

Knowing vs. Learning: Which Takes Precedence?

By Norman Lamm

I. Introduction: The Question

Education is the lifeblood of Judaism. "The study of Torah outweighs them all."¹ There are several mitzvot which the Sages said "outweigh them all," but clearly Torah study has the greatest place of eminence in the hierarchy of Jewish values. R. Hayyim Volozhiner taught in his *Nefesh HaHayyim* that it is not that Torah study is on one side, while all the other mitzvot are on the other side, and Torah study is heavier than the others. Rather, Torah study is the entity from which all others radiate.² They are the part, of which Torah study is the whole.³ This gives Torah study a completely different slant. It is not something apart from mitzvot. It is the origin of all mitzvot. Torah study (*limmud*) is exceedingly important, and so is Torah knowledge (*vediah*). The Sages asked, "Which is greater, *talmud* (study) or *ma'aseh* (action)?" They concluded, "Study is greater, since it leads to action."⁴ One who does not know Torah cannot practice any of the mitzvot. That is why it says, "An ignoramus cannot be pious."⁵ An ignoramus cannot know that which he needs to practice as a Jew. Torah knowledge has a clear place in the general structure of the values of Torah.

The question is: which is more important, Torah study or Torah knowledge? Is there more importance to learning as a process, or knowing as a passive achievement?

If Torah knowledge is the totality and ultimate aim of Torah, then it might be possible sometime in the future to fulfill one's obligation of Torah study by purchasing a microchip that contains all 400 books of responsa from the Bar Ilan CD-ROM and implanting it in one's brain. One would have Torah knowledge. What more would one need? There are other shortcuts which technology might invent, by which one could achieve a great deal of knowledge without spending terribly much energy in acquiring that knowledge. So the question is: which will it be?

II. Judaism vs. The Greeks

This question has certain clear philosophic underpinnings. It goes back to the days when Judaism was involved in a struggle with Hellenism and the teachings of Greek civilization. The Jewish struggle with the Greeks was not only a physical battle. We won that battle, so we celebrate Hanukkah.⁶ But it was also a conflict in the world of ideas and values, which has many consequences.

Scholars tell us that Plato, the origin of so much of Western philosophical thought throughout the ages, posed an ontological question (a question about the very nature of reality). He said that there was a difference between being and becoming. Becoming means development, constant growth, progress. Being means the aim, the end result. Greek thought, starting with Plato, said that being trumps becoming.⁷ Being is the ideal, and becoming is just the means toward achieving that ideal. The end is more important. The word "end" in English, like the word *takhlit* in Hebrew, has two meanings - it means the final part and also means the purpose. Since the purpose is greater than what leads to it, being takes precedence over becoming. Accordingly, the Greeks believed that knowledge is the ultimate goal because it is a state of being.

In his *Shemonah Perakim*,⁸ Maimonides poses a similar question. Who is greater, he asks: the righteous person who was born perfect (*hehasid hameuleh*), or the one who struggles with his own evil inclination and overcomes it (*hakovesh et yitzro*)? Maimonides answers that the Greeks taught us that the one who was born perfect is preferable, because a person who already has his perfection is the ideal for which we aim. This fits in beautifully with the Greek concept that being is superior to becoming. But, he continues, the Jewish sages prefer the one who is constantly involved in the struggle with his own self, with his own darker forces, and overcomes them. That is much more virtuous than the one who was merely well-behaved all along. Interestingly, Maimonides himself tries to reconcile the differences. In some ways it is the one who was born perfect. In some ways, it is the one who overcomes himself. But

he concedes that the Jewish sages hold that the one who overcomes himself is greater than the one who was born perfect⁹

Judaism, then, takes exactly the opposite worldview of the Greeks, and holds that becoming takes precedence over being. Accordingly, we believe that study is more important than knowledge. If knowledge is a state of being, studying is an act of becoming. As one studies, he keeps growing and growing. There is always movement towards the goal of knowledge. The process, the becoming, is what the studying is all about. In Judaism, the active process, the experience of learning, is greater than passive knowledge. Torah study is greater than Torah knowledge, because becoming is greater than being. That is why, although a scholar of the Talmud is called a *hakham* (wise person), the term we usually use is *talmid hakham* (student of the wise). A *hakham* is one who knows; a *talmid hakham* is one who learns. Similarly, a *lamdan* (a master of Torah study) is not one who knows, but one who learns, in the same way that a *gazlan* (a thief) is not one who has but one who steals. The passion for learning is more important than knowing.¹⁰

III. Practical Implications

This preference for the process explains what the Sages mean when they say, "According to the pain is the reward."¹¹ What one is rewarded for is the pain involved in the process - the pain of studying, the pain of researching, the pain of thinking, the pain of solving conflicts - the pain of being confronted by one's own ignorance and struggling to overcome it. King Solomon says, "The one who adds knowledge adds pain."¹² Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, one of my favorite sources of Hasidic wisdom and wit (not in the humorous sense, but in the sense of intelligence), comments, "If necessary become sick, but you need to study." Torah is acquired through suffering.¹³ There is no easy way out.¹⁴ If a person wants to achieve anything in the life of Torah, he needs to invest his peace of mind, health, concentration and focus. Five hundred years ago, one of the giants of Ashkenazic Jewry, R. Yisrael Isserlein (the author of *Terumat HaDeshen*), wrote about some of his students who came from wealthy homes. They had a new invention that they brought into the *beit midrash*: a type of turntable. Instead of needing to stand up and walk over to the shelf to get a book, they would place all their Gemara volumes on the "lazy Susan." They were able to learn with greater ease. They had a shortcut. R. Isserlein comments as follows, "Those rich, pampered students ... are not acting properly. On the contrary! When someone seeks a book and gets it with great effort, because of that [effort] he will remember what he wants to learn."¹⁵ If one invests pain and effort in learning something in the book, he will remember what he learned. If it comes easy, then easy come, easy go.¹⁶

To my mind, the most amazing example of the traditional emphasis on study as opposed to knowledge comes to us from a rather arcane book. One of the most difficult, the most recondite, the most abstract and abstruse parts of the Zoharic literature is called *Sifra DeTzeniuta*. The Gaon of Vilna wrote a commentary, equally difficult, on the *Sifra DeTzeniuta*. It was published with an introduction by the Gaon's student, R. Hayyim of Volozhin. There he records biographical items about the Vilna Gaon that are astounding. Every time I look at it, I am aghast. It is well-known that the Gaon was already a great *gaon* (genius) at his Bar Mitzvah. But he also lived an exceedingly rich mystical life. This was not an extravagant Hassidic Rebbe, but a precise Litvak, very careful, measured, and accurate about what he said. Yet the Gaon told R. Hayyim that, starting when he was nine years old, he had *aliyot neshamah* (spiritual experiences) every night, which continued for about seventy years. He received mystical visitations from Ya'akov Avinu, from Moshe Rabbeinu, and of course from Eliyahu HaNavi. One day the Gaon called R. Hayyim in and said, "Go see Zelmele."¹⁷ Tell him that tonight he will have an angelic visitation of *maggidim*.¹⁸ They will offer him solutions to all the problems that he is having in his Torah study. Tell him to chase them away, because any Torah knowledge which comes without the toil of Torah study is not worth it." The Gaon did not say they would offer false information. They would offer correct information, but one should not accept it. Any Torah knowledge which is easily acquired is simply not Torah, it has no value. The value of the Torah knowledge that one has is directly proportionate to the energy, the suffering, and the hard experience of acquiring it. The more one has invested in becoming, the more he will achieve the value of being.

The dispute we have seen between Judaism and the Greeks has certain surprising results. When the Greeks spoke about education, they had in mind adults, not children. The only reason a child needed to learn was as preparation for being an adult. An indication of the Greeks' priorities appears in a Greek word which midrashic literature borrows: "pedagogue." (We use it in English today.) The pedagogue was a teacher, but was usually a slave as well - an intellectual slave whom the master would use to teach his children. In Judaism, the relationship goes the other way around: the teacher is called a *rav*, a master. There is a very interesting counterpoint here. For the Greeks, the children's teacher was usually only a slave. In Judaism, the children's teacher is an important master. Interestingly, in the Rambam's *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, the first three halakhot deal almost exclusively with the education of children. (For example, the father must teach the child. If the father isn't there, who teaches the child?) Only in the fourth or fifth halakhah does the Rambam finally state that just as it is a mitzvah to teach children, so too it is a mitzvah to teach oneself. Learning by oneself as an adult is in a sense derivative of the requirement to teach one's children. For Judaism, teaching children becomes more important than teaching adults. Why? Although the end product is considered important, the process - the study - is much more important. This explains why our emphasis is on child education, as opposed to adult education.

To summarize, we have an encounter of two different worldviews, and the consequences thereof. The Greek worldview valued being over becoming, so it emphasized the end product, the knowledge of adults. The Jewish worldview gives full value to Torah knowledge, without which one cannot perform mitzvot, but it gives greater value to Torah study, the process of acquiring that knowledge. Accordingly, Judaism emphasizes child education and the greatness of a teacher as a master, one who is responsible for educating the next generation.

IV. Conclusion: The Struggle of Teaching

As I am somewhat connected to the field of education myself, I know that teachers are very often frustrated. There is a very high degree of burnout. It isn't easy to be a teacher. Therefore, educators frequently fret. I have heard this from many teachers in elementary schools, in high schools, and even in universities. They complain that they put so much effort into teaching and they don't produce results. They don't see the students getting as much as they should out of school. They feel frustrated by not being able to do all they can do. Both the quantity learned and the joy of learning are less than they ought to be. The struggle is often a very disheartening one.

Nevertheless, my friends and colleagues who are in the field of education need to remember this idea. The process is more important than the results. The very act of teaching, the struggle of challenging the students, is worthwhile even if it does not succeed in the way the teacher would like, and even if it appears to fall on deaf ears. That is the greatness of our craft, of our profession, of our call, of our commitment.

The importance of the struggle can be illustrated by two statements. The first is from R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi, known as the *Ba'al HaTanya*. He addresses the struggle we all have, the eternal war between the evil inclination and the good inclination. It can be discouraging, because the evil inclination too often is the victor.¹⁹ The *Ba'al HaTanya* writes, "A person must not let his heart sink or be depressed, even if this war continues for his whole lifetime. Perhaps it is for this that he was created, and this is his service [of God]."²⁰ The same holds true for any kind of worthy struggle in which we are engaged - whether it is the struggle of the evil inclination and the good inclination, whether it is the struggle of teaching, or whether it is the struggle of maintaining one's balance in Judaism while confronting the secular world (which is a struggle in which all of us are engaged). It may be frustrating and it may be painful. Nevertheless, the *Ba'al HaTanya* says, we must not complain, because it is not the achievement and the end, but the very act of struggle that is the greatest virtue of all.

There is a similar statement by R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk. The Talmud says, "*Yagati velo matzati, al ta'amin.*" If someone tells you, "I struggled but I didn't reach my goal," don't believe it.²¹ The Kotzker comments, "The struggle itself is already an achievement of the goal." Even if one has not achieved what he wanted, as long as he struggles he has won. The final product is secondary. We must not believe the one who says "*lo matzati*," because he doesn't realize that the *matzati* is secondary. Rather, "*Yagati, ta'amin.*" We must believe that the attempt to achieve is what it is all about.

This is the relationship of knowing and learning. Without denying the crucial value of knowing, learning is the most important. It is the struggle that is the source of our heroism, our value, and our contribution.

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NOTES

1 Mishnah, Peah 1:1.

2 Not only R. Hayyim of Volozhin, who was the leading student of the Vilna Gaon, and therefore the ideological spokesman for the Mitnagdic point of view, but even *Hassidut* and Hassidim agree with this. (This is very much counter to the popular prejudice, that Hassidim were all lower-class people or commoners, who were not sufficiently intellectually inclined to be *talmidei hakhamim*. That is a rather crass prejudice, as there were many Torah greats who came to us from the Hassidic world. A story about R. Avraham Bornstein (the Sochatchover Rebbe, author of the *Avnei Nezer*) is indicative of the value placed by Hassidim on Torah study. When he was older, he became ill. The doctors commanded him to stay in bed, and added that he must not study Torah, because when he did study he would get so involved that he exerted himself, and it could bring premature death upon him. When they told him this, he replied that he was going to study anyway. They said, "Rebbe, it is a matter of life or death." He retorted, "If I learn Torah, then I will die. But if I do not learn Torah, I am going to die. I would rather die from learning Torah than from not learning Torah." This story illustrates that Torah study is valued by all genuine and legitimate branches of Judaism.

3 R. Hayyim Volozhiner, *Nefesh HaHayyim, sha'ar dalet*, chapter 29.

4 *Kiddushin* 40b.

5 *Pirkei Avot* 2:6.

6 Actually, we may have lost part of the battle, because the question then was assimilation, and unfortunately assimilation is still very much a part of Jewish society.

7 This appears, among other places, in the allegory of the cave. See Plato, *The Republic*, 29 (518c).

8 Maimonides, *Shemonah Perakim*, chapter 6. In the Rambam La'am set edited by Mordechai Dov Rabinovitz, it appears in *Hakdamot LePeirush HaMishnah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1961), pp. 190-192.

9 In many ways, the same preference emerges from the conflict between Yosef and Yehudah. Yosef is well-behaved all along, a favorite darling of his father. He is unselfconsciously a leader, and does the right thing almost all the time. (Even when we find a struggle, in Yosef's encounter with Potifar's wife, it is one in which he does the right thing.) He seems to be much closer to the prototype who was born perfect. But Yehudah is a different question altogether. At the same time that Yosef is sold into slavery, starting a series of events which elevate him to become the viceroy of Egypt, it says, "At that time Yehudah descended" (Genesis 38:1). Yehudah becomes involved with a woman who he thinks is a harlot, and she turns out to be his daughter-in-law. He also said, "What profit is there in killing our brother?" We might as well sell him (Ibid. 37:26-27). Yehudah appears as a man who is beset by less than noble impulses. Yet he rises to the occasion when he confronts Yosef (who he does not know is Yosef), and in offering his own life instead of Binyamin's, he shows greatness. In the story of Tamar, when she shows Yehudah that he is the owner of the tokens he gave her when he thought she was a harlot, she asks him, "Recognize this?" (Ibid. 38:25) It is the same expression that the brothers - and probably Yehudah - had used when speaking to Ya'akov, "Recognize this? Is this your son's multicolored coat?" (Ibid. 37:32) What is Yehudah's reaction? He sees the challenge and overcomes it. He says, "She is right and I am wrong (Ibid. 38:26)." And when he confronts Yosef, Yehudah offers his own life. This explains why, on Ya'akov's deathbed, while he clearly speaks lovingly of Yosef, when it comes to Yehudah he says, "*Gur aryeh Yehudah, miteref beni alitah* - Yehudah is a lion's cub, my son, you ascended from prey" (Ibid. 49:9). Rashi asks: what is "*teref*"? It is based on the words, "*Tarof toraf Yosef* - Yosef has surely been torn apart" (Ibid. 37:33). Yehudah, who led Ya'akov to believe that Yosef was torn apart by a wild beast, has ascended from all that. Instead of "Yehudah descended," it is "you ascended." There is a great sense of growth in Yehudah. This is an example of the conflict between the one who was born perfect and the one who overcomes himself, with the one who overcomes himself taking precedence.

10 I recall, as a young man, coming with high anxiety to the class of the Rav (R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik). He was extremely demanding. We would come into his class and we shriveled. We would put our Gemaras in front of our faces and peek over it, so he wouldn't recognize us and call on us. Unfortunately, he very often caught me. I remember

once when he had been developing a thesis for some time. He asked me, "Lamm, what does Tosafot say?" I was intimidated, so I repeated what he had said the previous day. I thought, "He is going to be pleasantly surprised." But he erupted like a volcano, and said to me, "I know what I am saying. I do not need you to tell me! What do you think?" His greatness as a teacher was that he wanted a student to think. The Rav wanted a student to think along the lines of his method, but not his conclusions. He valued a student who challenged him over a student who passively received the information. As a matter of fact, he got so angry at me that he added, "They can sell you the Brooklyn Bridge! The problem is that you check your evil inclination outside. You come in with the good inclination. Next time, bring your evil inclination with you, and leave your good inclination outside!" He wanted a student to use his "evil inclination," his passion, in order to conquer a Tosafot and understand it properly. He valued the passion and process of study over knowledge, important as study is. That was an impressionable experience that I have taken with me throughout my life.

11 *Avot* 5:26.

12 *Ecclesiastes* 1:18.

13 *Berakhot* 5a.

14 Taking it one step further, the *Hazon Ish* writes in a letter, "I found everything difficult, and hardly ever found anything easy." Everything in life is difficult. Nothing is easy. See R. Avraham Yishayahu Karelitz, *Kovetz Iggerot me'et Maran baal Hazon Ish*, ed. Rabbi S. Greineman (Benei Brak, no date of publication).

15 R. Yosef ben Moshe, *Leket Yosher*, vol. 2, p. 39, citing R. Yisrael Isserlein.

16 When I was a youngster and needed to save pennies in order to buy a book, what I learned in that book remains with me much more than when I can walk into a bookstore, easily write out a check, and look at the book immediately. The investment plays a major role. I remember when I was about sixteen or seventeen, I was learning with my grandfather, R. Yehoshua Baumol, who was a great *posek* (halakhic expert). We learned Gemara *Pesahim*. Somewhere in the beginning of *Pesahim*, Tosafot quotes a Rashi in *Yevamot*. I read it - "Rashi explains" - and went on. My grandfather interrupted, "Wait a minute. Where are you going?" I said, "I'm reading the Tosafot." He asked, "But what is Tosafot saying?" I replied, "He's quoting a Rashi in *Yevamot*." He challenged, "Well, how do you know he is telling the truth? Maybe Tosafot is fooling you. Maybe he didn't read it correctly." My grandfather continued, "I want to tell you something." I will never forget it. "When it comes to *emunot vede'ot* (theology), you have to be a *ma'amin* (believer). When it comes to learning, you have to be an *apikores* (heretic)!" One needs to challenge everyone, one needs to be a skeptic. If Tosafot claims that Rashi says so, get up - don't be lazy - and take out the Gemara *Yevamot*, learn that Rashi, and make sure Tosafot is telling the truth. As everyone knows in the world of scholarship, that is the way to genuine scholarship. One needs a skeptical attitude, and that means investing a lot of energy and time.

17 *Zelmele* was the nickname of R. Shlomo Zalman, the younger brother of R. Hayyim. Zelmele died young, when he was thirty-three. A contemporary of his maintained that had Zelmele lived to a ripe old age, he might have exceeded the Gaon of Vilna himself. See R. Y. L. Maimon, *Sarei HaMeah* (Jerusalem: Achiasaf, 1965), vol. 2, p. 131.

18 It is related that *maggidim* is a type of paranormal phenomenon in which the mystic has his own voice speak from within him without his control. In the 16th century, R. Yosef Karo, the author of the *Shulhan Arukh*, would have a visitation from a *maggid* every Friday night. After eating and saying the Grace after Meals, he would put his head down and go into a type of trance, and the *maggid* would tell him Torah thoughts. R. Karo describes this in his book, *Maggid Meisharim*.

19 R. Yisrael Salanter once said that the *yetzer hara* is compared to a fly. A person chases it away, and it comes right back again.

20 R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Likkutei Amarim (Tanya)*, chapter 27.

21 *Megillah* 6b.