

הוא היה אומר עיונים בפרקי אבות

Parshat Bamidbar/Shavuot 5788
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Avot chapter 6 – To be a student.

Just learn

The first of the 48 ways to obtain Torah found in the 6th chapter of Avot is "Talmud"-study. In other words to obtain Torah you must learn it! We would have expected the Mishna to give us some ideas how we learn – listening with our ears, moving our lips , arranging the class room or something else.

There is a story of one of the giants of the Torah, who was asked how we reached his status as a gadol. He answered that it wasn't because he was so clever. The other students in his class were cleverer and found havrutot immediately, he was left alone. His friends started to argue in pairs what to learn, which masechet of the gemara? in depth or to learn faster.? He was by himself, with no one to argue with, so he just started to learn! This is the message of the Mishna. The Torah is obtained by learning, without too many discussions first.

The commentators disagree about the meaning of the word Talmud. Some say it means the gemara, in other words - explanations, as we learnt in the previous chapter :

בן חמש שנים למקרא, בן עשר למשנה, בן שלש עשרה למצות, בן חמש עשרה לתלמוד.¹

A five year old learns Bible, a ten year old Mishna, at 13 starts keeping the mitzvoth and at 15 learns gemara

This fits in with the end of our Mishna

...במקרא, במשנה, במיעוט סחורה...

By learning bible, Mishna and doing only a little business

The Mishna here doesn't say Talmud, because it is at the beginning of the list – learning gemara. Even so, it is strange why it appears at the beginning of the list – shouldn't a child learn the words of the chumash before learning gemara?

A 104 year old student

There is another point, the phrase "Talmud" is a heading for all the 48 things. The Talmud became the name for our central literature for a reason. Talmud means to learn. This is not a usual name for a book. Every book is "Talmud": history, maths, medicine books. What sort of book is a "learning book"? This is the message. The Torah is obtained by the ability to be a student

¹ שם, ה', כ"א.



A few months ago Rav Shteinman Zt"l passed away. We were all in awe of seeing a 104 year old student of the Talmud, who learnt the same gemara like a freshman in yeshiva. It is true he was a leader and important, but first and foremost he was a student

The urge to move forward

When we say the Torah is obtained by Talmud-study, this also means the opposite. If you can't put your ego aside and become a student, allowing yourself to absorb from it into you, you cannot obtain the Torah. It stays your inheritance מורשה, but not your "kinyan" קנין – something you have obtained. You haven't become one.

The opposite of Talmud, being a student is to lecture, to make speeches. If you learn to give lectures, or to get recognition, you will not be able to learn Torah. The western idea of learning in order to make something of yourself, to get a degree and move forward in the world isn't our ideal. We say the biggest promotion is to be a student, a talmid. If you succeed, you can be a Talmid Chacham – a clever student!

One of the things that can stop us obtaining the Torah is to get smicha, ordained as a rabbi, and to "complete your studies". As if you are saying, yes I will continue studying, but I will not be a talmid. I will know enough and not need to know more.

The Torah is obtained by Talmud – going into the bet midrash and meeting five year olds, young men and old people, all of them talmidim. This is why the list begins with Talmud. Not as a methodic list to start with gemara, but how to obtain the Torah

The aim in life – to be a talmid

The Mishna is halachot. The Yerushalmi even calls the Mishnayot halachot. Rebbe Yehuda HaNasi called them mishnayot because they are learnt off by heart, but in essence they are halachot – the end result of the halachic discussions, of all the studies. By learning halacha we know what to do, but this isn't how the Torah is "obtained", it doesn't become part of us.

So how can we educate towards making the Torah the aim of our lives? Lets imagine a chassid looking at a picture of his Rebbe. His main aim in life is to be a chassid, to hear from the Rebbe how to be one of his chassidim. This is his raison-d'etre, even if he will become a great rabbi or business man, first and foremost he will see himself as a chassid of the Rebbe.

Changing our outlook on life

In the western world we think always of moving forward, promotion: If you teach then you want to teach an older class, then a headmaster. If you are a commander, then you want to rise in rank, be a general and then go into politics. If you are the rabbi of a small yishuv, you want to be a rabbi of a city and then chief rabbi. This is so true, the world wants to move forward and you are stuck!

In order to obtain Torah the first thing to change is our outlook. To be a student... Gevalt!