

THE LOVE OF LEARNING IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

A. INTRODUCTION.

Amongst Western religious traditions, Judaism is alone in the high esteem accorded to intellectual achievement by the masses as well as professionals, and the broad communal role according to scholars and scholarship.

But first--the definition of some terms.

"Torah"=the Hebrew Bible ("Old Testament") (last book in canon approx. mid 4th century BCE)

Torah as literary corpus: the 3-fold canon (תנ"ך)

Torah as religious instruction: Written and Oral Torah; the Talmud and its literature

Torah as concept: the teaching; the way. Both narratives and commandments lead to ennobling of character and fidelity to the Covenant.

B. HISTORY.

1. The Biblical Period.

The Pentateuch. 'ושננתם לבניך ולברת בם וכו'.

The Book of Joshua. לא ימוש הספר החזק הזה מפניך והגלית בו ירובם וללילה

The Psalms. Chap. 119, largest in book, is mostly praise of study of Torah

Neglect of the study of Torah from time of Solomon's sons to time of Ezra the Scribe (4th century BCE) who ushered in period of intellectual and religious revolution with return of exiles to Land of Israel

Ezra: Public Reading of the Torah every Saturday, also Mondays and Thursdays (& holidays).

2. The Talmudic Period (~50 BCE-475 CE)

Universal free education: ordained by Joshua b. Gamla, High Priest at end period of the 2nd Temple; d. 69 CE. Enshrined into law (Maimonides, *Hil. T.T.* 2:1): no town permitted to exist if it did not provide for education of children from age of 6.

Thus, first 5 centuries of C.E. in Palestine and Babylonia saw thousands of full-time students

So prominent was Torah study that persecution of Jews usually took form of banning study of Torah

3. The Medieval Period. (Europe: ~ 4-16 or 18 cent.; Islam: from 7th century on))

Torah study mandated by law. Thus, in Code of Maimonides:

כל איש מישראל חליב בתלמוד תורה בין עני בין עשיר בין שלם בגופו בין בעל יסודות בין בחור בין שהיה זקן גדול שתשש כחו, אפילו היה עני המתפרנס מן הצדקה ומהזר על הפתחים ואפילו בעל אשה ובנים, חליב לקבוע לו זמן לת"ת ביום ובלילה. גדולי חכמי ישראל היו מהן הוטב עינים ומהן שואב מים ומהן סומים ואעפ"כ היו עוסקים בת"ת ביום ובלילה (הל' ת"ת פ"א ה"ה וה"ט)

Special "societies" for study of Torah by laymen -- artisans and laborers. By end of 17th century, such groups flourished in almost every decent sized community. Thus, community ordinances in Lithuania mandating adult study of at least one chapter Mishnah daily. Study halls for all adults often open 24 hours/day.

Thus, hardly ever found an illiterate Jew.

C. CONCEPTUAL.

1. The Value of Torah Study

ות"ת כנגד כולם -- Mishnah *Peah* 1:1

Reverence for teacher even over parents: Mishnah *BM* 2:11 that השבת אבירה first to teacher, then to parent

Torah study regarded as sacred activity. Thus, recite blessing over it -- as with any religious rite

Preference for association with scholars: willingness to yield on worldly goods in order to associate with those who learn. Thus, *Avot* 6:9 ר' יוסי בן קיסמא

2. Dedication to Study

Resh Lakish in Ber. 63b (3d century Palestine): (נרצח)
התורה אדם כל ימיו באוהל) -- אין התורה מתקיימת אלא במל
שכחית צמח עליה

"Toil in Torah" as more important than knowing Torah

Gaon of Vilna: knowledge gained by "short cuts" is of no value

Thus too (Max Kadushin): only mentions of asceticism in entire massive corpus of Talmud -- relate to Torah study.

3. Moral and Intellectual Preparation for study of Torah.

Avot 6:6 -- 48 ways of acquiring Torah: both methods of intellect and of character. As: attending on sages, associating with fellow students, scholarly argumentation, denying one's self the pursuit of money and pleasures and jesting; also: humility, joy, patience, a good heart, not looking for credit, being open to criticism, shunning honors, etc.

4. Study and Action.

Most of Torah overwhelmingly directed towards conduct, behavior, with emphasis as well on emotions (love, reverence, pity). But Torah study seems exception. Has two-fold purpose: leads to proper conduct, since that is what study is concerned with; and is an end or form of conduct in itself.

Which of these two is more important? The issue was joined in a famous debate, recorded in the Talmud, that took place in 2d century Palestine, probably at a time of grave persecution. One rabbi held that study was greater than practice, another--the reverse. The group as a whole then decided: "study is greater because it leads to practice." But this cryptic resolution begs the question: which ultimately is more valuable? Subsequent generations of both legal scholars and philosophers continued the debate.

5. Motivation of Learning.

Study be motivated by pure intention, "for its own sake," rather than for ulterior motives, "not for its own sake." This reflects the religious-spiritual significance attached to study of Torah. But two questions: to what extent are we to denigrate "not for its own sake," and exactly what do these terms mean?

The answer to the first, in the Talmud, is generally that we permit study not for its own sake because the act of learning soon absorbs the student who learns to learn for its own sake. However, certain motivations are always excluded, such as: study for the sake of belittling another scholar.

The semantic question gave rise to different solutions over the ages. Some defined "for its own sake" as: for the love of God, i.e., religious purposes. Others saw the *telos* of Torah study as the practice of the commandments. Yet others gave the term a more rigorous intellectual turn: "for its own sake" means for the sake of understanding the material being studied. These differing interpretations became important in the subsequent history of Judaism.

D. THE MODERN PERIOD.

1. Contemporary Examples of Torah Study

The remarkable spread of *yeshivot*, following traditional modes of Torah study, in Israel and U.S., after the Holocaust. Also, rise in Judaic scholars using modern critical methodologies to study Jewish materials. Sometimes, the two coexist in one institution -- as: Yeshiva University.

2. Learning and Education: Secularization.

Ever since the Emancipation and the Enlightenment (18th century), in which Jews had to confront modernity, the religious notion of the love of learning and the value of intellection became refracted through the secularist prism. This displaced Torah, the sacred studies, as the focus of *learning* and resulted in a heavy emphasis on *education*. This has become part of warp and woof of modern Jewish culture world-wide. Thus: the high degree of literacy amongst Jews; the high rate of university attendance--in 1970, 80% Jews vs 40% general--(which undoubtedly has other roots as well; note the new wave of Orientals to the USA excelling in almost all areas of education, especially the sciences but also in music); a very high rate of Nobel Prize winners (mid-'80s: 85 sciences & economics, 8 lit., 6 peace); the number of Jews in the professorate.

The question is: how long can this passion for education continue after its source has been abandoned? How long can the branch thrive when severed from its trunk and roots? It is probably too early to offer a definitive answer to this question.