

# Torah Study as Community Building

Parasha Yitro 5779

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January, 31 2019

We read this morning the highlight of Jewish history. God appears to the Jews on Mt. Sinai and gives them the Torah – the rules and ideas which will now govern their lives and history forever more. Even today, so many generations after this event, it continues to be the central factor in our identity as a Jewish people. So let us reflect a bit more deeply on this important milestone in Jewish history.

One of the odd aspects of the revelation is that we end up with two parts of the Torah: the Written and the Oral. The Written Torah itself expanded over time to include the 24 books of the Bible, but the true explosion in learning has been in the Oral Torah. Here we find endless discussions, which continue and thrive currently, and an ever expanding literature of Torah thoughts. But while we may assume in our times (which we will come to shortly) that these two sections of Torah just “happen” to be transmitted differently, we find a different attitude in the Talmud (Gittin 60b) which tells us that:

דברים שבכתב אסור לאמרם על פה ודברים שבעל פה אסור לכתבם

“The Written law may not be spoken orally, and the Oral law may not be written.”

There is a halachic prohibition against transmitting either Torah in the other format. In our times the distinction between the Written and Oral law are less noticeable. We now write the Oral law down, and most authorities maintain the prohibition against writing the Oral Torah is no longer in effect. Similarly we have many halachic leniencies which allow us to orally recite the Written law, so this clause is largely not in effect either. So nowadays we are largely unaware of the vast differences between these two types of Torah and how they (should) play vastly different roles in our lives.

But let us return to the original intention of God at the giving of the Torah. According to the Talmud then these two forms of Torah differ not by happenstance, but are inherently distinct and must be transmitted differently. There are two distinct roles Torah is meant to play in our lives and one must be done orally and the other in written form. What are these two roles?

The Written law is perhaps simpler to understand – it is a written record of the word of God. This is readily understandable to most of us. The Oral law is where we find something more unusual, something we may be less familiar with.

There is a dynamic we find with many mitzvot of the Torah that often after a lapse of many years, we think of them differently than their original intent. The laws of kosher, for example, were more relevant when people were more directly connected to their food, to livestock and farming, but are now for most of us a matter of finding symbols on labels in the supermarket, and some of the lessons of kosher have been lost. The ritual of tefillin has also changed dramatically. Originally it was intended to be worn all day, but eventually changed into something worn during morning services, so we think of it as a ritual of davening when it was ideally supposed to be broader. Torah study has followed a similar pattern.

We think of a great Torah scholar as one who sits all day hunched over books. The greatest scholars of Torah are those who spend the vast majority of their time with books, reviewing another page, pushing themselves to study another passage, despite being tired or having other obligations to tend to. Most students of Torah will spend much of their time studying with others, either one on one or in a class, but to achieve mastery of Torah undoubtedly involves many hours of solitary study, together with Talmudic books.

In our times we often think of Talmudic scholarship as being an unsocial experience, or even an anti-social one. Of course there are outstanding Talmudists who are socially engaged and outgoing, and Talmud study need not be, and is not, opposed to friendships. But the image of the Talmudist can conjure up someone less social. All of this would have been unthinkable to our ancient ancestors, for whom high level Talmud study was the ultimate encompassing social experience. It meant creating close study bonds with a teacher, with fellow students, it meant being immersed not just in Talmud but in a community of study.

When we read in the Talmud stories about the great Sages, we see that they are deeply connected through the bonds of their shared study. An Oral Law meant that in order to study one must have a close relationship with the teacher, one must develop broadly as a human being. The student learned not only facts and passages, but a way of life, how to view the world and Others. The idea of the solitary scholar in pursuit of Talmudic knowledge was foreign to this system.

When the Torah was recorded we lost not only the idea of an Oral transmission, but with it a crucial aspect of what Torah study meant. In the Torah's original intention, study of Torah was a process which created strong communities organized around the study of Torah. By necessity this system was unsustainable and so we have modified it. We allow for the solitary pursuit of Torah, but always with the caveat that if one can still engage in Torah study, which also connects deeply to others, that is the superior way to do it. Torah which can lead to community of Torah students who share their passion together is still our religious ideal.