the words are archaic, and sometimes the words are just unfamiliar to the reader.

Many people do not understand, for example, the words of *Akdamus Milin* [a liturgy recited on Shavuot morning, according to the Ashkenazic custom]. Now there is a translation of it which enables people to follow the words as it is being read. But people generally do not understand the words, because they are simply not familiar with these words. Even someone who is familiar with learning Gemara, which is in Aramaic, has a hard time understanding the Aramaic words of *Akdamus Milin*. The same goes for *Talmud Yerushalmi* - people are generally unfamiliar with many of the words in it, making it a difficult to read, even for those who know how to read the Aramaic words of the Gemara (*Talmud Bavli*).

In any case, when a person recites *Shnayim Mikra* each week and he doesn't understand what he's saying - either for the most part, or even if it's only partially - he gets used to the habit of reciting many words he doesn't understand. This continues the problem of superficially reading Torah without understanding what one is saying, a problem that began in his childhood, in his first stages of Torah learning.

A Faulty Method In Education Today - Teaching Through Stories

Going further with this issue, children today are generally not introduced to Torah learning through in-depth Torah learning. First they are taught the meaning of words, and then phrases and sentences - and often, they are being taught in "story" format. In the times of the Gemara, children were first taught *Chumash Vayikra*, which are entirely laws, and nowadays children are first taught *Chumash Beraishis*, which are stories. That means that children are beginning their Torah learning with stories. In most cases, a child is beginning his actual Torah learning by way of stories, and not by way of understanding.

As soon as the child is taught the meaning of the words, he is then taught sentences or phrases, and there becomes less emphasis on knowing the meaning of each word. He is taught sentences and phrases, without knowing the meaning of each individual word, and this causes a great impediment in

his Torah learning. And even if he is being taught every word, he is first taught *sefer Beraishis*, which are stories, and the child's soul is first introduced to understanding the Torah by way of stories [as opposed to analytical thinking and taking apart the information].

As a result of this, we can see even adults who come on Friday night to listen to storytellers. Many people – in fact, most – are drawn to this style of learning. A story is told over, where an important lesson can be gleaned from. But often, the soul of a person becomes more attached with the story itself, and in its many details, rather than with the lesson.

Some people even learn a *sugya* of Gemara and try to understand it in the same way that they hear stories. Instead of trying to understand the concepts of the *sugya* and analyzing each word, they are trying to understand the general picture of the information, as if they are trying to glean lessons from a story.

This problem happens because a person has skipped the stage of trying to understand each word whenever he was taught something. Even if he understood each word, he has still skipped the stage of understanding the simple meaning of a phrase, because he was immediately taught a story about the word or phrase, without trying to analyze the actual word or phrase at hand.

Children today are taught a section of the *parshah*, by way of a story. The child is given a story to read, based on a lesson from the *parshah*. With girls, the issue is much worse, because they are taught this way throughout all of their school years, unlike boys, who go to *yeshivah* and learn different styles of learning, which enable them to mature past the “story” level of understanding things. The girls who are taught by way of stories acquire the habit of reading stories throughout their entire life, reading another story, and another story. In either case, though, the child strongly remains with an understanding by way of stories. The elementary stage of thinking for a child is first acquired through stories, as opposed to really thinking and analyzing and taking apart the information.

In Summary and In Conclusion

We have so far discussed the developmental process of learning Torah, which begins before learning the words of Abaye and Rava in the Gemara. These elementary steps become deeply engraved in the soul, and they have bearings on a person's entire life – some more and some less. These are stages that the soul traverses, in the beginning of learning Torah. When a child is later taught Gemara, his understanding of the Gemara will be based on whatever level of grasp he has acquired before then, from his earlier stages of childhood.

If we merit it, we shall learn in the coming lessons how these elementary stages contribute to a person's entire developmental process of learning Torah, and how it can affect a person long into adulthood [and how one can repair the issues].

[1] [3] Succah 42a

[2] [4] Kiddushin 30b, Rambam Hilchos Talmud Torah 1:12, Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 246:4

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