

The Foundation of Jewish Life

The Jewish people have long been called “The People of the Book.” In fact, one of the identifying characteristics of Judaism is that Jews of all ages, and from all walks of life, engage in intensive and passionate Torah study, without any ulterior financial or academic motives. Such a dedication to study has probably never been matched by any other society. Since the Torah is the blueprint for the world, its study is the foundation for the entirety of Jewish life.

This class will discuss the following core issues:

- Why is Torah study considered essential to Jewish life?
- What do we hope to achieve through Torah study?
- What effect can Torah study have on my character?
- What if I feel like I’m not cut out for Torah study, or it’s too hard?
- Why does the Torah place so much emphasis on the commandment to study continuously without ever “graduating”?

Class outline:

- Section I. Participating in the Creation of the Universe
 - Part A. The Torah as the Blueprint of the Universe
 - Part B. The Role of Torah Study in the Ongoing Process of Creation
 - Part C. The Torah Brings Holiness into the World
 - Part D. Torah Ethics: A Beacon of Morality for the World
 - Part E. Torah Contains All of the World’s Wisdom

- Section II. Torah Study as a Perpetuation of the Revelation at Mount Sinai

- Section III. Torah Study: The Basis of Jewish Living
 - Part A. Knowing How to Live as a Jew
 - Part B. Understanding the Rationale Behind the Mitzvot
 - Part C. Developing a Relationship with God

- Section IV. Self-Education (or: The Art of Becoming a Mensch)

- Section V. Can Everyone Learn Torah?
 - Part A. Torah Study is for Everyone
 - Part B. Torah Study is Not Just for Intellectuals
 - Part C. Recommendations to Succeed in Torah Study

SECTION I. PARTICIPATING IN THE CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE

When God created the world, He looked into the Torah and used it as the blueprint for the creation of the universe. The whole purpose of Creation is Torah study; it is what sustains the world. When we study Torah and work on perfecting ourselves, we become partners with God in Creation. The Torah we study infuses the world with holiness, helps us navigate our moral and ethical decisions, and is our essential source of wisdom.

PART A. THE TORAH AS THE BLUEPRINT OF THE UNIVERSE

God created this world with a specific plan for its spiritual elevation. That plan is contained in the Torah. Thus every detail in Creation matches and parallels something in the Torah.

1. Rashi, Mishlei (Proverbs) 9:1 – God used His wisdom to create the world.

“Wisdom built its house” – God created the world using wisdom.

“חכמות בנתה ביתה” בחכמה בנה הקב“ה את עולמו.

2. Mishlei Rabati, Ch. 9 – The “wisdom” mentioned in this verse is specifically the wisdom of Torah.

“Wisdom built its house” – this is a reference to Torah, [with] which [He] created the entire universe.

“חכמות בנתה ביתה” זו התורה שבנתה כל העולמות.

3. Zohar, Terumah 161a – God looked into the Torah and created the world accordingly.

When God created the universe, He looked into the Torah and created [based on what is written in it]. It was through the Torah that the world was created.

כד ברא קוב“ה עלמא הוה אסתכל בה באורייתא וברא עלמא ובאורייתא אתברי עלמא.

PART B. THE ROLE OF TORAH STUDY IN THE ONGOING PROCESS OF CREATION

We have seen that the Torah is the world’s blueprint. How is that relevant to us now that the world has already been created?

1. Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim 4:11 – Since the Torah is the blueprint and origin of this world, continued involvement in Torah is necessary to keep the world going.

Therefore, the primary source of life, light, and existence of all the worlds is the involvement of the Jewish people in Torah study.

ולזאת עיקר חיותם ואורם וקיומם של העולמות כולם על נכון הוא רק כשאנחנו עוסקים בה כראוי.

2. **Ibid.** – By studying Torah one becomes a partner with God in the creation of the world.

And for this reason the Sages teach that one who studies Torah without ulterior motives is considered a “companion.” The meaning is that he is a companion, a colleague, of God, so to speak, by facilitating the continuation of the world through his Torah study [i.e. just as God created and maintains the world through Torah, so too does the individual who studies Torah].

ולכן אמרו בפרק מעלות התורה שכל העוסק בתורה לשמה שנקרא ריע, כי כביכול נעשה שותף ליוצר בראשית ית"ש, כיון שהוא המקיים עתה כל העולמות בעסק תורתו.

PART C. THE TORAH BRINGS HOLINESS INTO THE WORLD

1. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Berachot 6a – Anyone who studies Torah brings God's Presence into the world.**

From where do we know that the *Shechinah* (God's Presence) is with even one person who sits and studies Torah? Because the verse states, “Wherever I permit My Name to be mentioned I shall come to you and bless you” (Shemot/ Exodus 20:21).

מנין שאפילו אחד שיושב ועוסק בתורה ששכינה עמו שנאמר (שמות כ: כא) “בכל המקום אשר אזכיר את שמי אבוא אליך וברכתיך.”

When we look at a table, although it seems stationary, it is in fact composed of millions of microscopic molecules moving at great speed; there is more to life than meets the eye! This is not only true in the physical world, but in the spiritual realm as well – there are many “worlds” of spirituality. Torah study brings holiness and blessing to both the physical and spiritual worlds.

2. **Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim 4:11 – Study of Torah brings holiness and blessing to the world.**

The blessing we say [after reading from the Torah] is “[God] implanted eternal life within us,” like a plant which is planted with the intention of producing fruit and thereby bringing goodness to the world. So too, if we uphold the holy Torah with all our might as is required, we will bring an abundance of holiness, blessing, and [spiritual] light to all the worlds.

אנו מברכים עליה “וחיי עולם נטע בתוכנו” כענין הנטיעה שנטיעתה כדי לעשות פרי להרבות טובה, כן אם אנו מחזיקים בתורה הקדושה בכל כחנו כראוי... מומשיכים... תוספות קדושה וברכה ואור גדול בכל העולמות.

3. **Ibid. 4:30 – The Torah brings eternal holiness to the world.**

Any place which the Torah enlightens with its light and holiness even once, will be eternally and constantly holy.

אבל התורה הקדושה, כל מקום שתזריח ותופיע אורה וקדושתה פעם אחת, קדושת עולם תהיה לו, ונשאר תמיד בקדושתו.

PART D. TORAH ETHICS: A BEACON OF MORALITY FOR THE WORLD

The ethical development of the world has been greatly influenced by the Jewish people, whose ethics and values are derived directly from the Torah.

1. Paul Johnson, *A History Of The Jews*, p. 585 – The Torah's influence on humanity.

Certainly, the world without the Jews would have been a radically different place. Humanity might have eventually stumbled upon all the Jewish insights. But we cannot be sure. All the great conceptual discoveries of the human intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they had been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jews had this gift. To them we owe the idea of:

- Equality before the law, both divine and human
- The sanctity of life and the dignity of a human person
- The individual conscience, and so a personal redemption
- Collective conscience, and so of social responsibility
- Peace as an abstract ideal, and
- Love as the foundation of justice

and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without Jews it might have been a much emptier place.

Let us now highlight the sources for some of the above-mentioned concepts:

a. Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:15 – The idea of equality before the law, both divine and human.

Do not commit injustice in adjudication ... do not show favor to a wealthy man; *with fairness shall you judge your fellow man.*

לא תעשו עול במשפט... ולא תהדר פני גדול; בצדק תשפט עמיתך.

b. Bereishit (Genesis) 9:6 – The sanctity of life.

One who spills the blood of a man, by man shall his own blood be spilt; for in the Image of God did [He] create Man.

שופך דם האדם באדם דמו ישפך כי בצלם אלהים עשה את האדם.

c. Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:7 – Collective conscience and social responsibility.

Do not harden you heart and do not close your hand from your indigent brother.

לא תאמץ את לבבך ולא תקפוז את ירך מאחיק האב יון.

d. Rambam (Maimonides), *End of Hilchot Chanukah* – Peace as an ideal.

Great is peace! For the entire Torah was given to bring about peace.

גדול השלום שכל התורה ניתנה לעשות שלום בעולם.

The impact of the Jewish people on society, based on Torah ethics, is recognized even by heads of state:

2. **John Adams, 2nd President of the United States, quoted in What Did They Think Of The Jews? by Allan Gould – The Jews' contribution to civilization.**

I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation ... Fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations.

Although John Adams claimed the contribution of the Jews to civilization is due to “fate,” we know that this is no accident; our morality and contribution to the world in this regard is predicated on Divine wisdom.

3. **Houston Smith, The Religions Of Man, p. 258 – The Jews introduced God into the world, a Divine and moral God Who cares for His creations.**

It is here that we come to the supreme achievement of Jewish thought; not in its monotheism as such, but in the character it ascribed to the God it discovered to be One. The Greeks, the Romans, the Syrians, and most of the Mediterranean peoples would have said two things about their gods' character. First, the gods tend to be amoral; second, toward man they are preponderantly indifferent. The Jews reversed the thinking of their contemporaries on both points. Whereas the gods of Olympus tirelessly pursue beautiful women, the God of Sinai watches over widows and orphans. While Mesopotamia's Anu and Bannan's El were going their aloof ways, the God of Sinai is ... lifting His people out of slavery, and seeking his lonely, heartsick exiles in Babylon. God is a God of righteousness Whose loving-kindness is from everlasting to everlasting and Whose tender mercies are over all of His works.

PART E. TORAH CONTAINS ALL OF THE WORLD'S WISDOM

Torah study does not negate other areas of knowledge; on the contrary, many other areas of wisdom are found in the Torah. It contains knowledge of everything in the universe; consequently, one who has mastered the whole Torah has insight into many other areas of knowledge.

1. **Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 5:22 – All wisdom is contained in the Torah.**

Delve into [the Torah] and continue to delve into it, for everything is in it.

הפוך בה והפוך בה דכולה בה.

2. **Maharal, Derech HaChaim, ibid. – All the world's wisdom is concentrated in the Torah because God created the world by looking into the Torah.**

This warrants explanation: what does it mean “for everything is in it” – how does it [the Torah] contain everything? This [idea] is hinted to in the Midrash: “God looked into the Torah and created the world” (Bereishit Rabbah, Ch. 1) ... God set up the world according to the order of the Torah, so that everything that happens in the world follows the order of the Torah ... This is the meaning [of the Midrash] that God looked into the Torah and created the world, for the order of the world follows the order of the Torah. This is the meaning [of the Mishnah]: “Delve into the

דבר זה צריך פירוש איך נמצא בתורה הכל שאמר דכולה בה. ודבר זה רמוז במדרש (ב"ר פ"א) ... שהיה הקב"ה מביט בתורה וברא את העולם עד כאן ... ולפי סדר התורה סידר הש"י סדר העולם עד שהכל נמשך אחר התורה ... וזה שאמר שהיה מביט בתורה וברא העולם כי אחר סדר התורה נמשך סדר העולם. וזה שאמר הפוך בה דכולה בה, כלומר כאשר ישיג בתורה הנה הוא משיג בכל סדר המציאות, אחר כי דרכי העולם הזה יוצאים מן דרכי התורה עד שהכל יוצא מן התורה שהיא סדר האדם, נמצא כי הכל הוא בתורה.

Torah for everything is in it,” meaning that when one delves into the deeper meanings of the Torah one can come to an understanding of the entire universe, since all that occurs in the universe stems from the Torah, i.e. *all* comes from the Torah, which is the manifesto for mankind.

3. Rabbi Dr. Akiva Tatz, *Anatomy of a Search*, pp. 38-39 – Torah study permeates other areas of study as well.

Someone who learns Torah for its own sake, with no vested interest, merits to be granted the knowledge of “many things.” Apart from intellect and character, a deep study of Torah yields knowledge about that replica of Torah which is the universe. What kind of knowledge? I shall record just one example, from the medical field, although I have personally experienced the amazing on a number of occasions while working medically in contact with *gedolei* Torah.

The great Chazon Ish was famed for his knowledge of medical matters, although he had no formal medical training. In one well-known case, a mother took her son to the Chazon Ish because he had been diagnosed as having a lethal brain tumor. It had been decided to operate, although the attempt was desperate since safe access to the tumor seemed almost impossible. The Chazon Ish gave the boy a *berachah*, told the mother that all would be well, and gave her a diagram which he had drawn for the neurosurgeon concerned. The diagram indicated a surgical approach to the tumor and technique of operation. Now most doctors do not like being told what to do, especially surgeons, and especially by Rabbis, but the mother did as she was told and presented the diagram. The neurosurgeon looked at it and immediately admitted that it represented the only possibility of successful surgery. The tumor was removed and the boy recovered. The surgeon subsequently made the following comment to a friend of one of my teachers: “That the Chazon Ish knows more Torah than I do, I understand. *But how does he know more neurosurgery?*”

The Torah also provides an ethical framework for non-Jews – the Seven Noahide commandments. These are identified in Sanhedrin 56a as (1) establishing a judicial system; and the prohibition of the following: (2) cursing God, (3) idol worship, (4) forbidden sexual relationships, (5) murder and suicide, (6) theft, and (7) eating a limb severed from a living animal.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ☞ God looked into the Torah and used it as the blueprint for the creation of the world. He created the world with a specific plan for its elevation. This plan is put into action when human beings toil in Torah study and strive to apply it. By bringing the world to its objective (i.e. through Torah study), people become partners with God in Creation.
- ☞ Studying Torah is what brings holiness into the world. God dwells in places where there is Torah study.
- ☞ The Torah is an ethical code of law, which for generations has served as a beacon of morality in a challenging world. Although on the surface it appears as if other infrastructures are upholding the world (commerce, technology, politics, etc.), in truth it is the Torah which sustains all other systems.

SECTION II. TORAH STUDY AS A PERPETUATION OF THE REVELATION AT MOUNT SINAI

On Mount Sinai God revealed Himself to the entire Jewish nation of approximately 2.5 million people and gave them the Torah. God “speaks” to us via the Torah. Each time a Jew learns Torah he is reliving that connection with God.

1. Devarim 4:9-10 – The Torah commands us to remember the Sinai episode forever.

Take care and guard yourself exceedingly well that you do not forget what your eyes saw [at Sinai], and that they not leave your consciousness for all the days of your life, and teach them to your children and your children's children – [what transpired on] the day that you stood before God on Sinai.

רק השמר לך ושמור נפשך מאד פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו עיניך ופן יסורו מלבבך כל ימי חיך והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך. יום אשר עמדת לפני ה' אלקיך בחורב....

2. Zohar, Chukat 159b – At any time in history, Jews can recapture that moment on Mount Sinai – by studying Torah.

Anyone who immerses himself in Torah study is considered to be standing upon Mount Sinai each day, receiving the Torah.

מאן דאשתדל באורייתא כאילו קאים כל יומא אטורא דסיני וקביל אורייתא.

3. Talmud Bavli, Berachot 21b – Every act of Torah study is an unfolding of the Revelation at Sinai.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi taught, “One who teaches his son Torah is considered to have received the Torah from Mount Sinai. We see this from the above verses, for it is written, ‘Teach them to your children and your children's children,’ and immediately afterward it says, ‘The day that you stood before God on Sinai.’” [The juxtaposition of the concepts of teaching one's child and standing on Mount Sinai teach us that they are connected.]

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי כל המלמד לבנו תורה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קבלה מהר חורב, שנאמר “והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך” וכתוב בתריה “יום אשר עמדת לפני ה' אלקיך בחורב.”

4. Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim 4:14 – Every word of Torah study ever uttered was foretold in the Torah God gave to Moshe (Moses) at Sinai.

All [of the Torah] is [included in] the word of God to Moshe on Sinai, [including] every question a young student will ever ask his teacher. When one engages [in Torah study], every word [he says] is as if God uttered it from His mouth, so to speak, and it is considered as if he has just received it now from God's mouth at Sinai.

שהכל מאמר פיו יתברך למשה בסיני, ואפילו מה שתלמיד קטן שואל מרבו... וגם עתה בעת שהאדם עוסק בה, בכל תיבה, אותה התיבה ממש נחצבת אז להבת אש מפיו יתברך כביכול... ונחשב כאילו עתה מקבלה בסיני מפיו יתברך שמו.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ☞ At Mount Sinai, God gave the entire Jewish nation the Torah. Every time we study Torah, we are reliving and perpetuating that awesome moment on Mount Sinai.
- ☞ Every word of Torah ever uttered was foretold by God to Moshe at Sinai. When one engages in Torah study it is as if he has just received that Torah from God at Sinai. In this way, the awesome event on Mount Sinai is not just an ancient event, some distant memory of the past, but alive and renewed every time we study Torah.

SECTION III. TORAH STUDY: THE BASIS OF JEWISH LIVING

“...Torah study for the layman does not advance his career, or increase his income. Even Rabbis and accomplished scholars continue to study for their entire lives. Why isn't it sufficient to “qualify” and then stop learning? Why does the Torah place so much emphasis on the commandment to study continuously?”

“The simplest and most obvious explanation is the practical aspect of studying Torah in order to properly observe Torah law. It is clear, however, that the obligation goes far beyond knowing the practical application of Jewish law. We study laws that are relevant, as well as those that have no direct application today, such as the laws of the Temple; we study the derivation and sources of the laws; we even study opinions that are not accepted as the final word in the law; we study philosophy, mysticism, and the text of the Torah.

“According to Jewish belief, the purpose of existence is for human beings to create a relationship with God. In order for a relationship to be meaningful and intimate the two parties must be compatible. We develop this compatibility with God by imitating His actions and traits. Through the performance of the commandments of the Torah we learn to act as God does; by improving our character traits we become similar to God in the realm of His character ... Full compatibility can only be achieved, however, when the intellect is also developed appropriately, when we learn to think like God.” (Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, pp. 411-412)

PART A. KNOWING HOW TO LIVE AS A JEW

A Jew has responsibilities to himself, his community, and to God. There are different mitzvot geared toward each of these responsibilities. Learning Torah and studying these mitzvot enable us to carry out these responsibilities.

1. Devarim 5:1 – Proper observance of the mitzvot is only possible through rigorous and conscientious Torah study.

Moshe called all of Israel and said to them, “Hear, Israel, the laws and ordinances that I am speaking to you today; *learn them and take care to fulfill them.*”

ויקרא משה אל כל ישראל ויאמר אליהם “שמע ישראל את החוקים ואת המשפטים אשר אנכי דבר באזניכם היום ולמדתם אותם ושמרתם לעשותם.”

2. Rambam, Hilchot Talmud Torah (Laws of Torah Study) 3:3 – Torah study is the most important mitzvah because it teaches one how to act.

There is no mitzvah that is equal to that of Torah study. Rather, Torah study is equal to all of the

אין לך מצוה בכל המצוות כולן שהיא שקולה כנגד

mitzvot together. The reason for this is that study leads to practice.

תלמוד תורה אלא תלמוד תורה כנגד כל המצוות כולן, שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה.

3. **Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Derech Hashem (The Way of God) 4:2:1 – Without Torah study one would not know how to act.**

The study of Torah is a self-evident necessity. Without it, it is impossible to serve God, for if one does not know what he is commanded to do, how can he do it?

הנה תלמוד תורה הוא ענין מוכרח לפי שזולתו אי אפשר להגיע אל המעשה כי אם לא ידע מה הוא מצוה שיעשה, איך יעשהו.

The goal of Torah study is proper action, while proper actions are impossible without intensive Torah study. The two are inseparable. A mitzvah is a concretizing of the Torah; it expresses and maintains the wisdom one absorbs through Torah study.

4. **Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim, 4:30 – Studying Torah must go hand in hand with fulfilling the mitzvot.**

This idea can be seen in the verse, “For a mitzvah is a candle, and Torah is light.” A candle has no independent light; it simply serves as a way of holding and expressing the light that comes from fire. The mitzvah is the candle that holds the flame of Torah ... On the other hand, only studying Torah without fulfilling the mitzvot is also worthless, for the light of Torah will have nothing to cling to, much as a flame cannot exist without a wick for it to hold on to.

ויש לכיין גם זה הענין בכתוב “כי נר מצוה ותורה אור.” כענין הנר שאין לה בעצמה שום אור כלל רק מהאור המאיר בה...ודאי שגם בעסק התורה לבד בלי קיום המצוות כלל ח”ו ג”כ אין כלום...כי בלתי קיום המצוות ח”ו אין דבר במה להתאחז ולהתקשר בו אור התורה לשרות עליו ולהתקיים בו כדמיון האור בלא פתילה...

Halachah, Jewish law, translates Torah ideals into concrete behavior.

5. **Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Halakhic Man, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1983, p. 19 – Halachah is the ideal standard by which reality is measured.**

When Halachic man [one who adheres to Jewish law] approaches reality, he comes with his Torah, given to him from Sinai, in hand ... His approach begins with an ideal creation and concludes with a real one ... The essence of the halachah, which was received from God, consists of creating an ideal world and cognizing the relationship between that ideal world and our concrete environment in all its visible manifestations and underlying structures. There is no phenomenon, entity, or object in this concrete world which the [pre-existing] halachah does not approach with its ideal standard.

PART B. UNDERSTANDING THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE MITZVOT

It is possible to be “directed” how to act. Without Torah study, however, our actions would remain hollow. When anchored in the understanding that comes from intensive Torah study, our actions take on a new dimension; the mitzvot become alive with purpose.

1. **Rambam, Hilchot Me'ilah 8:8 – It is important to understand the rationale behind the commandments.**

It is appropriate for one to contemplate the laws of the holy Torah and to know their objectives to the best of one's ability.

ראוי לאדם להתבונן במשפטי התורה הקדושה ולידע סוף ענינם לפי כחו.

2. **Vilna Gaon, Mishlei 19:2 – Without understanding the commandments, one loses the impetus to observe them.**

“Without wisdom it is not good for the soul” – this means that if a person just performs mitzvot without accompanying it with Torah study, it will not be good for his soul. This is called doing mitzvot “without wisdom – it is not good for the soul.” His soul will not have pleasure from doing the mitzvot since he does not know their rationale, and thus does them without enthusiasm.

“גם בלא דעת נפש לא טוב” – כלומר אם אדם עושה מצות ואינו עוסק בתורה, לא טוב...כשעושה מצות בלתי דעת, ה“נפש לא טוב”, כי אין נהנית הנפש מזה, מחמת שאינו יודע השורש ועושה בלא חשק.

3. **Rabbi David of Karlin, preface to Piskei Halachot – Studying helps reach an internal understanding.**

Without studying [Torah], it is impossible to reach fulfillment of the mitzvot with an internal understanding and an authentic recognition of what one is doing.

שזולת הלימוד לא יבא לעולם לידי מעשה בידיעה פנימית והכרה עצמית.

PART C. DEVELOPING A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Studying Torah enables us to achieve an essential goal of our existence – to create a relationship with God. We learn as much as is humanly possible about God in order to connect with Him.

1. **Devarim 6:5-6 – The source for the commandment to study Torah.**

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your resources. And these words that I teach you today shall be upon your heart.

“אהבת את ה' אלקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאדך: והיו הדברים האלה אשר אנכי מצוך היום על לבבך.

2. **Rashi, ibid. – Studying Torah is the way to get to know God.**

[The second verse is an explanation of the first:] What does it mean, to “love God?” “Let these words that I teach you today be upon your heart” for through doing so [i.e. learning Torah] you will come to know God and follow His ways.

מהו האהבה? והיו הדברים האלה שמתוך כך אתה מכיר בהקב"ה ומתדבק בדרכיו.

3. **Rabbi Avigdor Miller, Sha'arei Orah, p. 37 – The purpose of Torah study is to help us comprehend God (as much as is humanly possible).**

The Torah requires us to emulate God. Part of this obligation is to model our very psyche and intellect after the thoughts of God. This is one reason for the importance of studying and delving deeply into the Torah, as an effort to comprehend God's Will and make our own will reflect His. Once one has accomplished this, even his natural reactions will mirror God's Will. What God loves, he loves; what is hateful to God, is hateful to him; what is repulsive to God, he is repulsed by as well.

בתלמוד תורה, מלבד החיוב הגדול של לימוד התורה מצד עצמו, גם משום מצות והלכת בדרכיו אנו חייבים ללמוד ולהעמיק בדברי תורה, מתוך גישה לירד לסוף דעתו של הקב"ה ולקנותו בדעתינו עד שיהא נעשה כמו דעה שלנו... ואז כשהשקפותיו ותגובותיו הפנימיים יהיו כמו מחשבות ה', אז הוא "דומה לו". כי אז, מה שהקב"ה רוצה, הוא רצונו ממש. מה שאהוב אצל הקב"ה הוא אהוב לו, מה שה' שונא מרגיש שונא גם לו, ומה שמאוס בעיני ה' מאוס ממש בעיניו.

4. **Ramchal, Derech Hashem 4:2:2 – By studying Torah we tap into a spiritual reality that is the closest thing possible to God's essence.**

Among the emanations that God shines upon His creatures, there is one emanation that is on a higher level than all the rest. This emanation is the closest thing possible to the essence of God Himself and His grandeur and splendor. It is through this emanation that God bestows of His honor upon His creatures. Now God has bound up this emanation with something He created expressly for this purpose, and that is the Torah.

בכלל ההשפעות הנשפעות ממנו ית' לצורך בריותיו, יש השפעה אחת עליונה מכל ההשפעות, שענינה היא היותר יקר ומעולה מכל מה שאפשר שימצא בנמצאים, והיינו שהוא תכלית מה שאפשר שימצא בנמצאות מעין המציאות האמיתית שלו יתברך ויקר ומעלה מעין אמיתת מעלתו יתברך, והוא הוא מה שמחלק האדון ית"ש מכבודו ויקרו אל בראיו. ואמנם קשר הבורא ית"ש את השפעתו זאת בענין נברא ממנו ית' לתכלית זאת, והוא התורה.

What is the means to come closest to God?

5. **Ibid. 1:4:9 – God authored a text which has the ability to bring one close to Him when studied properly.**

Out of all the means that God has given us to come close to Him, there is one that stands higher than all the rest. This is the study of Torah. This consists of two parts: one is the reading and understanding of the Torah, and the other is the deeper comprehension of Torah. With His kindness, God authored a text in accordance with His wisdom, which He then presented to us. This is the Torah (i.e. the Five Books of Moses) as well as the books of the prophets that followed. These texts have a special property, namely, that when one reads them with sanctity and purity, and with the proper intent – to fulfill God's Will – he will be imbued with a great loftiness and a very great level of perfection. Similarly, when one works at understanding the content of these books, as well as the accompanying explanations that God

ואמנם אמצעי אחד נתן לנו האל יתברך שמו שמדריגתו למעלה מכל שאר האמצעים המקרבים האדם אליו, והוא תלמוד תורה. והוא בשתי בחינות. האחת, בבחינת ההגיון והלמוד. והשניה בבחינת ההשכלה. כי הנה רצה בחסדו וחיבר לנו חבור דברים כמו שגזרה חכמתו ית' ומסרם לנו והיינו כלל ספר התורה ואחריו ספרי הנביאים, שבסגולת הדברים האלה יהיה שמי שיהגה בהם בקדושה ובטהרה על הכונה הנכונה שהיא עשיית חפצו ית' שמו, יתעצם בו על ידם מעלה עליונה ושלמות גדול עד מאד. וכן מי שישתדל בהבנתו ובידיעת מה שמסר לנו מפירושיהם, יקנה כפי השתדלותו, שלימות על שלימות...

presented to us, he will attain one level of perfection after another.

All of these means that God has given us for drawing close to Him endow not only the one who utilizes them with greatness, but affect the entire universe; the whole world is elevated through one person's efforts. And this is especially true of Torah study.

ובכל אלה הענינים, לא די מה שקונה האדם בעצמו
מזעלה ושלמות, אלא שמציאות הבריאיה כלה בכלה
ובפרטה מתעלה ומשתלם ובפרט ע"י התורה.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ☞ Studying Torah enables us to keep the mitzvot. Yet, we must also understand the rationale behind them – otherwise we would inevitably keep the mitzvot just by rote.
- ☞ Although the purpose of Torah study is to keep the mitzvot, we also study mitzvot that are not applicable to us nowadays (e.g. the laws of *tzara'at*, the laws regarding the service in the Temple, etc.) because Torah study has value in and of itself.
- ☞ One never “graduates” from Torah study, because it constitutes the ongoing process of getting closer to God. And because God is Infinite, no amount of Torah will ever suffice – hence Torah study is an ongoing, lifelong mission.

SECTION IV. SELF-EDUCATION (OR: THE ART OF BECOMING A MENSCH)

In today's world, “education” is about acquiring the knowledge necessary to earn a living or further a career. Graduating “with honors” means the student has achieved a high academic record. There is no curriculum to build good character and moral conduct.

In Jewish thought, however, academic success is secondary to personal growth and moral development. We do not pursue studies for purely intellectual development or to advance our careers, but for the purpose of becoming better people. Unfortunately, it is all too common to find people of great intellectual capabilities who are morally compromised. In this intellectual climate, it is not surprising to find people searching for honesty, integrity, and an internally directed sense of meaning and purpose.

Torah study is completely different. From a young age children are trained to incorporate what they learn into their lives on a daily basis. Rather than the “do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do” attitude so prevalent in secular thought, in Judaism, thought and action are inseparable.

“If a child's progress is monitored in spelling and arithmetic but not in character building, he gets the idea that only the former are important. Hence a Torah education includes education for life in general, for friendships, for marriage, in short, for everything, because Torah is everything” (Rabbi Dr. Akiva Tatz, *Anatomy of a Search*, pp. 35-36).

1. Bereishit 5:1 – Everyone wants to be a real person; the Torah tells us how.

This is the book of the annals of Man.

זה ספר תולדות האדם.

2. **Ramban (Nachmanides), *ibid.* – The entire Torah is a description of how human beings are to develop.**

It seems to me that the whole Torah is hinted at in this verse – because all of the Torah deals with the annals of Man.

ולפי דעתי ירמוז לכל התורה כי כל התורה כולה ספר תולדות האדם.

3. **Rabbi Elazar Menachem Man Shach, *Machshevet Mussar*, p. 99 – Man is a composite being who should aspire to encompass all the values of the Torah.**

The Torah gives us the description of what is the real image of humanity, of who is worthy of carrying the title “Man.” “Man” is the highest title anyone can merit! How does one become worthy of that title? “This is the book of the history of Man!”

A complete human being is one who encompasses all the mitzvot, all of the attributes, and all of the values that the Torah teaches.

התורה משקפת את הדמות של האדם, למי יש תואר אדם ומי יכול לשאת תואר אדם. “אדם” זה תואר של המעלה הגדולה ביותר ואיך מקבלים תואר אדם? “זה ספר תולדות האדם!”

האדם השלם הוא כאשר הוא מורכב מכל פעולות המצוות מכל המעלות והמצוות עשה בלי חסרונות... האיסורים הם פגמים באדם.

Rabbi Zev Leff relates that a professor of philosophy was once brought before his university’s ethics committee for compromising behavior in his personal life with one of his students. When questioned how a professor of philosophy can teach one thing in class and behave differently in his private life he replied: “Does the professor of mathematics take his triangle home at night?” In stark contrast, Torah study is not an “academic” pursuit. There is no division between what one studies and what one strives to practice. The goal is to study in order to integrate Torah ideas and ideals into our being so as to perfect our character.

4. ***Ibid.* p. 101 – Everything in Torah is relevant to our lives.**

Every verse, every paragraph in the Torah is there to teach something. Even something that is not counted as a commandment – “Do or do not do such-and-such” – is there to teach something. The Torah is called, “Torat Chaim,” the Torah of Life. This means that the Torah teaches us how to live life. There is no greater pleasure than when one is able to study a section from the Torah and see that it is relevant, it makes sense ... There is so much evil in the world – theft, murder, all types of degenerate behavior. The Torah, on the other hand, is the Torah of life. It teaches man how to live correctly.

כל פסוק ופרשה שכתובה בתורה – מצוה ללמוד. כל מה שנכתב בתורה בא ללמד, אף מה שאינו נמנה במנין המצוות, והתורה היא תורת חיים, פירוש שזו תורה של החיים....התענוג הגדול לאדם צריך להיות האושר כאשר הוא לומד פסוק חומש ורואה איך הדברים מתאימים ויש לזה טעם! זה מביא מתיקות...העולם רקוב עד תוך תוכו, מלא גניבות ורציחות וכל המידות הרעות שבעולם!...והתורה היא תורת חיים לימוד תורה מלמד את האדם.

As the Rambam writes in *Hilchot Teshuvah* 5:2, each individual has the potential to become as righteous as Moshe Rabbeinu. Our Torah leaders are our role models in our quest for greatness.

5. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur*, Vol. I, p. 57 – Jewish role models excel in both Torah study and character development.**

A remarkable harmony between wisdom and

אחדות נפלאה בין החכמה והמעשים מאפיינת את

action, knowledge and deed, typifies all of the great Sages of the Jewish people until this very day ... The eternal sign that God's Presence dwells within the Jewish people is the existence of great men [*gedolei Yisroel*] in every generation, people who have reached high levels of excellence in Torah and deed ... This remarkable blend of genius with piety is the trademark of the *gedolei Yisroel*. Side-by-side with their intellectual legacies – such as their particular approach to Torah study and their rulings in matters of Jewish law – we can see their ethical legacies. For each of them has enriched the Jewish people with a new approach to serving God.

כל גדולי חכמי ישראל עד אחרון האחרונים...הסימן הנצחי שהשכינה שורה בישראל, הוא הימצאם של גדולי ושלמי התורה והמעשה בכל דור ודור...איחוד נפלא זה של גאונות וצדקות הוא הסימן לגדולי ישראל. בצד יצירתם הרוחנית – שיטתם בלימוד, פסקיהם בהלכה – אנו מכירים יצירתם המוסרית- מעשית אשר כל אחד מהם העשיר אותנו בדרך עבודה חדשה באופן התקרבות אל ה' מחדש.

Following are some examples:

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, who lived in Jerusalem until his death in 1995, was regarded as the foremost authority of his day in all matters related to Jewish law.

6. [Nisson Wolpin, Torah Lives, pp. 38 – The Kindness of Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach.](#)

During the [mourning period] following his passing, a new dimension of [Rabbi Auerbach] was revealed, involving thousands of personal stories of *tzedakah* and *chesed* previously unknown. He married off untold numbers of orphans and paid for their wedding celebrations. He supported, monetarily and morally, so many young widows ... The religious newspapers were filled with incredible accounts of his helping poor, elderly and sick people ... All of his acts of loving-kindness were part of his toil in Torah, a feeling of obligation, as a man whose every thought was governed by halachah.

Another towering Talmudist and Halachist was Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, who died in 1986.

The following story illustrates his humility:

Shabbat candles are lit considerably before Shabbat begins, and although the woman who has lit candles must begin observing the laws of Shabbat immediately, the same does not apply for men. Rabbi Feinstein would apparently travel the five-minute distance between his home and the synagogue by car some time before the advent of Shabbat. This did not find favor in the eyes of one of the locals, who sent a letter “explaining” to the greatest Halachist of the generation that what he was doing was improper. Rather than putting the presumptuous man in his place, Rabbi Feinstein thanked him and decided to follow his advice, in spite of the fact that the halachah was on his side. Below is Rabbi Feinstein's response.

7. [Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim 1:96 – The humility of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein.](#)

I am happy that you have taken the opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah of rebuke. Heaven forbid that I should be upset with you! With God's help, I will no longer travel in a car after candle-lighting time [before Shabbat], even though there is not even a trace of a prohibition involved in this...

נהייתי מאד אשר מע"כ מזדרו לקיים מצות תוכחה לפי דעתו ותשואות חן חן למע"כ וח"ו להקפיד על זה, וא"ה לא אסע עוד משעת הדלקת נרות בקאר אף שאין בזה שמץ איסור.

8. Rabbi Akiva Tatz, *Anatomy of a Search*, p. 38 – The consideration of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein was being escorted in New York on a particular occasion, when, after being helped into the car, he asked the driver not to proceed. After a long pause, when the person who had helped him was no longer in sight, Rav Feinstein opened the car door and removed his hand which had been caught by the door and the fingers smashed. The amazed driver asked, “Rebbe, why didn’t you scream?” He had not uttered a sound. Rav Feinstein replied: “I did not want to embarrass the person who closed the door on my hand.”

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:

- ☞ The Torah portrays the ideal world. Through studying Torah we learn how to elevate our lives to the ideals of the Torah.
- ☞ Studying Torah goes hand in hand with working to perfect our character. Jewish leaders throughout the generations were known both for their excellence in Torah study and for their extraordinary character traits.

SECTION V. CAN EVERYONE LEARN TORAH?

One might think that Torah study is only for Judaic scholars. This is not the case. All Jews enjoy the mitzvah to pursue Torah study, independent of intelligence or Hebrew skills. However, there are recommendations to maximize one’s success in learning Torah.

PART A. TORAH STUDY IS FOR EVERYONE

1. Rambam, *Hilchot Talmud Torah* 1:8 – The opportunity to study Torah is incumbent on everyone.

Every Jewish man is obligated in the study of Torah, whether he is poor or rich, whether he is in good health or is suffering, young or very old and weak; even if he is so poor that he is living on charity and begging at doorways; even one who must support a wife and children is obligated to set aside time, every day and every night, for the study of Torah.

כל איש מישראל חייב בתלמוד תורה בין עני בין עשיר
בין שלם בגופו בין בעל יסורין בין בחור בין שהיה זקן
גדול שתשש כחו אפילו היה עני המתפרנס מן הצדקה
ומחזר על הפתחים ואפילו בעל אשה ובנים חייב
לקבוע לו זמן לתלמוד תורה ביום ובלילה.

2. *Ibid.* 1:9 – The great Torah Sages came from all walks of life.

Among the great Sages of Israel were woodchoppers and water-bearers, and some who were blind. Nevertheless, they engaged in the study of Torah day and night, and they were part of the chain of transmission of the Torah, person to person, back to Moshe Rabbeinu.

גדולי חכמי ישראל היו מהן חוטבי עצים ומהן שואבי
מים ומהן סומים ואף על פי כן היו עוסקין בתלמוד
תורה ביום ובלילה והם מכלל מעתיקי השמועה איש
מפי איש מפי משה רבינו.

Even at a time when illiteracy was rampant throughout the world, the Jews put an emphasis on educating everyone.

3. **Beryl Smalley, Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1970, p. 78 – A 12th century monk observed:**

... the Jews, out of zeal for God and love of the law, put as many sons as they have to the letters, that each may understand God's law ... A Jew, however poor, if he had ten sons, would put them all to letters, not for gain, but for the understanding of God's law, and not only his sons, but his daughters.

PART B. TORAH STUDY IS NOT JUST FOR INTELLECTUALS

1. **Pirkei Avot 6:2 – Everyone benefits from Torah study.**

Anyone who studies Torah becomes elevated.

וכל מי שעוסק בתורה תדיר הרי זה מתעלה.

2. **Tiferet Yisrael, ibid. – Torah study is not just for geniuses, it is for every Jew.**

“Anyone who studies Torah becomes elevated” – one might think that one can only earn the crown of Torah if he has a great mind. Therefore, the Sages teach, “*Anyone* who studies Torah becomes elevated.” *Anyone!* Even someone who is not so clever.

שלא תאמר לאו כל אדם זוכה לכתר תורה, רק כשיש לו תרתי, שיש לו שכל גדול ושיתמש בו בתורה, ע"ז קאמר שכל העוסק בתורה כו', ר"ל אפילו אין לו שכל גדול.

3. **Midrash Rabbah, Shemot 5 – God spoke – and speaks – to each person at his or her own level.**

The voice of God [at the revelation on Mount Sinai] was heard by each individual according to his or her capability: the elderly according to their capability; young men according to their capability; children according to their capability; babies according to their capability; women according to their capability; even Moshe according to his capability ... Everyone received the Divine communication according to his or her capability.

בא וראה האיך הקול יוצא אצל כל ישראל כל אחד ואחד לפי כחו, הזקנים לפי כחן, והבחורים לפי כחן, והקטנים לפי כחן, והיונקים לפי כחן, והנשים לפי כחן, ואף משה כפי כחו... הוי אומר כל אחד ואחד לפי כחו.

4. **Daily Prayers, ArtScroll Siddur, p. 119 – Each and every Jew has his own “portion” in understanding the Torah.**

Grant us *our share* in your Torah ...

ותן חלקינו בתורתך...

PART C. RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUCCEED IN TORAH STUDY

How can each person maximize his ability to study Torah successfully? There are forty-eight qualities which

enable a person to study Torah effectively. Overall, as in anything meaningful in life, the more one works at learning Torah, the more one will benefit. Moreover, just as we ask God to grant us our needs – health, prosperity, and peace, etc. – we also pray that He enable us to study and understand the Torah.

1. Pirkei Avot 6:6 – There are forty-eight ways through which Torah is acquired.

The Torah is acquired through forty-eight qualities which are: Study, attentive listening, saying one's studies aloud, intuitive understanding, discernment, awe of teachers, fear of Heaven, humility, joy, purity, serving the wise, being close with fellow students, evaluative discussion with fellow students, calmness, knowledge of Tanach, knowledge of Mishnah,

moderation in business activity, moderation in worldly activity, moderation in physical pleasure, moderation in sleep, moderation in speech, moderation in merry-making, slowness to anger, having a good heart, faith in the Sages, accepting suffering, knowing one's place,

being happy with whatever one has, making a fence around one's words, not boasting, endearing oneself to others, loving God, loving His creatures, loving righteousness, loving justice, loving to have one's mistakes corrected, keeping far from honor, not being arrogant about one's knowledge, not enjoying making halachic decisions,

sharing another person's troubles, judging others positively, setting them in the path of truth, setting them in the path of peace, teaching calmly, asking and answering, listening and adding insights, studying in order to teach, studying in order to perform the mitzvot, making one's teacher wiser, reflecting over one's lessons, and repeating an idea in the name of the person who said it first. For we learned that whoever repeats an idea in the name of the originator brings redemption to the world – as it says in the Megillah, "And Esther told it to the King in Mordechai's name" (Esther 2:22).

...והתורה נקנית בארבעים ושמונה דברים בתלמוד
בשמייעת האוזן בעריכת שפתים בכינת הלב בשכלות
הלב באימה ביראה בעונה בשמחה בשמוש חכמים
בדקדוק חברים ובפלפול התלמידים בישוב במקרא
במשנה

במיעוט סחורה במיעוט דרך ארץ במיעוט תענוג
במיעוט שינה במיעוט שיחה במיעוט שחוק בארץ
אפים בלב טוב באמונת חכמים ובקבלת היסורין
המכיר את מקומו

והשמח בחלקו והעושה סייג לדבריו ואינו מחזיק טובה
לעצמו אוהב אוהב את המקום אוהב את הבריות אוהב
את הצדקות אוהב את המישרים אוהב את התוכחות
מתרחק מן הכבוד ולא מגיס לבו בתלמודו ואינו שמח
בהוראה

נושא בעול עם חבירו מכריעו לכף זכות מעמידו על
האמת מעמידו על השלום מתישב לבו בתלמודו שואל
ומשיב שומע ומוסיף הלומד על מנת ללמד והלומד
על מנת לעשות המחכים את רבו והמכוין את שמועתו
והאומר דבר בשם אומרו הא למדת שכל האומר דבר
בשם אומרו מביא גאולה לעולם שנאמר: (אסתר
ב:כב) ותאמר אסתר למלך בשם מרדכי.

When making a *siyum*, in the prayer said upon completing a tractate of the Talmud we recite: *We toil and they (non-Jews) toil. We toil and receive reward and they toil and do not receive reward.* The Chofetz Chaim asks: What does it mean that they don't receive reward? If a tailor makes a suit for a customer doesn't he get paid for his work? The Chofetz Chaim explains as follows: It is true that a tailor gets paid for a suit he makes. But if the suit doesn't fit the customer, he will not get paid. Whereas with Torah study, the reward is not for the *end product* but for the *effort*. Regardless of whether or not an individual comprehends the Torah he studies, he is rewarded in Heaven for the effort.

2. **Pirkei Avot 5:23 – Reward for Torah study is according to one's effort, not according to the outcome.**

The reward is according to the effort.

לפום צערא אגרא.

3. **Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura, 5:23 – The greater the effort expended in learning Torah, the greater the reward.**

The reward for studying Torah is proportionate to the amount of difficulty that was endured in doing so.

כפי רוב הצער שאתה סובל בלמוד התורה, כן יהיה שכרך מרובה.

4. **Ibid. 2:16 – Torah is infinite. As much as think we have grasped it, there is always more to learn.**

It is not incumbent upon you to finish the work; but neither do you have the right to evade it.

לא עליך המלאכה לגמור ולא אתה בן חורין ליבטל ממנה.

5. **Talmud Bavli, Niddah 70b – One should pray to God, requesting help in understanding His holy wisdom.**

What should one do in order to become wise [aside from studying Torah]? ... He must request mercy from Him to Whom wisdom belongs, as it is written, "For God gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding."

מה יעשה אדם ויחכם? ... יבקשו רחמים ממי שהחכמה שלו שנאמר "כי ה' יתן חכמה מפיו דעת ותבונה."

A beautiful example of such a request is found in a prayer we recite each morning:

6. **Daily Morning Prayers, ArtScroll Siddur, p. 89 – Daily prayer asking God to help us understand His Torah.**

Our Father – merciful Father! – have mercy upon us, put it in our hearts to understand and elucidate, to listen, learn, teach, safeguard, perform, and fulfill all the words of Your Torah's teaching with love ...

אבינו אב הרחמן המרחם רחם עלינו ותן בלבנו להבין ולהשכיל לשמוע ללמוד וללמד לשמור ולעשות ולקיים את כל דברי תלמוד תורתך באהבה.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION V:

- ☞ Torah study is not just for intellectuals; it is for every Jew, on his or her own level. The Torah has what to say to each of us, giving us guidance and guidelines no matter what situations we encounter. What counts is not how clever or knowledgeable we are, but how much effort we exert in our study of Torah.
- ☞ The Torah giants have come from all walks of life, from all professions, and from all economic situations.
- ☞ There are forty-eight qualities which enable a person to study Torah effectively.

- ☞ Overall, as in anything meaningful in life, the more one works at learning Torah, the more one will benefit.
- ☞ Just as we ask God to grant us our needs – health, prosperity, and peace, etc. – we also pray that He enable us to study and understand the Torah.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES

Section III. Part A. Torah Study: The Basis of Jewish Living

Vayikra 22:31, and Rashi ibid.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz, Anatomy of a Search, pp. 28-39, 100.

Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 409 ff.