

Osek Bemitzvah Patur Min Hamitzvah

Multitasking Mitzvot

Should you ever stop doing one mitzvah to go do another?

Sukkah 25a

Our generation has been branded “Generation M” – M stands for Multitasking.

People seemingly manage to check their email and Facebook, follow a movie, eat dinner, and hold a conversation – all at the same time.

What about mitzvot? What does the Torah say about multitasking mitzvot?

What are we to do if we simultaneously encounter more than one mitzvah opportunity? Can we drop one commandment to do another? Must we stay on task? Should we try to multitask?

This *Thinking Gemara* shiur deals with these and other questions through exploring some of the Talmudic principles connected to making choices between different positive mitzvot.

Here are some of the key questions this class will deal with:

KEY QUESTIONS

- If I am doing one good deed – a mitzvah – and another opportunity or obligation presents itself, how should I act?
- What are the principles and concepts underlying the prioritization of mitzvot?
- Does it make a difference which mitzvah I am doing and what other mitzvah comes up?
- What if I am learning Torah and the opportunity to do a mitzvah arises – do the same rules apply?

CLASS OUTLINE

Section I. Do you stop doing one mitzvah to perform another?

Case 1. “Michelle, we need you!” – Do you stop your volunteer chesed project to help your friend move out of her apartment?

Case 2. Are doctors and social workers exempt from all mitzvot?

Case 3. Friday Afternoon Rush – Can you interrupt preparing for Shabbat to replace a missing mezuzah?

Section II. Interrupting Torah Study to Perform Other Mitzvot

Case 4a. “We Need Some Volunteers”

Case 4b. “David, We Need Your Expertise”

Why is learning Torah unique?

- A.** The Raavad’s and Meiri’s approach
- B.** The Vilna Gaon’s approach
- C.** The Steipler Gaon’s approach

Note: This shiur is not intended as a source of practical *halachic* (legal) rulings. For matters of halachah, please consult a qualified *posek* (rabbi).

SECTION I Do you stop doing one mitzvah to perform another?

Case 1. “Michelle, we need you!!”

Michelle, a psychology grad student, volunteers in the Jewish Family Services Big-Sister program. At least twice every week she meets with Lisa, a sixteen-year-old, who is trying to navigate some serious personal issues. One Thursday afternoon, right in the middle of an intense session, Michelle gets a text from her friend Suzie: “Michelle, come quick!! Sari needs help moving. The truck will be here in forty-five minutes, and there’s an hour and a half of packing to do!!”

Michelle knows Sari from the psycho-linguistics seminar they attend together. All too familiar with Sari’s lack of organizational skills, she can just imagine her friend’s stress level. Sari is in a genuine crisis and needs her! But Lisa needs her too, and Lisa’s whole life is one big crisis.

What are Michelle’s options?

Apologize to Lisa, reschedule, and go help Sari immediately?

Get in touch with Sari right away and explain why she cannot come?

Ignore the text (she really should not have left her cellphone on anyways)?

What do you think Michelle should do?

1. Talmud Bavli, Sukkah 26a

We learn in a Baraita: Rabbi Chananya son of Akavya said, “Scribes of Torah scrolls, tefillin, and mezuzot, their wholesale and retail salesmen, and anyone involved in sacred work – including those who sell the bluish *techeilet* dye for *tzitzit* – are exempt from reading the *Shema*, from the *Amidah* and from wearing tefillin and from all the mitzvot of the Torah.” This fulfills the words of Rabbi Yossi the Galilean, who said, “One who is involved in a mitzvah is exempt from doing another mitzvah.”

תנא: אָמַר רַבִּי חַנְנִיָּא בְּן עַקְבֵּיָא, “כּוֹתְבֵי סְפָרִים תְּפִילִין וּמְזוּזוֹת הֵן וְתַגְרֵיהֶן וְתַגְרֵי תַגְרֵיהֶן וְכָל הָעוֹסְקִין בְּמְלָאכְתָּא שְׁמַיִם - לְאַתְוִי מוֹכְרֵי תְכֵלֶת - פְּטוּרִין מִקְרִיאַת שְׁמַע וּמִן הַתְּפִלָּה וּמִן הַתְּפִלִּין וּמִכָּל מִצְוֹת הָאֲמֻרוֹת בְּתוֹרָה, “ לְקַיִם דְּבַרֵּי רַבִּי יוֹסֵי הַגָּלִילִי שֶׁהָיָה רַבִּי יוֹסֵי הַגָּלִילִי אוֹמֵר, “הָעוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה פְּטוּר מִן הַמִּצְוָה.”

2. Sukkah 25a – What are the biblical sources for the principle?

Mishna: Those traveling on a mitzvah mission are exempt from [the mitzvah of dwelling in a] Sukkah. The ill and their caretakers are exempt from Sukkah.

מִשְׁנָה שְׁלוּחֵי מִצְוָה פְּטוּרִין מִן הַסֻּכָּה. חוֹלִין וּמְשֻׁמְשֵׁיהֶן פְּטוּרִין מִן הַסֻּכָּה

Gemara: What is the biblical source for this halachah? We learn in a Baraita: The verse in the

גְּמָרָא מֵנָא הֵי מִלִּי? דְּתַנּוּ רַבְּנָן בְּשִׁבְתָּהּ בְּבִיתָהּ פֶּרֶט

Torah states [Devarim/Deuteronomy 6:7] that you should say the Shema “when you sit in your house.” This comes to exclude someone who is involved in doing a mitzvah [from the obligation to read the Shema]. The continuation of the verse, “when you go on the way” excludes a groom on his wedding night from reading Shema (because he is preoccupied with the mitzvah of consummating the marriage)...How is this principle derived from the verse? [You are only obligated to read the Shema when you are in a situation that is] similar to “walking on the way,” i.e., where you are involved in a voluntary activity.

Is this really the source for the principle that one already involved in a mitzvah is exempt from another mitzvah obligation? Isn't another verse the source? For we learn in another Baraita: The Torah writes [Bamidbar/Numbers 9:6], “There were people who were impure (because they were needed to perform the mitzvah of caring for the dead and therefore were unable to participate in the mitzvah of offering the Pesach Sacrifice on that day)...” Who were these people? Rabbi Yossi the Galilean said, “They were the ones charged with carrying Joseph's coffin.”

לְעוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה וּבְלִקְחָהּ בְּדֶרֶךְ
פָּרַט לְחֵתוֹ ... כִּמְאִי מִשְׁמַע?
אָמַר רַב הוּנָא: כְּדֶרֶךְ מַה דְּרֵךְ
רְשׁוּת אַף כָּל רְשׁוּת לְאַפּוּקִי
הֵאִי דְבְּמִצְוָה עָסוּק ...

וְהָעוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה פְּטוּר מִן
הַמִּצְוָה מֵהֵכָא נִפְקָא? מֵהֵתָם
נִפְקָא! דְּתַנְיָא: 'וַיְהִי אֲנָשִׁים
אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ טְמֵאִים לְנֶפֶשׁ אָדָם
וְגו' אוֹתָם אֲנָשִׁים מִי הָיוּ?
נוֹשְׂאֵי אֲרוֹנוֹ שֶׁל יוֹסֵף הָיוּ,
דְּבָרֵי רַבִּי יוֹסִי הַגָּלִילִי ...

3. Ritva's Commentary on Sukkah 25a

Since they are only exempt from another mitzvah while they are actively involved in a prior mitzvah [we will discuss this issue later in sources 7, 8, and 9], why does this principle need to be derived from a verse in the Torah? Isn't it obvious that you should not drop one mitzvah to perform another?!

וְכִינּוּן דְּלֹא מִפְטַר אֶלָּא בְּעוֹדוֹ
עוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה זֶה לְמַה לִּיהָ קָרָא
פְּשִׁיטָא לְמַה יְנִיחַ מִצְוָה זֶה מִפְּנֵי
מִצְוָה אַחֲרָת?

4. Ibid. – The Ritva answers.

We can answer as follows. The verse (Bamidbar 9:6) teaches us that even if you want to leave this mitzvah to do a greater mitzvah, **you have no permission to do so**. You might have mistakenly thought that you are exempt from an obligation to do the second mitzvah, but if you want to leave it and do the other you have that option. The verse above teaches us that since you are exempt from

וַיֵּשׁ לֹאמַר דְּהָא קָא מִשְׁמַע לָן
דְּאַפְלוּ בְּעֵי לְהַנִּיחַ מִצְוָה
זֶה לְעִשׂוֹת מִצְוָה אַחֲרָת גְּדוּלָהּ
הֵימְנָה אֵין הָרְשׁוּת בְּיָדוֹ. סְלִקָּא
דְּעִתְהָ אֲמִינָא אִיפְטוּרֵי הוּא
דְּמִפְטַר מִינָהּ, אֲבָל אִי בְּעֵי
לְמַשְׁבַּק הָא וּלְמַעַבְדַּ אֵידָךְ
הָרְשׁוּת בְּיָדוֹ. קָא מִשְׁמַע לָן

the second mitzvah, it is now considered a totally voluntary act, and it is **forbidden** to leave the first mitzvah to do something voluntary.

דְּכִיּוֹן דְּפִטוּר מִן הָאֲחֵרוֹן הֲרִי
הִיא אֲצִלוֹ עֲכָשְׁיוֹ פְּדָבֵר נֶשֶׁל
רְשׁוּת, וְאִסוּר לְהַנִּיחַ מִצְוֹתָיו
מִפְּנֵי דְבָר שֶׁהִיא שֶׁל רְשׁוּת.

Case 2. Are doctors and social workers exempt from all mitzvot?

Jon Levy, a medical social worker directing the crisis intervention unit at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins Hospital, looked at his schedule for September 23 – the fifth day of Sukkot. His commute would begin long before dawn, and once at the hospital he was slated with a non-stop schedule full of staff meetings and patient sessions.

But today is Sukkot. When would he do the mitzvah of taking the Four Species? What about eating in the Sukkah?

Must he weave those two mitzvot into his schedule?

What about the principle we just learned about osek bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah? Does his all-day involvement in mitzvot exempt him from Sukkah and lulav?

What do you think?

5. Mishnah Sukkah 25a

Messengers on a mitzvah mission are exempt from the mitzvah of Sukkah. The ill and their caretakers are exempt from Sukkah.

שְׁלוּחֵי מִצְוָה פְּטוּרִין מִן הַסֵּכָה.
חוֹלִין וּמְשֻׁמְשֵׁיהֶן פְּטוּרִין מִן
הַסֵּכָה.

6. Rashi, Sukkah 25a, “Peturin Min Ha-Sukkah”

They are exempt from the mitzvah of Sukkah – even while they are encamped.

פְּטוּרִין מִן הַסֵּכָה - וְאִפְּלוּ
בְּשַׁעַת חֲנֻיָּתוֹ:

7. Tosafot Sukkah 25a “Shluchei Mitzvah”

This is surprising. If they are able to fulfill both mitzvot, why are they exempt? Is a man who has tzitzit on his clothing and tefillin on his head exempt thereby from other mitzvot?

וְתִימָה אִם יְכוּלִין לְקַיֵּם שְׁנֵיהֶם
אֲמַאי פְּטוּרִין דְּאֵטוּ אָדָם שֵׁישׁ
לוֹ צִיצִית בְּבִגְדוֹ וְתַפְּלִין בְּרֵאשׁוֹ מִי
מִפְּטוּר בְּכָד מִשְׁאָר מִצְוֹת?

8. Tosafot Sukkah 25a “Shluchei Mitzvah”

We must say that here we are dealing with a case in which their preoccupation with fulfilling the mitzvah of Sukkah [at night] would detract from their ability to fulfill the very mitzvah they are en route to fulfill [the following day].

וְצָרִיךְ לוֹמַר דְּהִקָּא נְמִי אִירִי בְּכִי
הֵיא גְּוֹנָא דְּאִי מִיטְרְדִי בְּקִיּוּם
מִצְוֹת סוּפָה הֵוּוּ מְבַטְלֵי מִמִּצְוֹת:

9. Ran, Commentary on the Rif, Sukkah

Therefore, it seems to me that someone involved in a mitzvah is exempt from another mitzvah even though he could fulfill both of them... The Torah exempted anybody involved in God's work from going to the trouble of fulfilling other mitzvot, even when theoretically possible... However, I certainly agree that if someone does not need to expend any extra effort in order to fulfill both mitzvot, he should certainly do both. "If you can be 'good,' do not bring yourself to be called 'bad'" [a Talmudic expression (Berachot 30a) that encourages doing mitzvot in a superior fashion even if not obligatory, where no extra effort is required].

לְפִיכָּה נִרְאָה לִי דְהַעוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה פְּטוּר מִן הַמִּצְוָה אֲף עַל פִּי שְׂיָכוֹל לְקַיֵּים אֶת שְׁתֵּיהֶן ... כָּל שֶׁהוּא עוֹסֵק בְּמִלְאֲכָתוֹ שֶׁל מְקוֹם לֹא חֵיִיבָתוֹ תוֹרָה לְטַרְחַ וּלְקַיֵּים מִצְוֹת אַחֵרוֹת אֲף עַל פִּי שֶׁאֶפְשָׁר ... וּמֵהוּ מוֹדִינָא וְדַאי שְׂכָל שְׂאִינוּ צְרִיךְ לְטַרְחַ כְּלָל אֶלָּא כְּדַרְכוֹ בְּמִצְוָה רֵאשׁוֹנָה יְכוֹל לְצַאֵת יָדַי שְׁנֵיהֶם, דְּבִכְהֵא גְוֹנָא וְדַאי יֵצֵא יָדַי שְׁתֵּיהֶן. וּמֵהִיּוֹת טוֹב אֵל יִקְרָא רַע (בְּרֻכּוֹת ל.):

10. Rema, Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 38:8

Scribes of Torah scrolls, tefillin, and mezuzot, their wholesale and retail salesmen, and anyone involved in sacred work are exempt from putting on tefillin all day except during the reading of the Shema and during prayer. Rema: And if they must do their work (writing tefillin and mezuzot) during the time of reading of the Shema and *Amidah*, then they are exempt from reading the Shema and *Amidah* and tefillin. For anyone involved in doing a mitzvah is exempt from another mitzvah, provided that he would have to overexert himself to perform the other. If he is able to do both without any special exertion, he should do both (Hagahat Ashri quoting the Or Zarua and the Ran in the second chapter of Sukkah).

כּוֹתְבֵי תְּפִלִּין וּמְזוּזוֹת הֵם וְתַגְרֵיהֶם וְתַגְרֵי תַּגְרֵיהֶם וְכֹל הַעוֹסְקִים בְּמִלְאֲכַת שְׁמַיִם פְּטוּרִים מִהֶנְחַת תְּפִלִּין כָּל הַיּוֹם זוּלַת בְּשַׁעַת קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע וְתַפְלָה: הֵגָה וְאִם הֵיוּ צְרִיכִים לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלַאֲכָתוֹ בְּשַׁעַת קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע וְתַפְלָה אִזּוֹ פְּטוּרִין מִקְרִיאַת שְׁמַע וְתַפְלָה וְתַפְלִין דְּכָל הַעוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה פְּטוּר מִמִּצְוָה אַחֵרֶת אִם צְרִיךְ לְטַרְחַ אַחֵר הָאֲחֵרֶת אֲבָל אִם יְכוֹל לַעֲשׂוֹת שְׁתֵּיהֶן כְּאַחַת בְּלֹא טַרְחַ יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁתֵּיהֶן: (הֵגָה אֶשְׁרֵי בְּשֵׁם אוֹר זְרוּעַ וְר"ו פֶּרֶק ה'י"ט):

Case 3. Friday Afternoon Rush – Can you interrupt preparing for Shabbat to replace a missing mezuzah?

Mindy and Simon own and run Keshet House, a vacation and retreat center high up in the Adirondack Mountains. It is late Friday afternoon of their Midsummer Shabbat Experience 2014 for Artists and Musicians. Mindy has one last thing to do: to heat up the food and put it on the Shabbat hotplates. She gets to the kitchen at 6:00 PM. All of the Shabbat food is locked up in the big refrigerator in the kitchen, and she realizes that she left her key back in their room. Shabbat comes in at 6:20, leaving her twenty

minutes. It will take her five minutes to get to their cabin and five minutes back, and ten minutes to heat up the food and put it on the Shabbat hotplates; she has just enough time to finish everything.

On the way back from the cabin, key in hand, something catches her eye, something looks wrong – a mezuzah is missing from cabin 18!

In a split second, Mindy thought to herself: “Putting up that mezuzah is a mitzvah obligation that I won’t be able to do during Shabbat, and Simon is with the kids on the far end of the camp with the pre-Shabbat session so he can’t do it. But – on the other hand– I will not have enough time both to put on the mezuzah and finish preparing for Shabbat. But – on the other hand – I am just preparing for a mitzvah, and putting up the mezuzah would be a mitzvah itself. On the other hand – how can I leave our whole group without hot soup and cholent for Shabbat?”

Mindy is frozen in deliberation. What should she do – put up the mezuzah or heat up the soup and cholent?

11. Rambam (Maimonides), Mishneh Torah Hilchot Shabbat 30:1

Four things (commandments) were said concerning Shabbat, two biblical level and two rabbinic that are explicitly spoken about in the Prophetic works. The Torah level obligations are “Remember” (Shemot/Exodus 20:7) and “Keep” (Devarim/Deuteronomy 8:11) the Shabbat. The ones mentioned in the Prophets are honoring and enjoying the Shabbat, as it says, “You should call Shabbat a delight, and God’s holy [day] honored” (Yeshaya/Isaiah 58:13).

אַרְבָּעָה דְּבָרִים נֶאֱמָרוּ בְּשִׁבְתָּ-
שְׁנַיִם בְּתוֹרָה, וְשְׁנַיִם מִדְּבָרֵי
סוּפְרִים וְהוּן מִפְּרָשִׁין עַל יְדֵי
הַנְּבִיאִים: שִׁבְתוּרָה “זְכוֹר” (שְׁמוֹת
כז), וְ”שָׁמֹר” (דְּבָרִים ה, יא)
וְשִׁנְתָּ פְרָשׁוֹ עַל יְדֵי הַנְּבִיאִים, כְּבוֹד
וְעוֹנֵג, שְׁנֵאמַר “וְקִרְאתָ לַשַּׁבָּת עֹנֵג,
לְקַדּוֹשׁ ה’ מְכַבֵּד” (ישעיהו נח, ג).

12. Melo Haroim Bava Metzia 31

It is possible to say, as we have proven in my book Melo Haroim in the section titled “Osek Bemitzvah,” that even someone involved in a rabbinic-level mitzvah is exempt from a biblical-level mitzvah.

יֵשׁ לוֹמַר, כְּמוֹ שֶׁהוֹכַחְנוּ בְּסִפְרֵי מְלֵא
הַרוֹעִים עֲרֹךְ “עוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה” דְּאִפְלוּ
עוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה דְּרַבְּנָן פְּטוֹר מִמִּצְוָה
דְּאוּרֵי־תָא.

13. Mitzpeh Eitan Sukkah 10a

Since they had begun the mitzvah by walking, they were already involved in the mitzvah of visiting their *rav*. We posit that someone who is involved in one mitzvah is exempt from another mitzvah. This is derived (Sukkah 25) from the verse written in the Shema, “when you go on the way.” We explain that

בֵּינוֹן שֶׁכָּבַר הִתְחִילוּ בָּהּ
בְּהִלּוּכֶם הוּוּ לְהוּ עוֹסֵק
כָּבַר בְּמִצְוֹת קְבֻלָּת פְּנֵי רַבּוֹ
וְקִיָּמָא לֹן דְּעוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה
פְּטוֹר מִן הַמִּצְוָה וְיִלְפִינָן לָהּ
לְקַמְּו (דף כה) מִדְּכִתִּיב גְּבִי

only if you are going on **your** journey are you obligated in Shema (or any other mitzvah), but if you are already on a mitzvah journey (here used in the broad sense of “activity”) you are exempt from other mitzvot. If so, it is plausible to derive from here that **any** mitzvah activity, even that of a rabbinic mitzvah, exempts you from a Torah level obligation, for you are not involved in personal voluntary activity, in “*lechet didach*” – your travels.

קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע וּבְלִקְחָהּ בְּדֶרֶךְ
בְּלֶקֶת דִּידָךְ הוּא דְמַחֲיִיבֶת
הָא דְמִצְוָה פְּטִירַת. וְאִם כֵּן
אֵיכָּא לְמִשְׁמַע דְּכָל לְכַת
דְּמִצְוָה אֲפִילוּ דְרַבָּנָן פְּטוּר
מִמִּצְוָה שְׁל תוֹרָה דְּלֵאוּ לְכַת
דִּידָךְ הוּא.

SECTION II Interrupting Torah Study to Perform Other Mitzvot

Case 4a. “We Need Some Volunteers”

David is a helper: he raises his hand first when volunteers are needed; he stays until the end of a party to help clean up; and he barely drives anywhere without offering someone a ride.

One Tuesday evening David was in the main gathering room of the Center for Jewish Life and Learning. He and his chavruta (study partner) were learning Parshat Shavua (weekly Torah portion) in one corner. Sam and Kevin were deeply involved in a chess game in another. There were another five people sitting on couches talking.

In walked the director of the center, Mr. Robbins, and said, “I need four volunteers to move tables and set up for tonight’s event to raise funds to help pay for weddings of orphans in Israel. Who can give me a hand? It’ll take about twenty minutes.”

Dave’s hand almost instinctively started to shoot up – then he caught himself. He remembered that in the weekly Halachah shiur, Rabbi Isaacs mentioned that if you are involved in one mitzvah you should not break off and do another, and he is involved in the mitzvah of studying Torah.

Should this principle be applicable here?

Based on what we learned until now, what do you think?

14. Moed Katan 9b with Rashi’s comments

[Two rabbis were studying.] One rabbi pointed out the following difficulty: On the one hand, it says (Mishlei/Proverbs 3:15), “It (the Torah) is more precious than pearls and none of **your** activities are worth anything compared to it.” [Rashi explains that this implies that you should negate any other **personal** activities in favor of being involved in Torah study.] However, “sacred activities” are of equal level to Torah study.

הָדָר יִתְבִי וְקָא מְבַעֲי לְהוּ: כְּתִיב
(משלי ג:טו) “יְקָרָה הִיא מִפְּנִינִים
וְכָל חֲפָצָיָהּ לֹא יִשְׁוּוּ בָּהּ” (רש"י:
שְׁתַּעֲסוֹק בְּתוֹרָה) הָא חֲפָצֵי
שְׂמִימִים יִשְׁוּוּ בָּהּ (רש"י פְּלוּמֵר,
שְׂאֵם יֵשׁ לָהּ לְעִסוֹק בְּמִצְוָה
תְּבַטֵּל תְּלַמּוּד תוֹרָה, וְעִסוֹק
בְּמִצְוָה) וְכִתִּיב (משלי ח:יא) “כָּל

[Rashi explains that this means to say that if you have to be involved in some other mitzvah you should interrupt your Torah study and perform the other mitzvah.] On the other hand, it says, (Mishlei 8:11) “No activities are equal to it.” This implies that even sacred activities are not equal to Torah study. [Rashi explains that this means you should let the mitzvah go undone and stay involved in Torah study.] The resolution is that one source (Mishlei 8:11) refers to a mitzvah that can be done by others, whereas the other (Mishlei 3:15) refers to a mitzvah that cannot be done by others – in which case it takes precedence over Torah study.

חֲפָצִים לֹא יִשְׁווּ בָּהּ דְּאִפְּלוּ
חֲפָצִי נְשָׁמִים לֹא (רש"י: דְּמַבְטֵל
מִצְוָה וְעוֹסֵק בְּתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה)
יִשְׁווּ בָּהּ - כִּאֵן בְּמִצְוָה שְׂאֵפְשֵׁר
לְעִשׂוֹתָהּ עַל יְדֵי אַחֲרִים, כִּאֵן
בְּמִצְוָה שְׂאֵי אֵפְשֵׁר לְעִשׂוֹתָהּ עַל
יְדֵי אַחֲרִים.

Case 4b. “David, We Need Your Expertise”

However, Mr. Robbins later comes into the room and says, “David, if I remember correctly, you are the only one here who really knows how to properly hook up the projector to the laptop. Can you help me out now?”

If David is still learning, then what should he do?

15. Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deiah

Torah study weighs against all the mitzvot. If someone is faced by a conflict between doing another mitzvah and studying Torah – if the mitzvah can be done by others he should not leave his learning, but if not, he should do the mitzvah and then return to his learning.

תִּלְמוּד תּוֹרָה שְׂקוּל כְּנֶגֶד כָּל
הַמִּצְוֹת. הִיא לְפָנָיו עֲשִׂיית
מִצְוָה וְתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה אִם אֵפְשֵׁר
לְמִצְוָה לְהַעֲשׂוֹת עַל יְדֵי אַחֲרִים
לֹא יִפְסִיק תִּלְמוּדוֹ, וְאִם לֹא
יַעֲשֶׂה הַמִּצְוָה וְיַחְזוֹר לְתוֹרָתוֹ.

16. Mishnah Peiah 1:1

These are things that have no set amount: *pei'ah* (leaving off a portion of a field unharvested for the poor), *bikurim* (first fruits, brought to the Temple in Jerusalem), *reiayon* (a sacrifice brought when making a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem), *gemilut chasadim* (doing kindness to another), and *talmud Torah* (Torah study). These are things that you eat the “fruit” of – their profits – in this world, but the principle reward remains for the World to Come: honoring parents, doing kindness, bringing about peaceful relations between friends – but Torah study weighs against all of them.

אֵלוּ דְּבָרִים שְׂאֵין לָהֶם
שְׁעוֹר. הַפָּאָה, וְהַבְּפוּרִים,
וְהַרְאִיוֹן, וְגַמְלוֹת חֲסָדִים,
וְתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה. אֵלוּ דְּבָרִים
שְׂאֵדָם אוֹכֵל פְּרוּתֵיהֶן
בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְהַקֶּרֶן קִיָּמַת לוֹ
לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא. כְּבוֹד אָב וְאָם,
וְגַמְלוֹת חֲסָדִים, וְהַבָּאָת
שְׁלוֹם בֵּין אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ
וְתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה כְּנֶגֶד כָּלֵם:

Here are three approaches to resolve this problem:

A. The Raavad's (Rabbi Avraham son of David, 1125-1198) and Meiri's (Rabbi Menachem Meiri, 1249 – 1306) Approach.

17. Meiri Moed Katan 9b

Even though someone involved in one mitzvah is exempt from another, this principle was not said concerning Torah study. This is because the main point of Torah study is knowing how to fulfill the other mitzvot. Therefore, we interrupt Torah study to do any other mitzvah that cannot be done by others. This is the approach of the great commentators [the Raavad].

ואף על פי שהעוסק במצוה פטור מן המצוה, לא נאמר כן בתלמוד תורה. הואיל ועקרה לדיעת קיום שאר מצות, מבטליו אותה בשביל כל מצוה שאי אפשר לקיימה על ידי אחרים. כן היא שטת גדולי המפרשים.

18. Yerushalmi Berachot 1:2

Rabbi Yochanan said, “One who learns without intending to practice – it would have been better had his placenta turned over upon his face, and had he not come into the world.”

ואמר רבי יוחנן, “הלמד שלא לעשות נוח לו אילו נהפכה שיליתו על פניו ולא יצא לעולם.”

19. Kiddushin 40b

Rabbi Tarfon and the elders were having a festive meal on the second floor of the Natzah house in Lod. The following question was asked of them:

Is learning Torah greater or is action – performing the mitzvot – greater? Rabbi Tarfon declared, “Action is greater.” Rabbi Akiva declared, “Learning is greater.” All of them declared and said, “Learning is greater for it brings one to action.”

וכבר היה רבי טרפון וזקנים מסובין בעלית בית נתנה בלוד ונשאלה שאילה זו בפניהם תלמוד גדול או מעשה גדול? נענה רבי טרפון ואמר, “מעשה גדול.” נענה רבי עקיבא ואמר, “תלמוד גדול.” נענו כולם ואמרו, “תלמוד גדול שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה.”

B. The Vilna Gaon's Approach (Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman Kremer, 1720 - 1797)

20. Shenot Eliahu Mishnah Peiah 1:1

The principle is that we do not interrupt Torah study, even for a mitzvah – if it can be done by others. This stands to reason, because every word of Torah is itself a great mitzvah, and is equal to all other mitzvot. If so, when one, for instance, learns one page of Torah he fulfills several

והכלל בזה שאין מבטליו תלמוד תורה אפילו למצוה אם יכולה להעשות על ידי אחרים. והשכל מחייב בזה, מפני שכל תיבה ותיבה בפני עצמה היא מצוה גדולה והיא שקולה כנגד כולם.

hundred mitzvot. And if that is the case, it is certainly better to fulfill several hundred mitzvot rather than one mitzvah.

A person may only interrupt Torah study for performing a mitzvah if it cannot be done by someone else. Therefore, the Tanna teaching this Mishnah (Source 16) says that Torah study has no minimal limit, as we mentioned above. This is also the case if you have to eat, for that is also a mitzvah. If this were not true, you would not have the free time to do any mitzvah or even to eat, for it is written, “You should learn Torah [*vehagita* – contemplate Torah] day and night” (Yehoshua/Joshua 1:8). Therefore, the Mishnah teaches us that sometimes a person fulfills his obligation of Torah study even with a single word.

אם כן, כַּשְׁלוּמֵד לְמִשְׁלַּד דְּהָ אֶחָד
מִקְיִים כַּמָּה מֵאוֹת מִצְוֹת. וְאִם
כֵּן, בּוֹדֵאי יוֹתֵר טוֹב לְקַיִּים מֵאַה
מִצְוֹת מִמְצֻוָּה אַחַת.

רַק כְּשֵׁאי אֶפְשָׁר לְקַיִּים עַל יְדֵי
אַחַר אֲזִי רִשְׁאי לְבַטֵּל וְלָזוּה
שׁוֹנֵה הִתְנַא הָא דִּתְלָמוּד תּוֹרָה
אִין לָהּ שִׁיעוּר לְמַטָּה לְהוֹרוֹת
כַּנְזָכָר לְעִיל. אוּ כְּשִׁצְרִיךְ לְאָכּוֹל
שֶׁהוּא גַם כֵּן מִצְוָה. וְלוֹלִי זֹאת לֹא
הִיָּה לָנוּ פְּנָאי לְעִשׂוֹת אִיזָה מִצְוָה
אוּ לְאָכּוֹל דְּכִתִּיב וְהִגִּית בּוֹ יוֹמָם
וְלַיְלָה. לְכָד מִשְׁמִיעֵנוּ דְּלִפְעָמִים
אַף בְּתַבָּה אַחַת יוֹצֵא.

C. The Steipler's Approach (Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, 1899-1985)

21. Kehilot Yaakov, Berachot 15

Since the Torah did not set a specific amount of time for the mitzvah of Torah study, therefore the time each person is obligated to study is according to his ability. During the time when one is unable to learn, he is not classified as someone “*be’ohness*” – exempt from the mitzvah because of extenuating circumstances. Rather, his obligation to study is defined by how much time he is able to.

וְכֵן מִצְוֹת תְּלָמוּד תּוֹרָה כִּיּוֹן
שֶׁלֹּא נִתְּנָה בּוֹ תּוֹרָה שִׁיעוּר,
מִמִּילָא חַיִּיב הוּא
כְּפִי יְכֻלְתּוֹ. וְעַל זְמַן שֶׁהוּא
אֲנוּס מִלְלָמוּד אִין זֶה בְּגֵדֵר
מִבְטֵל מִצְוָה בְּאוּנוֹס, אֶלָּא זֶהוּ
גְבוּל חַיִּיבוֹ שֶׁהוּא עַד כַּמָּה
שֶׁאֶפְשָׁר לוֹ.

22. Kehilot Yaakov Berachot 15

We can now understand why the tractate Moed Katan (Source 14) explains that Torah study is only pushed aside by a mitzvah that cannot be fulfilled by others. For when it can be done by others, he is not classified as “exempt [from learning Torah] due to extenuating circumstances” [and he must go on learning], for the other mitzvah will not go undone. All that will happen is that this particular individual [who is in the middle of learning] will miss out on fulfilling that other mitzvah. But, to the contrary, learning Torah is a better option, for the value of Torah study is equated to all the other mitzvot combined.

וּבְזָה יוֹבֵן הָא דְּמִבּוֹאֵר בְּמוֹעֵד
קָטָן דְּאִין תְּלָמוּד תּוֹרָה נִדְּחָה
אֶלָּא לְמִצְוָה שֵׁאי אֶפְשָׁר
לְעִשׂוֹת עַל יְדֵי אַחֵרִים.
דְּכְשֵׁאֶפְשָׁר לְעִשׂוֹת עַל יְדֵי
אַחֵרִים כְּבָר אִינוּ אֲנוּס לְבַטֵּל
תְּלָמוּד תּוֹרָה כִּיּוֹן דְּלִיכָא בְּטוּל
מִצְוָה רַק שִׁיָּהא לְאֶדָם זֶה
הָעוֹסֵק בְּתְלָמוּד תּוֹרָה הָפְסֵד
שֶׁל קִיּוּם מִצְוָה בְּזָה אֶמְרִינָן
דְּאֶדְרַבָּא קִיּוּם מִצְוָה דִּתְלָמוּד
תּוֹרָה עֲדִיף, דִּתְלָמוּד תּוֹרָה
כַּנְגֵּד כּוּלָם.

**RECOM-
MENDED
ADDITIONAL
READING****Hebrew Article**

“Osek Bemitzvah Patur Min Hamitzvah,” by Hagaon Rabbi Asher Weiss, in *Minchas Asher Devarim* pp. 68-72.

Hebrew Source Material

“Osek Bemitzvah Patur Min Hamitzvah,” a shiur summary and source material prepared by Olamot, available online at:

<http://olamot.net/shiur/%D7%A2%D7%95%D7%A1%D7%A7-%D7%91%D7%9E%D7%A6%D7%95%D7%94>

English Audio Shiurim

“Osek Bemitzvah,” by Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky, available online at:

http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/736901/Rabbi_Zvi_Sobolofsky/Shas_Topics-_Oseik_BiMitzvah

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English Article

“If You Are in the Middle of a Mitzvah,” Chapter II of Rabbi Binyamin Blech’s, *Understanding Judaism: The Basics of Deed and Creed*, pp. 14-18.