

Talmud Torah: Books and Beyond

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I. The Relationship Between the individual and God: Spiritual Engagement

1. Deuteronomy 6:5-7

And you shall love Hashem, your God, with all of your heart, with all of your soul and with all of your resources. Let these matters that I command you today be upon your heart. Teach them thoroughly to your children and speak of them while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you retire and when you arise.

Question: What might be the relationship between the second two verses and the first one?

2. Joshua 1:8

This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth, but you should meditate on it day and night so that you may observe to do all that is written in it, for then your way will be prosperous and you will become wise.

3. Maimonides Laws of the Learning of Torah 1:8

Every man from Israel is obligated in the study of Torah: whether poor or rich, whether healthy or suffering, whether a young man or an old one who has lost his strength, even if he is a poor person who survives on charity and is begging at doorways, and even a married person with children has to set aside times for the study of Torah, during the day and at night, as it says “You should meditate on it during the day and at night” (Joshua 1:8).

Question: How does Maimonides understand the verse from Joshua? What does he add to the conversation?

4. Tractate Brachot 8a

Abaye said: I used to learn in my house and pray at the synagogue until I heard what Rabbi Chiya the son of Ami said in the name of Ulah, that since the day that the Temple was destroyed God does not have anything in this world except for the four cubits of Jewish law. [Therefore] I [now] pray where I learn. Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Asi, even though they had thirteen synagogues in Tiberias, only prayed between the walls [of the *beit midrash*], the place where they studied.

Question: Why might these rabbis think it important to learn and pray in the same space?

II. The Relationship Between the Individual and Him/Herself: Self-Cultivation

5. Psalms 119:92-93

If your Torah were not my delight, then I would have perished in my affliction. I will never neglect your precepts, for you have preserved my life through them.

Question: In what sense might Torah be life-giving?

6. Ethics of Our Fathers 2:6

He used to say: A boor cannot be fearful of sin; an unlearned person cannot be scrupulously pious; the bashful person cannot learn, and the quick, impatient person cannot teach; anyone excessively occupied in business cannot become a scholar; and in a place where there are no leaders, strive to be one.

Question: What values are being advocated here? How is piety portrayed?

7. Ethics of Our Father 6:2

And it says: “The Tablets are God’s handiwork and the script was God’s script *charut* (engraved) on the Tablets.” Do not read “*charut*” (engraved) but “*cherut*” (freedom), for you can have no freer man than one who engages in the study of Torah.

Question: In what ways might Torah study be liberating?

8. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, pgs. 81, 136, 137

Question: What are the freedoms granted to us by Torah study, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik?

III. The Relationship Between the Individual and the Community: Community-Building and Repair

9. Tractate Brachot 64a

Rabbi Elazar said on behalf of Rabbi Chanina: Torah scholars increase peace in the world, as it is said: “And all your children will be students of God, and your children will have peace” (Isaiah 54:13)—do not read “your children” (“*banayich*”), but “your builders” (“*bonayich*”); “There is abundant peace for the lovers of your Torah, and there is no stumbling block for them” (Psalms 119:165); “May there be peace within your wall, serenity within your palaces. For the sake of my brethren and comrades I shall speak of peace in your midst. For the sake of the House of Hashem, our God, I will request your good” (Psalms 122:7-9); “God will give might to his nation, God will bless his nation with peace” (Psalms 29:11).

10. Tractate Gittin 59b

And for the sake of [alt. promotion of] the paths of peace is the whole of Torah. Here too [in the case at hand] is it promoting peace, as it says, “Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are paths of peace” (Proverbs 3:17).

Question: How might the study of Torah promote peace?

11. Tractate Shabbat 127a

These are the precepts whose fruits a person enjoys in this world but whose principle remains intact for him in the world to come. They are: the honor due to father and mother, acts of kindness, early attendance at the house of study morning and evening, hospitality to guests, visiting the sick, providing for a bride, escorting the dead, absorption in prayer, bringing peace between people—and the study of Torah is equivalent to (“*k’neged*”) all of them.

Question: *K'neged* can mean different things—equivalent to, in opposition to, complement of. What is the relationship between study and action, according to this source?

12. Tractate Kiddushin 40b

Rabbi Tarfon and the elders were reclining in the house of Nitzeah when the question was asked of them: Is the study of Torah greater or are actions greater? Rabbi Tarfon answered that actions are greater. Rabbi Akiva answered that study is greater. Everyone [finally] answered that study is greater, because brings about action.

**Question: How do you understand the rabbis answer to the question of priority?
What comes out on top?**

13. Ethics of Our Fathers 1:2

Shimon the Righteous was among the survivors of the Great Assembly. He used to say: The world depends on three things—on Torah study, on the service [of God], and on kind deeds.

IV. Conclusion

14. Ethics of Our Fathers 2:12

Prepare yourself for the study of Torah, for it is not an inheritance for you.

**Question: How can a tradition *not* be an inheritance?
Is there a difference between something inherited and something owned?
What might it mean to own something that is already yours?**