



*Parashah Insights*  
by  
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*Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom*

*Parashat Ekev*  
*Appreciating the Mitzvot*

*Grading Mitzvot*

"If (*ekev*) you will listen to these laws and keep and do them, Hashem your G-d will keep the covenant and the kindness which He swore to your fathers" (*Devarim* 7:12).

The use of the word "*ekev*," usually translated as "heel," is unusual. The Torah could have used a more familiar term, such as "*biglal* (because) you will listen" or "*im* (if) you will listen." Rashi explains that the uncommon word *ekev* is a reference to the "light" or "minor" *mitzvot* which we tend to "trample underfoot with our heel."

However, we are still left with a question. How can we classify *mitzvot* as "major" or "minor?" What is more, how can we grade *any mitzvah* as "minor?" Whether big or small in our limited perceptions, every *mitzvah* has the status of the King's Own commandment, which we are obligated to fulfill. As far as we are concerned, they are all equally important.

We may feel that serious commandments are those which bear "serious" punishments, while minor commandments bear lighter penalties. For example, we know that some transgressions are punishable by *karet*, where the soul is cut off from its connection with Hashem; some by death at the hands of the Heavenly Courts; some by execution by the earthly *bet din*; and others by lashes, fines, or other forms of punishment administered by the *bet din*.

Apparently, this assessment is not entirely accurate, as we learn from our Sages' words concerning minor and major *mitzvot*: "Be as careful with a minor *mitzvah* as



with a major one, for you do not know the reward given for *mitzvot*" (*Avot* 2:1). However, we may say that this *mishnah* does not refer to grading negative commandments by the severity of the punishment for their transgression. It speaks only of the reward given for the fulfillment of positive commandments which, with few exceptions, the Torah has not revealed to us. Another possible explanation of these terms is our Sages' classification of "light" *mitzvot* as those which are not especially costly, and "heavy" *mitzvot* as those which involve a greater outlay of money (see *Hullin* 142b and *Avodah Zarah* 3a).

According to Kabbalistic teachings, man comes to this world in order to perfect himself by fulfilling the Torah's two hundred and forty-eight positive commandments and three hundred and sixty-five negative commandments, which correspond to his two hundred and forty-eight limbs and three hundred and sixty five sinews (Introduction to *Shaar HaMitzvot*).<sup>1</sup> It is possible that a given individual may have been born for the sole purpose of fulfilling one particular commandment required for the complete rectification of his soul. This *mitzvah* – really *his mitzvah* – may seem to him to be a very minor matter and as a result, "he tramples it underfoot with his heel." He has no idea that the rectification of his soul hinges on none other than this "little" *mitzvah*. This is why the Torah tells us, "If you will listen to these laws." Listening (*shemiah*) implies comprehension (*Zohar*, vol. III, p. 138b). In this context, it refers to man's obligation to achieve in-depth understanding of the *mitzvot*, so that he can appreciate their importance in his quest for personal rectification. Even if he imagines that they are rather insignificant, he dare not brush them aside – they may be exactly the ones he needs. This is why our Sages say, "for you do not know the reward given for *mitzvot*." He does not know why he was sent down here – it may have been only for this minor *mitzvah*, the one element missing to complete the rectification of his soul.

These words also indicate that listening to, or more precisely, understanding, the laws, is the key to their perfect fulfillment. When we understand the profound significance of the *mitzvot*, we will fulfill them more correctly. If we do not appreciate their meaning and importance, we may be very casual about neglecting them. This, then, is the message of the words "If (*ekev*) you will listen to these laws." *Ekev* means "heel," the very bottom or end of the body. We should exert ourselves to fully understand the *mitzvot*, all the way down to the end, so to speak. Only if we get to the bottom of their meaning can we fulfill them with the perfection they deserve.

Our Sages tell us that "One *mitzvah* leads to another *mitzvah*, and one sin leads to another sin" (*Avot* 4:2). If we commit what we consider to be a minor sin, we ready ourselves to move on to the next sin, and the next one, until we find ourselves committing major transgressions with hardly a second thought. We find this principle in their explanation of King David's words, "For they have expelled me

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<sup>1</sup> See *Parashah Insights on Bamidbar and Devarim*.



today from being gathered unto Hashem's lot, saying, go worship other gods" (I *Shmuel* 26:19). At first glance, King David's concern seems a bit far-fetched. True, he was being forced to leave *Eretz Yisrael*, but why should life abroad thrust him directly into idol worship, G-d forbid? Our Sages tell us, "This is the art of the evil inclination. Today he says to you, 'do this' and tomorrow he says to you, 'do that' and the next day he says to you, 'go worship idols,' and one goes and worships" (*Niddah* 13b). King David feared that leaving *Eretz Yisrael* was a first step that could lead anywhere. He understood that the evil inclination, a true master of manipulation, starts by going after us with something small and unimportant, thus grooming us for bigger and better sins to come. If at first we merely trample on minor misdeeds, we will soon be actively seeking out serious sin.

### ***The Entire Mitzvah***

The Ohr HaHayyim provides us with profound insight into the question of minor and major *mitzvot* in his commentary on another verse later in our *parashah*: "The entire *mitzvah* that I command you today, you shall observe to do" (*Devarim* 8:1). He writes that in the verse "If you will listen to these laws and keep and do them" (7:12), the Torah has already instructed us to fulfill all the commandments, and told us that we will be rewarded for doing so. What, then, is this "entire *mitzvah*" which the Torah now commands us to "observe to do?"

He explains that Moshe Rabbenu, with a profound understanding of human nature and the workings of man's mind, anticipated a certain phenomenon. Perhaps we are extremely careful to fulfill a few selected *mitzvot* which we find particularly appealing. There may even be one "favorite" to which we are especially attached, and we truly give it our all. An unfortunate pattern is likely to set in: when other *mitzvot* present themselves, we are in no hurry to fulfill them. The likelihood is even greater if we have several such *mitzvot* in our repertoire – we will be satisfied with our chosen few.

This error is especially common among those who feel that since they learn Torah and fulfill the familiar daily *mitzvot*, they can afford to be lax with those which are not as easily accessible. The consequences are terrible, the Ohr HaHayyim tells us. We pay for such behavior in suffering, humiliation, degradation, and great misery, may G-d spare us. With the words "the entire *mitzvah*," Moshe taught the nation that all the Torah's many *mitzvot* actually form one single, indivisible unit. We do not pick and choose in Torah; we are commanded to fulfill "the entire *mitzvah*."

### ***Complete through Mitzvot***

The verse continues, "The entire *mitzvah* that I command you today, you shall observe to do." Why should we keep "the entire *mitzvah*?" The Torah gives us what the Ohr HaHayyim calls an irrefutable reason: "So that you will live."



We can understand this in light of the *Zohar's* teaching about the composition of man (*Zohar* vol. I, p. 170). As we said, man was created with two hundred and forty-eight limbs and three hundred and sixty-five sinews, corresponding to the two hundred and forty-eight positive commandments and three hundred and sixty-five negative commandments. Let us consider the following situation. We are suffering intense pain in one of our limbs, and we cry out in anguish – it hurts! Come now, we are told, what are we complaining about? We have two hundred and forty-seven limbs in excellent working order, and they are not causing us the slightest bit of trouble. Even if one insignificant little limb does hurt, what of it? All the others are just fine, praise G-d, and there is no reason to fuss.

What would we think of this singularly unsympathetic response to our suffering?

We may compare this to our obligation to fulfill the Torah's commandments, each corresponding to a specific limb or sinew. When we transgress a given commandment, we will suffer pain in the corresponding limb or sinew. It does nothing for our suffering to hear that since all our other limbs are well, we really should not grumble over one little twinge. So too, fulfilling two hundred and forty-seven *mitzvot* will not make up for the lack of number two hundred and forty-eight. The same is true of the negative commandments. Fulfilling the first three hundred and sixty-four will not compensate for skipping number three hundred and sixty-five.

This is the meaning of the Torah's words, "the entire *mitzvah*." *Mitzvot* are to be kept in their entirety, with no exceptions. We should do our utmost to observe and fulfill both the negative and positive commandments – all of them. Why? "So that you will live;" the latter depends on the former. If we lack a commandment, we will lack life and vitality in its corresponding limb.

The Ohr HaHayyim writes that we may feel that this comparison is not all that exact. When even one of our physical limbs hurts, the entire body suffers, while the lack of one *mitzvah* would not seem to hinder our fulfillment of the others. This is why Moshe said, "the entire *mitzvah*." The Torah's many *mitzvot* together form one unit, with a single shared foundation and structure, just as all the limbs of a body combine to form a single whole.

With this in mind, we can understand why the Torah's words "if you will listen" refer to "the minor *mitzvot* which a person tramples underfoot with his heel." When the evil inclination seeks to incite us to make light of the minor *mitzvot*, it knows full well that any missing *mitzvah*, even the most minor, is like a missing limb, G-d forbid. We would never agree to give up even the smallest of our physical limbs; why should we be willing to give up even the smallest *mitzvah*?

In addition, the damage is not confined to a single limb. It causes a blemish (*pegam*) throughout our spiritual structure, just as one sick, suffering limb causes the whole body to be ill. Let us understand why this is so. Every limb in the human body is interrelated and interconnected to every other limb. So too, every one of the



six hundred and thirteen *mitzvot* is a complete structure on its own, containing within it all the other six hundred and twelve *mitzvot* (*Assarah Maamarot, Maamar Halttim* 13). Any single missing *mitzvah* is a fundamental lack in *all* the *mitzvot*, and as such, in our entire spiritual structure. The Torah instructs us to “listen” – to understand the profound significance of a *mitzvah*, realizing both its power to develop our spiritual structure to perfection, and the blemish caused by its lack.

### ***Attention to Detail***

Rabbi Shmuel Houminer explains this concept in greater depth (Introduction to *Eved Hamelech*). He writes that anything our Sages derive from the verses of the Torah has the status of Torah-ordained law, including the many details of how to correctly fulfill the *mitzvot*. Each detail on its own is not enumerated as one of the six hundred and thirteen commandments; if they were, we would have many thousands of commandments. However, when we fulfill the myriad details derived and handed down by the Sages, we are fulfilling Torah-ordained commandments.

It follows that all these minute details, down to the very smallest, contribute to the completion of our spiritual stature, including even the tiniest components of the limbs and sinews, producing a perfect whole.

We learn about the importance of small details from our Sages' teaching regarding the additional names given to Miriam and Yocheved, the midwives in Egypt who defied Pharaoh's instructions to kill newborn Jewish children (*Shmot* 1:15-17). They were also known as Shifrah and Puah. Yocheved was called Shifrah because she would “*meshaper*” (beautify) the newborn infants by cleaning and bathing them. Miriam was called Puah because she would soothe the newborns by cooing to them, saying “poo, poo” (1:15, Rashi). Considering that these two women risked their very lives to save those babies, why was so much made of small acts of kindness and nurturing, really no more than any midwife does for the infants she delivers? Would it not have been more appropriate to name them, let us say, Hatzalah (rescue) and Yeshuah (salvation), commemorating their truly great acts of heroism?

These names teach us the importance of what we might call the little things. Miriam and Yocheved lived in an era when the Jewish nation was threatened with destruction by Pharaoh's decree, and every Jewish baby born was in great danger. Even during those perilous times, Shifrah and Puah gave the mothers and children in their care the very best, down to the smallest details of grooming and soothing the newborns. This was greatness which earned them special reward, and for which the Torah immortalized their names to serve as an example for us all.



## *The Role of Middot*

We may lavish great care on the *mitzvot* which we personally consider to be “serious” or “important.” Other *mitzvot* do not merit quite as much loving attention; they are more often “trampled underfoot.” This is especially true of the small details involved in the meticulous fulfillment of *mitzvot*, and of refined *middot*. We tend to underestimate these two factors, so much so that they are often neglected even by those who are generally careful to observe the other commandments.

They are making a mistake. Rabbi Hayyim Vital writes that while good *middot* are not counted among the six hundred and thirteen *mitzvot*, they are essential for their fulfillment. This is because *middot* are related to man’s base soul, the part of the soul most closely connected to the body which actually carries out the *mitzvot* (see *Shaare Kedushah*, vol. I, *Shaar Bet*).

Good *middot* are a major factor in man’s spiritual perfection. Through good *middot*, we emulate the Al-mighty Himself. The Torah commands us to “walk in Hashem’s ways” (*Devarim* 10:12, 11:22, 28:9). Our Sages tell us what this means: “Just as He is compassionate and merciful, so should you be compassionate and merciful” (*Shabbat* 133b; see also *Sotah* 14a and *Devarim* 11:22, Rashi).

Many of our Sages’ teachings show us that good *middot* are a critical element in man’s spiritual perfection. For example, they tell us that on one occasion, when the great *Tanna* Shmuel visited his father’s grave, he encountered the soul of his departed friend Levi, a great and pious scholar. He asked Levi an obvious question. Why was his soul still lingering in the cemetery? Why had it not gone on to the reward surely awaiting it in *Gan Eden* (Paradise)?

Levi’s soul told him, “I am being punished because I did not attend the daily Torah lectures given by Rav Afas, and he was offended by my absence. I stayed away for seven years, and now, measure for measure, my soul is barred from entering *Gan Eden* for seven years (*Berachot* 18b).”

What exactly had Levi done wrong? The problem was not that he had missed out on new Torah insights he would have heard by attending the lectures given by Rav Afas. Had this been the case, he would have been punished specifically for not fully utilizing the opportunity to further his Torah knowledge by studying under Rav Afas. He *was* being punished because Rav Afas *had been offended by his absence*. In other words, the issue here was *middot*. Even though Levi was not lacking in any learning he would have gained by attending Rav Afas’ lectures, Rav Afas was insulted that he had not come. This slight to Rav Afas’ feelings was enough to bar Levi from ascending to *Gan Eden* for no less than seven long years.

Can we make light of the question of *middot*?

The Sages also tell us that “On three principles the world stands. On Torah; on service [of Hashem]; and on lovingkindness (*Avoth* 1:2). These three principles are



three pillars which support the world.

The pillar of Torah is all-inclusive, combining *mitzvot* between man and G-d and those between man and his fellow man. The pillar of Divine service, related to prayer and cleaving to Hashem, is solely between man and G-d. The pillar of lovingkindness, a product of refined *middot*, relates to man and his fellow man. The combination of *mitzvot* between man and G-d and *mitzvot* between man and his fellow man, which are in fact good *middot*, leads to spiritual perfection.

This *mishnah* conveys the most fundamental principle in the Jewish religion. In the outside world, a scholar may be well known and widely admired for, let us say, his vast scientific knowledge. At the same time, he may be notorious for his terrible character, but that is not viewed as a problem. Society is impressed with academic or technological achievement, and takes little interest in good *middot* and moral perfection. Not so Torah – Torah demands perfection of mind and *middot* alike.

### ***Pure Mitzvot***

Our Sages relate that when the *Tanna* Rabbi Yosse ben Kisma was sick, Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon came to visit him. Rabbi Yosse ben Kisma expressed concern over Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon's dangerous activities. He said, "Hanina, my brother, don't you realize that this nation's [the Romans'] power comes from Heaven? [The proof is that] they were able to destroy His House and burn His Sanctuary, and kill His pious and righteous ones. And yet, [after all this,] they still exist. And I have heard that you sit engaged in Torah study and gather public assemblies with a Torah scroll resting in your arms, [in open defiance of the Romans' decrees]."

Rabbi Hanina's response did not address his colleague's fears. He merely said, "Heaven should have mercy."

Rabbi Yosse ben Kisma answered him, "I'm talking common sense to you, and you're answering me [illogically, saying,] 'Heaven should have mercy?' I would be surprised if they don't burn you at the stake together with the Torah scroll."

Rabbi Hanina then asked him, "Rebbe, where do I stand as regards life in the World to Come?"

He replied, "Did you ever do any deed of special merit?"

Rabbi Hanina told him that once, he had mistakenly given away the money he had intended to use for his own Purim meal to charity. Instead of reimbursing himself from charity funds, he took extra money out of his pocket to give to charity.

Rabbi Yosse ben Kisma told him, "If so, then may my portion [in the World to Come] be like your portion, and may my lot be like your lot" (*Avodah Zarah* 18a).



This raises an obvious question. Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon constantly endangered his life by teaching Torah in public, an act punishable by a terrible death in those dreadful years. Did this saintly *Tanna* really have no other merit than having once put a little extra money in the charity box? Why was he, of all people, worried about his *olam haba*? Wasn't his selfless dedication to Torah more than enough to earn him the very best in the World to Come?

One possible explanation is that with this incident, our Sages teach us that *mitzvot* must be free of all ulterior motives and personal interests – they should be fulfilled solely for Hashem's honor. At times, we may fulfill a *mitzvah* at considerable self-sacrifice, yet still derive some personal enjoyment from the honor or publicity we receive for our efforts. That little surge of satisfaction is enough to detract from the perfection of the *mitzvah*.

This was Rabbi Yosse ben Kisma's question: had Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa ever performed a *mitzvah* pure of any blemish? Rabbi Hanina had; he had voluntarily given his Purim money away to charity, in addition to other money originally intended for the poor, and then given additional charity as well. This was a *mitzvah* done in utter privacy. No one could know what was happening in Rabbi Hanina's pockets, or in his heart. Even so, he conducted himself with exceptional piety and gave the extra money to charity. The unblemished perfection of this *mitzvah* had the qualities which would bring its doer to eternal life in the World to Come.

### ***The Best We Can Make It***

The Rambam cites this conversation between Rabbi Yosse ben Kisma and Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon to prove an important principle (Commentary on the *Mishnayot*, *Makkot* 3:16).

Our Sages tell us, "Rabbi Hananya ben Akashya said, the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to grant merit to Israel. For this reason he gave them an abundance of Torah and *mitzvot*, as is written 'Hashem desired for the sake of His righteousness, to increase Torah and glorify it'" (*Yeshayahu* 42:21)."

The Rambam explains that it is a fundamental of our faith that everyone comes to this world in order to fulfill at least one of the six hundred and thirteen commandments to perfection, with no ulterior motives or improper intentions, strictly out of love for the Al-mighty. If we achieve this, we merit the World to Come. To help us reach this goal, Hashem provided us with a large selection of *mitzvot* to serve as attractive options. With such a vast variety at our disposal, we should be able to perform at least one *mitzvah* at its finest, as it truly should be done.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> We can understand this concept in keeping with the principles cited above. Our six hundred and thirteen *mitzvot* correspond to man's limbs and sinews, and we need to fulfill them all in order to rectify all of our respective limbs and sinews. At the same time, each *mitzvah* is a complete unit





This is what the Torah teaches us with the words, "If you will listen to these laws." As we said, "listening" implies more than merely picking up sound waves; it means understanding. We should learn and understand the details of every *mitzvah* in depth, so that we can fulfill it as perfectly as possible, without any ulterior motives. We tend to minimize this aspect of the commandments; it seems to us that what really counts is the deed itself, and not the intent behind it. But proper intent is not a minor issue. On the contrary – it leads to the perfect performance worthy of the World to Come.

### ***In All We Do***

Our Sages speak of "minor *mitzvot*." At any given moment throughout our lives, we are presented with the opportunity to do countless precious, G-d-given *mitzvot*. Every step we take in life is actually a choice: will we do good, or will we do bad? Will we turn the moment into a *mitzvah*, or just the opposite, G-d forbid? If we are wise enough to realize that these everyday decisions are opportunities to fulfill the Will of the Al-mighty, we will not allow them to slip away. In the *Siddur Ohr HaShanim*, Rabbi Aryeh Leib Epstein shows how we can transform even daily activities into important *mitzvot*. He explains that whenever we do the right thing, we gain twice. By doing good we have, at the very same time, *not* done bad.

For example, by the simple act of bowing before the *Aron Kodesh* (Holy Ark) when entering the synagogue, we refrain from bowing to idols, G-d forbid, fulfilling many negative commandments. When we step into the corner grocery and select foods with reliable *kashrut* certification, we are automatically *not* buying non-kosher products, distancing ourselves from tens of prohibitions related to forbidden foods. The greater our level of awareness, the more *mitzvot* we are privileged to accumulate. These are the minor *mitzvot* that one tramples underfoot with his heel. If only we seek them out, they are ours for the taking.

***This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.***

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on its own, containing within it all the other *mitzvot*. When we fulfill one *mitzvah* to perfection, it encompasses all the other *mitzvot* as well.



## *Insights into Pirke Avot*

by

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*Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom*

### *Perek Vav, Mishnah Vav (Part 10)*

6:6 Torah is greater than priesthood and [greater] than kingship. For kingship is acquired with thirty privileges, and priesthood is acquired with twenty-four. And the Torah is acquired with forty-eight means, and they are these: with study; with listening; with speech; with understanding of the heart; with wisdom of the heart; with awe; with fear; with humility; with joy; with purity; with serving Torah scholars; with analytical study with colleagues; with the discussion with students; with a settled mind; with study of Scripture; with study of *Mishnah*; with minimal involvement in business; with minimal involvement in intimate relations; with minimal involvement in pleasure; with minimal sleep; with minimal conversation; with minimal frivolity; with slowness to anger; with a good heart; with belief in Torah sages; with acceptance of suffering; knowing one's place; and being happy with one's lot; making a fence for one's words; and one who does not think highly of himself. He is beloved; loves the Omnipresent; and loves people; loves charity; loves rebuke; loves honesty; distances himself from honor; is not arrogant in his learning; is not eager to issue rulings; bears the burden with his fellowman; and judges him favorably; guides him to truth; establishes him in peace; is settled in his teaching; asks and answers. One who studies in order to teach; and one who studies in order to do; one who adds to his teachers' wisdom; and one who resolves the meaning of his studies; and one who cites words in the name of the one who said them. You learn from here that anyone who cites words in the name of the who [originally] said them, brings redemption to the world. As it says, "And Esther said to the king in Mordechai's name" (*Esther 2:15*).

#### *The Roots*

The Torah is acquired... (#15) with study of Scripture; (#16) with study of *Mishnah*.



**Scripture** is *Tanach*,<sup>1</sup> the Written Torah. It is the source of all the *mitzvot*, and of all the wisdom of the Torah. The Written Torah is the foundation upon which the mighty tower of the Oral Tradition is built. Just as a building with no foundation will be unsteady, our understanding of the Oral Tradition will be deficient without knowledge of the Written Torah (see *Midrash Shmuel*). The Written Torah is called *Talpiot*, the hill (*tel*) that all mouths (*piyot*) turn to (see *Shir HaShirim* 4:4, *Targum* and *Metzudat Tzion*). In Torah study, all roads lead to the central “hill,” the Five Books of Moses. The many facets of Torah knowledge – *halachah*, *aggadah*, and even *Kabbalah* – all develop from this source.

**Mikra** is the essential basis of Torah study. The Talmud is rooted in the **Mishnah**, and the **Mishnah** is rooted in **Scripture**, as are all the other works of the Sages: *Sifra*, *Sifre*, *Mechilta*, *Tosefta*, *Midrash*, and *Zohar*. As we have explained in earlier *mishnayot*, the Mishnah itself is a short outline of the *halachot* of the six hundred and thirteen commandments, grouped under six main headings, the “Orders” of the Mishnah.<sup>2</sup> Every topic in the Talmud begins with a *mishnah*, followed by the *Gemara*, which explains, expands, and expounds on the details of the *halachot* summarized in the *mishnah*, and how the different opinions of the Sages are derived from the related Scriptural verses. We cannot comprehend the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara* if we do not know which verses the *halachot* are based on, and understand their meaning.<sup>3</sup>

The Torah is often compared to a tree, as in the verse, “It is a Tree of Life for those who grasp it” (*Mishle* 3:18).<sup>4</sup> In *Pirke Avot* as well we find the comparison of Torah to a tree, for example, “Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah says... one whose knowledge is greater than his deeds, to what is he compared? To a tree with many branches and few roots, and the wind comes and uproots it and turns it upside down... One whose deeds are greater than his knowledge, to what is he compared? To a tree with few branches and many roots” (*Avot* 3:17). In this *mishnah*, *mitzvot* (“deeds”) are compared to the roots of a tree. A tree has roots, a trunk, and branches. The wisdom of Torah is compared to the tree itself, and the deeds to its roots. Without a firm foundation of roots to anchor it, a tree will be top-heavy and fall over. So too, in order for the “tree” of Torah wisdom to grow and develop, it needs

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<sup>1</sup> An acronym for *Torah*, *Neviim*, *Ketuvim* (the Torah, Prophets, and Writings), the twenty-four books of the Scriptures.

<sup>2</sup> The Six Orders of the Mishnah are *Zeraim*, *Moed*, *Nashim*, *Nezikin*, *Kodashim*, and *Taharot*.

<sup>3</sup> In our own times, some new editions of the Talmud include marginal notes with all the verses mentioned on the page, quoted in full, helping students see how the Sages derived their halachic rulings from the verse.

<sup>4</sup> See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 6:6, Part 3.



Our *mishnah* teaches us that **the Torah is acquired** not only with the study of *Gemara* mentioned earlier (*b'talmud*), but also **with study of Scripture** and **with study of Mishnah**. For our Torah study to be accurate and comprehensive, the “branches, leaves, flowers, and fruit” of the “tree,” an analogy for the novellae developed through in-depth study, are not enough. The tree must have the roots, *Mikra* and *Mishnah*. With the Written Torah and the basis of the Oral Tradition condensed in the Mishnah, we can develop a beautiful, thriving “tree” of Torah.

This concept is expressed in the familiar expression, “getting to the root of the problem.” A superficial solution to a problem does not take its source into account. The same is true of Torah study. To “get to the root” of any topic in Torah it must be traced back, from the writings of the Early Authorities to the *Gemara*, to the **Mishnah**, to **Scripture**. If we only learn the halachic rulings in the *Shulhan Aruch* and other works of *halachah*, without the foundation of Talmud, **Mishnah** and **Scripture**, our Torah study will be deficient, lacking its roots.

### *Early Study*

In the times of the earlier *Tannaim*, the Sages studied Torah directly from the verses of the *Humash*. They would read and explain each verse, with all the teachings of the Oral Tradition which now comprise our *Mishnah* and *Gemara*. A Torah scholar who is extremely knowledgeable in the entire Talmud can trace back all its teachings and rulings to the verses in the *Humash*. It is related that in the Vilna Gaon's later years, he too learned Torah this way, using only a *Humash*. He would read a verse, and then review everything in the Oral Tradition about that verse (*Aliyot Eliyahu*, p. 29, note).

In an earlier *mishnah* we learned, “a five-year-old begins reading Scripture” (*Avot* 5:21). We explained that a young child's early years of study are the ideal time for him to gain extensive knowledge of *Tanach*. He is still too young for serious in-depth study, but he can understand and benefit from study of *Tanach* with the basic commentaries. I knew people who had learned all of *Tanach* by heart in their youth.

Studying *Tanach* with the commentaries of Rashi and the *Metzudot* is highly recommended for both young and old, for clear understanding of the simple meaning of the verses. This knowledge is a treasure which lasts a lifetime, both for the wisdom of the *Tanach* itself, and as the key to the Oral Tradition.

Nothing in this world can compare to the sacred G-dly wisdom of the Written Torah. It is because of the Written Torah that we are known to the nations as “the

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Oral Tradition because of the difficulty involved shows that this is the meaning of our Sages' words.



strong, solid roots.<sup>5</sup>

In our discussion of the **forty-eight means** through which Torah is acquired, we explain that **Scripture** and **Mishnah** are the roots of the Talmud. We can suggest that “deeds,” compared to roots in Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah’s *mishnah*, are linked to the “roots” of **Scripture** and **Mishnah** mentioned by the *Tanna* of our *mishnah*. Our Sages teach that when the Jewish people accepted the Torah with the words *naaseh v'nishma*, “we will do, and we will study and understand,”<sup>6</sup> they were declaring their willingness to take on the Written Torah without hesitation, together with the basics of the Oral Tradition, similar to the information later compiled in the Mishnah. However, they did hesitate to accept the more difficult and complicated Talmud; this is why the Al-mighty “held the mountain over them like a barrel” and threatened to bury them underneath it (*Shabbat* 88a), compelling them to accept the Oral Tradition despite their fears (see *Tanhuma, Noah* 3).<sup>7</sup> The nation’s commitment to *mitzvot* (“deeds”), expressed in the word *naaseh*, and to the acquisition of sufficient knowledge to fulfill them, expressed in the word *nishma*, referred to **Scripture** and **Mishnah**, the Torah’s roots.

This interpretation of the meaning of *naaseh v'nishma* answers an obvious question. Understood literally, the *Tanhuma* appears to be saying that they only accepted the Written Torah, but wanted no part of the Oral Tradition. If this were the case, how would they have kept any of the *mitzvot*? We have often explained that it would be impossible to fulfill the Torah’s commandments based only on the text of the Written Torah – it does not provide the necessary practical information. The details we need to know in order to do each *mitzvah* are contained in the Oral Tradition. How, then, could our ancestors have committed to keeping the Written Torah alone? Without the Oral Tradition behind it, they would not even know how to begin.<sup>8</sup>

In keeping with our explanation, they did in fact accept the basic outline of the Oral Tradition which would enable them to do the *mitzvot* of the Written Torah. *Naaseh* was acceptance of the Written Torah; *v'nishma* was acceptance of the information similar to what was later contained in the Mishnah. Their hesitation, requiring some coercion at the crucial moment, concerned only the intricate, complex, in-depth study of the Talmud, which they found daunting.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 3:17, Part 4 for a fuller discussion of this topic.

<sup>6</sup> Literally, “We will do and we will hear” (*Shmot* 24:7).

<sup>7</sup> See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 3:12, Part 1.

<sup>8</sup> See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 2:12, Part 2; 3:11, Part 2; and 6:6, Part 2 for fuller discussion of this topic.

<sup>9</sup> Careful study of the language of the *Tanhuma* concerning the nation’s hesitation to accept the



people of the Book.” This definition of the Jewish people is found in the verse, “For it is your knowledge and wisdom in the eyes of the nations, who will hear all these laws and will say, they are none other than a knowledgeable and wise nation, this great people” (*Devarim* 4:6). The verse refers to the Written Torah; the non-Jewish nations do not have access to the Oral Tradition, but they too can recognize the profound wisdom of the Scriptures.

### *Weekly Review*

#### **The Torah is acquired... b'Talmud...b'Mikra; b'Mishnah.**

Our obligation to know the entire Torah includes *Mikra*, as well as *Mishnah* and *Talmud*. This is why our Sages instituted the practice of *shnayim Mikra v'ehad Targum*: “One who completes the weekly *parashah* which will be read by the community on the upcoming Shabbat, [reading each verse twice in the original Hebrew and once in the Aramaic *Targum*], his days and years are lengthened” (*Berachot* 8b).<sup>10</sup>

The halachic authorities rule that this review of the *parashah* can be completed over the course of the week. We can read part of the *parashah* with the *Targum* on Sunday, continue with the next part on Monday, and finish by Friday, *erev Shabbat* (*Shulhan Aruch Orach Hayyim* 285:3, *Mishnah Berurah* 8). However, according to the Arizal, the entire *parashah* should be completed on Friday, not spread out through the week, in keeping with the verse, “And it will be on the sixth day, and they will prepare what they will bring” (*Shmot* 16:5). The Arizal explains that just as we make material preparations for Shabbat – cooking, cleaning, setting up the candles, and more – we should also make spiritual preparations. *Shnayim Mikra v'ehad Targum* is part of the spiritual preparation for the Day of Rest, done on *erev Shabbat* (see *Mishnah Berurah* *ibid.*; *Shaar HaMitzvot, Parashat V'et'hanan*, p. 34b; *Shaar HaKavanot*, p. 61d). On a practical level, *shnayim Mikra* with the *Targum* ensures that we will review the Five Books of the Torah every year.

The *Shulhan Aruch* writes that a G-d-fearing individual should also study Rashi's commentary in addition to the *Targum* (*ibid.* 285:2).<sup>11</sup> We can suggest that beyond the simple meaning of the words of the *Shulhan Aruch*, Rav Yosef Karo implies that studying Rashi enhances our fear of Heaven. Rabbi Yeshayahu HaLevi Horowitz, renowned as “the *Shelah HaKadosh*,” wrote that Rashi's commentary on the Talmud, and even more so, on Scripture, was composed with Divine Inspiration.

<sup>10</sup> See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 1:5, Part 3 and 2:7, Part 3 for fuller discussion of this topic.

<sup>11</sup> According to the *Mekubalim*, reviewing the *parashah* with the *Targum* is one *mitzvah*, and learning Rashi's commentary on the *parashah* is a separate *mitzvah* – reviewing the Rashi is not part of *shnayim Mikra*.



Every word and every nuance was carefully chosen, and holds great meaning (*Shelah, Masechet Shavuot, Perek Ner Mitzvah* 14). Throughout the generations, great Torah scholars have labored over every letter of Rashi, giving rise to hundreds of learned super-commentaries. One of the first was that of Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi in the 1500's, followed by many more in the ensuing centuries. These works are not light, popular anthologies; they are on par with commentaries on the Talmud or the Rambam.<sup>12</sup>

### *Studying Mishnah*<sup>13</sup>

**The Torah is acquired...with study of *Mishnah*.**

The next step in acquiring the wisdom of Torah from its sources is **study of *Mishnah***. **Scripture**, the first source, is the Written Torah; ***Mishnah***, the second source, is a concise outline of the Oral Tradition. As we have explained in earlier *mishnayot*, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi understood that the difficulties facing the Jewish people called for drastic measures. The Second Temple was no more, and much of the nation was in exile, enduring hardship and persecution; a system based on memorization of vast quantities of complicated material was no longer practical. There was a real danger that the Torah might be forgotten. As an emergency measure, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi took the unprecedented step of writing down a brief listing of the *halachot*, organized under six main headings, known as the *Mishnah*. The entire Talmud, known as *Shas*, an acronym for *Shishah Sedarim* ("Six Orders"), is rooted in the *Mishnah*. At that time *Gemara*, the enormous body of detailed discussion and analysis, was still studied orally, with the outline provided by the *Mishnah* serving as an aid to memory.<sup>14</sup>

There is another important reason to study *Mishnah*. There are a number of tractates for which there is no *Gemara* at all, for example, those in *Seder Taharot*. A Torah student or scholar can study the entire Talmud, and still be missing these tractates, found only in the *Mishnah*.

### *Mikra, Mishnah, Talmud*<sup>15</sup>

**The Torah is acquired... b'Talmud...b'Mikra; b'Mishnah.**

<sup>12</sup> See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 2:10, Part 3 and 6:2, Part 2 for fuller discussion of this topic.

<sup>13</sup> See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 1:1, Part 2; 4:13, Part 1; 5:21, Part 2; and 6:6, Part 2 for fuller discussion of the topics in this section.

<sup>14</sup> See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 1:1, Part 2; 1:6, Part 1; 2:8, Part 4; 4 4:20, Part 2; and 5:21, Part 2 for fuller discussion of this topic.

<sup>15</sup> See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 2:8, Part 4; 4:9, Part 2; 5:21, Part 3; and 6:6, Part 2 for fuller discussion of the topics in this section.



As we see, *Tanach* and Mishnah are the basis of Talmud study. It would seem that “with study of Talmud” should be the next of the **forty-eight means** on the list, but it is not; **study of Scripture** [and] **study of Mishnah** are followed by **with minimal involvement in business**.

We suggested that Talmud study is not mentioned here because it is already listed as the first of the **means** for acquiring Torah.<sup>16</sup> As we explained earlier in our discussion of the *mishnah*, *b’talmud*, **with study**, refers to study of the Talmud itself, the essence of all Torah learning. In addition, it is included in *shemiat ha’ozen*, **listening**,<sup>17</sup> and *shimush hachamim*, **servicing Torah scholars**.<sup>18</sup>

Earlier in our explanation of the *mishnah*, we mentioned our Sages’ teaching that we should divide our Torah study time into three: a third should be spent on Scripture, a third on *Mishnah*, and a third on Talmud (*Kiddushin* 30a, *Avodah Zarah* 19b). We explained that practically speaking, a mature Torah student or scholar will not spend a third of his day studying *Humash* or *Navi*, another third on *Mishnah*, and only the remaining third of the day on *Gemara*. The breakdown relates more to our years of study overall than to our daily schedule.

Younger children study *Mikra*, and then go on to *Mishnah*, with less time spent on *Mikra*. As they get older, their main focus will be on Talmud. This is in keeping with an earlier *mishnah* in *Avot*: “A five-year-old begins Scripture, a ten-year-old begins *Mishnah*... a fifteen-year-old begins Talmud” (*Avot* 5:21). We still follow this basic order in contemporary Torah education, although every stage is begun somewhat earlier. In former times, when there were no written texts for the Oral Tradition, the five years spent acquiring a thorough knowledge of *Mishnah* were essential. In our times, with all the information available in print, the emphasis is on developing the necessary skills for in-depth study.

This study program is in keeping with the opinion of the Rambam, who explains that our Sages’ words in *Avot* refer “[only] to the early stage of one’s Torah study. But when one grows in wisdom he will not need to learn the Written Torah, nor to constantly engage in the Oral Torah (*Mishnah*). He will review the Written Torah and the Oral Tradition at set times, so that he will not forget anything of the laws of the Torah, but he will devote most of his time to *Gemara* alone, in keeping with the breadth of his heart and the depth of his understanding” (*Hilchot Talmud Torah* 1:11-12).

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<sup>16</sup> See above, “Roots.” See also Insights into *Pirke Avot* 6:6, Part 2 and Part 8.

<sup>17</sup> A reference to *girsas*, the exact wording and clear, straightforward understanding of the Oral Tradition.

<sup>18</sup> A reference to *sevarah*, the analytical, in-depth discussion characteristic of Talmud study.





According to *Tosfot*, Talmud study on its own fulfills this requirement. The Sages teach that the Babylonian Talmud is “mixed with *Mikra*, *Mishnah*, and Talmud.” Studying it encompasses all three (*Sanhedrin* 24a, *Tosfot*).

## *Acquiring Torah*

### **The Torah is acquired...with study of Mishnah.**

**Study of Mishnah** is valuable and beneficial at every stage in life. For younger students, it is an excellent way to gain knowledge of the basic facts and concepts of all the *halachot* in the Torah. For more advanced students, it enhances their study of *Gemara* by providing a general understanding of the Talmudic topics they study. Even for great Torah scholars, **study of Mishnah** is an ideal, concise review of the Talmud.

Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, the revered Steipler Gaon, of blessed memory, would study eighteen chapters of Mishnah every day, as advised by the halachic authorities. He would use a small pocket-size edition of the Mishnah with no commentaries at all.<sup>19</sup> As he read the words of each individual *mishnah*, he would review in his mind the discussions and decisions of the Sages of the Talmud on that *mishnah*. For this legendary giant of Torah, **study of Mishnah**, one of the **forty-eight means** through which Torah is acquired, served as a springboard to reinforce his memory of the entire Oral Tradition.

### **The Torah is acquired with forty-eight means.**

Our Torah “is longer than the earth and deeper than the sea” (*Iyov* 11:9). It takes a lifetime of study to acquire it, but the rewards are great: “Fortunate is he who comes here with his [Torah] learning in hand” (*Pesachim* 50a et al). When we face the Heavenly Court, it will be apparent that our Torah study was worth every effort. When man stands in judgment before the Heavenly Court, he is questioned about his Torah knowledge – first Scripture, then *Mishnah*, *Midrash* (*aggadah*), Talmud (*halachah*) and *Kabbalah*. If he did not study Torah to the best of his ability, the Sages tell us, “How [very] severe is the day of judgment” (*Midrash Shohar Tov*, *Mishle* 10:3).<sup>20</sup> As we see from our Sages’ description of the questioning of the Heavenly Court, study of the *Midrashim* (*aggadot*) is also an important part of learning Torah. The Ben Ish Hai gave a daily lecture on the *aggadot* in En Yaakov, which was the basis of the novellae in his works *Benayahu* and *Ben Yehoyada*.

<sup>19</sup> I was privileged to witness this in person, when I visited his home on the afternoon of the Seventeenth of Tamuz. He was in his nineties at the time, and despite his advanced age he studied out loud, totally engrossed in the Mishnah. See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 1:15, Part 1.

<sup>20</sup> See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 3:18 and 4:6, Part 2 for fuller discussion of this topic.



A Torah scholar who follows in the path recommended by our Sages will acquire knowledge of *Mikra*, *Mishnah* and Talmud. If he is knowledgeable and G-d-fearing, he can eventually go to the most advanced stage, the study of *Kabbalah*.

*This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.*

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