

Osek Bemitzvah Patur Min Hamitzvah

Multitasking Mitzvot

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

Sukkah 25a

Teacher's Guide

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?

The Principle

There is a halachic meta-principle that directly impacts on Michelle’s dilemma. We will first meet the principle, find out its biblical sources, and then present three ways that halachic commentators answer an extremely powerful question.

1. Talmud Bavli, Sukkah 26a – Rabbi Yossi teaches a metaprinciple.

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.”

תנאי: אָמַר רַבִּי חַנְנִיָּא בְּן עַקְבָּיָא,
 “כּוֹתְבֵי סְפָרִים תְּפִילִין וּמְזוּזוֹת
 הוּן וְתַגְרֵיהוֹן וְתַגְרֵי תַגְרֵיהוֹן וְכָל
 הָעוֹסֵקִין בְּמִלְאֶכֶת שְׁמַיִם -
 לְאַתְוֵי מוֹכְרֵי תְכֵילֶת - פְּטוּרִין
 מִקְרִיאַת שְׁמַע וּמִן הַתְּפִלָּה וּמִן
 הַתְּפִלִּין וּמִכָּל מִצְוֹת הָאֲמֹרוֹת
 בַּתּוֹרָה,” לְרַבִּי יוֹסֵי הַגְּלִילִי
 הַגְּלִילִי שֶׁהָיָה רַבִּי יוֹסֵי הַגְּלִילִי
 אוֹמֵר, “הָעוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה פְּטוּר
 מִן הַמִּצְוָה.”

In light of the principle osek bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah (one who is involved in a mitzvah is exempt from doing another mitzvah), what should Michelle do? She is now involved in doing one mitzvah – helping Lisa – and therefore seems to be exempt from doing another mitzvah – helping Sari.

The Talmud cites two biblical sources in support of this principle.

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.

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

משנה שלוחי מצוה פטורין
מן הסכה. חולין ומשמשיהן
פטורין מן הסכה ...

גמרא מנא הני מילי? דתנו
רבנן 'בשבתך בבייתך' פרט
לעוסק במצוה ובלקחתך בדרך
פרט לחתן ... מאי משמע?
אמר רב הונא: כדרך מה דרך
רשות אף כל רשות לאפוקי
האי דבמצוה עסוק ...

והעוסק במצוה פטור מן
המצוה מהכא נפקא? מהתם
נפקא! דתניא: 'ויהי אנשים
אשר היו טמאים לנפש אדם
וגו' אותם אנשים מי היו?
נושאי ארונו של יוסף היו,
דברי רבי יוסי הגלילי ...

The Ritva points out a glaring difficulty with this passage.

3. Ritva's Commentary on Sukkah 25a – The Ritva asks a basic question.

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?!

וכיון דלא מיפטר אלא בעודו
עוסק במצוה זו למה ליה קרא
פשיטא למה יניח מצוה זו מפני
מצוה אחרת?

His answer has implications for Michelle's dilemma.

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

וַיֹּשֶׁ לֹמֵר דְּהָא קָא מְשַׁמַּע לָן
 דְּאִפְלוּ בְּעֵי לְהַנִּיחַ מִצְוָה
 זו לַעֲשׂוֹת מִצְוָה אַחֶרֶת גְּדוּלָה
 הַיְמָנָה אִין הַרְשׁוּת בְּיָדוֹ. סְלָקָא
 דְּעִתְּהָ אֲמִינָא אִיפְטוּרֵי הוּא
 דְּמִפְטַר מִינָהּ, אֲבָל אִי בְּעֵי
 לְמַשְׁבַּק הָא וּלְמַעַבְד אִידָךְ
 הַרְשׁוּת בְּיָדוֹ. קָא מְשַׁמַּע לָן
 דְּכִינּוֹן דְּפְטוּר מִן הָאֲחֵרוֹן הֵרִי
 הִיא אֲצִלוּ עֲכָשׂוּי פְדָבֵר שְׁל
 רְשׁוּת, וְאָסוּר לְהַנִּיחַ מִצְוָתוֹ
 מִפְּנֵי דְבָר שְׁהִיא שְׁל רְשׁוּת.

Based on the Ritva's answer about why God deemed it necessary to write a biblical verse to teach us not to drop one good activity to go do another, we must modify our answer to Michelle's question. Not only is she **not obligated** to leave her Big-Sister session with Lisa and go help Sari pack; she is actually **prohibited** from doing so!

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

Good time management is a necessary skill for living a healthy Jewish life. We must allot sufficient amounts of time in our daily and weekly schedules for educating our children, studying Torah ourselves, praying, cultivating our relationships, and fulfilling mitzvot. Most people who work “nine to five” can, with a little effort and ingenuity, manage to work out a schedule that accommodates work, family, Torah study, and mitzvot.

But some people – such as doctors and social workers – have a unique challenge in setting up their schedules, based on the principle of *osek bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah*. If they spend their entire days fulfilling mitzvot – healing the sick and helping people with their problems – aren't they exempt from other mitzvot during the times they are working?

How can someone fit in more mitzvot amidst a day as packed as in the following case?

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?

We can help give Jon direction on how to spend his fifth day of Sukkot through understanding a dispute between Tosafot and the Ran.

Tosafot comments on a Mishnah that uses our principle - *osek bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah* - to exempt someone on a mitzvah mission from the mitzvah of Sukkah.

5. Mishnah Sukkah 25a – A mitzvah mission exempts you from Sukkah.

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 הַסֻּכָּה.
חֹלִין וְמַשְׁמִיטֵיהֶן פְּטוּרִין מִן
הַסֻּכָּה.

Granted, someone tending to or treating the sick might be involved 24-7 and will simply not be able to fulfill the mitzvah of Sukkah, but why are mitzvah messengers – on the way to fulfill some necessary mitzvah – **entirely** exempt from Sukkah? If traveling is done primarily during daytime hours (see Taanit 10b), why are travelers not obligated to set up a Sukkah and live (eat dinner and sleep) there at night?

Rashi and Tosafot differ on the answer to this question.

6. Rashi, Sukkah 25a, “*Peturin Min Ha-Sukkah*” – Do mitzvah travelers have to live in a Sukkah at night?

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

פְּטוּרִין מִן הַסֻּכָּה - וְאֵפִילוּ
בְּשֵׁעֵת חֲנֻיָּתָן:

Although Tosafot cites sources affirming that these mitzvah travelers are, in fact, completely exempt from Sukkah even if they only travel during the day, he finds this ruling difficult.

7. Tosafot Sukkah 25a “*Shluchei Mitzvah*” – Why should mitzvah travelers not be obligated in Sukkah at night?

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 שֵׁשׁ
לוֹ צִיצִית בְּבִגְדוֹ וְתַפִּילִין בְּרֵאשׁוֹ מִי
מִפְּטֵר בְּכָד מִשְׁאָר מִצְוֹת?

Why, asks Tosafot, should messengers be exempt from Sukkah when they are not actively involved in the mission? Even though they are still in the middle of their mitzvah trip, shouldn't they do the mitzvah if they are able to? Someone wearing

tefillin or tzitzit is fulfilling a mitzvah, yet who would ever think they are exempt from doing other mitzvot? Here is Tosafot's solution:

8. Tosafot Sukkah 25a “*Shluhei Mitzvah*” – Tosafot answers.

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 לומר דְּהִקְאָ נְמִי אִיִּרִי בְּכִי
הָאִי גִּוְנָא דְּאִי מִטְרְדִי בְּקִיּוּם
מִצְוֹת סוּפָה הוּוּ מְבַטְלִי מִמִּצְוֹת:

Tosafot understands that the mitzvah emissaries will only be exempt from Sukkah at night if sleeping in the Sukkah will compromise their mission the next day. (They are of course exempt if they actually travel at night.) Tosafot's position is that one mitzvah only exempts you from another if you are actively involved in that mitzvah, so that the mitzvot are *mutually exclusive*. If you are able to perform both mitzvot, you must push yourself to do so.

The Ran, however, differs with Tosafot as follows:

9. Ran, Commentary on the Rif, Sukkah – What is the extent of the “osek bemitzvah” exemption?

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 דְּהָעוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה
פְּטוּר מִן הַמִּצְוָה אַף עַל פִּי שְׂיָכוֹל
לְקַיֵּים אֶת שְׁתֵּיהֶן ... כֹּל שֶׁהוּא
עוֹסֵק בְּמִלְאכְתּוֹ שֶׁל מְקוֹם לֹא
חִיבָתוֹ תוֹרָה לְטַרְחַ וּלְקַיֵּים
מִצְוֹת אַחֲרוֹת אַף עַל פִּי שְׂאֵפְשָׁר
... וּמִיָּהוּ מוֹדִינָא וְדִּאי שְׂכָל
שְׂאֵינּוּ צָרִיךְ לְטַרְחַ כָּלֵל אֶלְא
כְּדַרְפוּ בְּמִצְוָה רִאשׁוֹנָה יָכוֹל
לְצִאת יָדֵי שְׁנֵיהֶם, דְּבִכְהֵאִי גִּוְנָא
וְדִּאי יֵצֵא יָדֵי שְׁתֵּיהֶן. וּמִהִיּוֹת טוֹב
אֵל יִקְרָא רַע (בְּרִכּוֹת ל.):

According to the Ran someone involved in one mitzvah is exempt from doing another commandment even when he is not actively involved in it. He should focus on the mitzvah he is doing and not attempt to multitask. The Ran agrees, however, that if someone can effortlessly do the second mitzvah, he should nonetheless fulfill it. The Ran's point is that the Torah does not obligate a Jew to overexert himself to fulfill multiple mitzvot in close temporal proximity.

The Tosafot and the Ran would thus differ about Jon's dilemma.

Tosafot: As long as sitting in the hospital Sukkah does not compromise Jon's ability

to do his social work efficiently, he should try to get in all the mitzvot he can. He is only exempt from other mitzvot while he is actively involved in his social work. Mitzvah involvement pushes off other mitzvah obligations, but they kick in when time permits.

Ran: While involved in one mitzvah, the Torah totally exempts a person from performing another commandment. Jon is not obligated to push himself to do other mitzvot during a full day like this. If there would be no trouble doing a second mitzvah, of course it is good to do it, but the Torah allows a person to focus on one commandment without worrying about juggling multiple obligations.

The Ran also grappled with the same problem that the Ritva did: why do we need a biblical source to teach us something blatantly obvious – that a person need not drop what he is doing to do something else? Whereas the Ritva concluded (Source 4 above) that the biblical source is necessary to prohibit the second mitzvah, which can be classified as “voluntary,” the Ran goes in a different direction.

The Ran answers: Even without the Torah’s special teaching, we would know that you do not have to drop active involvement in mitzvah #1 to perform mitzvah #2. The biblical source teaches us that you are exempt from doing a second mitzvah even though you theoretically could do both.

How do we rule? What position does the Shulchan Aruch present?

10. Rema, Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 38:8 – How do we rule?

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 תְפִילִין וּמְזוּזוֹת הֵם
וְתַגְרֵיהֶם וְתַגְרֵי תַגְרֵיהֶם וְכָל
הָעוֹסְקִים בְּמִלְאכַת שָׁמַיִם
פְּטוּרִים מִהַנְּחִיחַת תְּפִילִין כָּל הַיּוֹם
זוֹלַת בְּשַׁעַת קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע
וְתַפְלָה: הֵגָה וְאִם הָיוּ צְרִיכִים
לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלָאכָתָם בְּשַׁעַת קְרִיאַת
שְׁמַע וְתַפְלָה אִזּוּ פְּטוּרִין מִקְרִיאַת
שְׁמַע וְתַפְלָה וְתַפְלִין דְּכָל
הָעוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה פְּטוּר מִמִּצְוָה
אַחֶרֶת אִם צָרִיךְ לְטָרוּחַ אַחֵר
הָאֲחֶרֶת אֲבָל אִם יָכוֹל לַעֲשׂוֹת
שְׁתֵּיהֶן בְּאֶחָת בְּלֹא טָרוּחַ יַעֲשֶׂה
שְׁתֵּיהֶן: (הֵגָהת אֲשֶׁרִי בְּשֵׁם אוֹר
זְרוּעַ וְר"ו פֶּרֶק הַיְיָשׁוּן):

The Rema relates to our issue and (following the Beit Yosef Orach Chaim 38 “*Vekotvei*”) rules according to the Ran, against Tosafot. He concludes (confirmed by the Biur Halachah Orach Chaim 38 “*Im Tzarich*”) that a person does not have to push himself to fulfill a second mitzvah when he is involved in another. The reason: “The

Torah did not obligate somebody involved in doing God's labor to go to the trouble of fulfilling other mitzvot, even if it is theoretically possible."

On a day when Jon Levy finds himself involved in non-stop mitzvot, he is thus technically exempt from lulav and Sukkah even if he could theoretically squeeze them in. However, if without any special effort he can fulfill the mitzvot – a lunch break opens up and the hospital has a Sukkah he can eat in or a visiting rabbi makes the rounds in the hospital and offers patients and staff members the opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah of the four species – he should definitely do so.

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?

The Ritva (Source 4) notes that it is forbidden to leave a first mitzvah for another mitzvah, even if the second mitzvah is greater than the first. In our case, however, the *substantive difference* between the mitzvot might be a reason to prefer the second mitzvah over the first.

Mindy is preparing for Shabbat. Certainly, this is a mitzvah (see Rambam, Hilchot Shabbat 30:5), but on which level?

11. Rambam (Maimonides), Mishneh Torah Hilchot Shabbat 30:1 – What level of mitzvah obligation is involved in preparing for Shabbat?

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 דְבָרִים נֶאֱמָרוּ בְּשַׁבָּת -
שְׁנַיִם בְּתוֹרָה, וְשְׁנַיִם מִדְּבָרֵי
סוּפְרִים וְהֵן מִפְּרָשֵׁי עַל יְדֵי
הַנְּבִיאִים: שְׁבִתוֹרָה “זְכוֹר” (שְׁמוֹת
כ,ז), וְ“שָׁמֹר” (דְּבָרִים ה,יא)
וְשִׁנְתָּ פְרָשׁוֹ עַל יְדֵי הַנְּבִיאִים, כְּבוֹד
וְעוֹנֵג, שְׁנַאֲמַר “וְקִרְאתָ לַשַּׁבָּת עֵנֶג,
לְקִדּוּשׁ ה’ מְכַבֵּד” (ישעיהו נח,יג).

Oneg Shabbat, indulging in Shabbat delights, is a rabbinic mitzvah. The mitzvah of mezuzah is biblical. When a person is occupied with a *rabbinic mitzvah*, is he exempt from a *biblical mitzvah*?

This question is dealt with by two authorities of the eighteenth century – the Melo Haroim (Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Yalush, Poland 1778-1825) and the Mitzpeh Eitan (Rabbi Avraham Maskil L’Eitan, Lithuania 1788-1848) – and is discussed later by the Kovetz Shiurim (Rabbi Elchanan Bunim Wasserman, Lithuania 1874-1941; Rabbi Wasserman leaves the question unresolved).

12. Melo Haroim Bava Metzia 31 – Is someone involved in a rabbinic mitzvah exempt from a biblical-level mitzvah?

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 עָרְךָ “עוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה” דְּאֵפְלוּ
עוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה דְּרַבְּנָן פָּטוּר מִמִּצְוָה
דְּאוּרֵיִתָּא.

The Mitzpeh Eitan deduces from a Talmudic anecdote that even someone involved in a rabbinic mitzvah is exempt from a biblical one. He also shows how this flows out of the principle’s derivation from the biblical verse.

In the anecdote, two rabbis did not fulfill the mitzvah of Sukkah – a biblical mitzvah – because they were on the way to visit their teacher on the holiday – a rabbinic mitzvah.

13. Mitzpeh Eitan Sukkah 10a – Why is someone involved in a rabbinic mitzvah exempt from a biblical one?

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

בְּיַוֵּן שֶׁכָּבַר הִתְחִילוּ בָּהּ
בְּהִלּוּכָם הוּוּ לְהוּ עוֹסֵק כְּבָר
בְּמִצְוֹת מְבִלַת פְּנֵי רַבּוֹ

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 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.

וְקִיָּמָא לֹן דְּעוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה
פְּטוּר מִן הַמִּצְוָה וְיִלְפִינָן לָהּ
לְקַמּוֹ (דף כה) מִדְּכֵתִיב גַּבִּי
קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע וּבְלִקְתָּהּ בְּדֶרֶךְ
בְּלִקְתָּ דִּידָךְ הוּא דְּמִחְיִיבָת
הָא דְּמִצְוָה פְּטִירָתָא. וְאִם כֵּן
אִיכָּא לְמִשְׁמַע דְּכָל לְכַת
דְּמִצְוָה אֲפִילוּ דְּרַבְּנָן פְּטוּר
מִמִּצְוָה שְׁל תוֹרָה דְּלֵאוּ לְכַת
דִּידָךְ הוּא.

It follows, according to these two authorities, that Mindy can continue her Shabbat preparations, and delay putting up the mezuzah until after Shabbat.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I

- The general principle is that a person who is involved with a mitzvah need not stop for the sake of performing another mitzvah.
- Early authorities (Rishonim) address the question of why this idea requires a biblical derivation. Isn't it obvious without a verse?
- The Ritva answers that we derive from the verse that it is actually *prohibited* to stop one's performance of a mitzvah for the sake of performing another mitzvah.
- The Ran says we are exempt from the second mitzvah even if we could theoretically push ourselves to do both – the Torah does not demand us to go to the trouble of multitasking. The Rema rules that this is the normative halachah.
- According to a number of opinions, even someone involved in a **rabbinic** mitzvah is exempt from performing a *biblical* mitzvah.

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?

The answer is: it is not so simple.

A passage in the Gemara addresses this question.

14. Moed Katan 9b with Rashi's comments – Do you break from learning Torah to do mitzvot?

[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. [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.

הָדָר יִתְבִי וְקָא מְבַעֵי לְהוּ: כְּתִיב
(משלי ג:טו) "יְקָרָה הִיא מִפְּנִינִים
וְכָל חִפְצֵיךָ לֹא יִשְׁווּ בָּהּ" (רש"י:
שְׁתַּבְּטִיל כָּל חִפְצֵיךָ בְּשִׁבְלִי
שֶׁתַּעֲסוֹק בַּתּוֹרָה) הָא חִפְצֵי
שְׂמִימִים יִשְׁווּ בָּהּ (רש"י פְּלוֹמֵר,
שְׂאֵם יֵשׁ לָהּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּמִצְוָה
תַּבְּטִיל תִּלְמוּד תּוֹרָה, וְעֵסוֹק
בְּמִצְוָה) וְכִתִּיב (משלי ח:יא) "כָּל
חִפְצִים לֹא יִשְׁווּ בָּהּ" דְּאֶפִּילוּ
חִפְצֵי שְׂמִימִים לֹא (רש"י: דְּמַבְטִיל
מִצְוָה וְעוֹסֵק בַּתִּלְמוּד תּוֹרָה)
יִשְׁווּ בָּהּ - כֵּאֵן בְּמִצְוָה שְׂאֶפְשֵׁר
לַעֲשׂוֹתָהּ עַל יְדֵי אַחֲרִים, כֵּאֵן
בְּמִצְוָה שְׂאֵי אֶפְשֵׁר לַעֲשׂוֹתָהּ עַל
יְדֵי אַחֲרִים.

This passage reveals that the principle *osek bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah* does not apply to learning Torah in the manner of other mitzvot. If you are learning and another mitzvah presents itself, you **should** break off and do the other mitzvah. Only where the mitzvah can be done by others should you continue your Torah study.

In this situation above, David should not volunteer, because there are seven other

people in the room (who are not involved in a concrete mitzvah) that can get the job done.

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?

Based on the above source David should close his Chumash, get up and help out Mr. Robbins. No one else is able to do that mitzvah.

The Shulchan Aruch rules accordingly.

15. Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deiah – The Shulchan Aruch rules about when Torah study can be interrupted.

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.

תְּלַמּוּד תּוֹרָה שְׁקוּל כְּנֶגֶד כָּל
הַמִּצְוֹת. הִיָּה לְפָנָיו עֲשִׂית
מִצְוָה וְתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה אִם אֶפְשָׁר
לְמִצְוָה לְהַעֲשׂוֹת עַל יְדֵי אֲחֵרִים
לֹא יִפְסִיק תְּלַמּוּדוֹ, וְאִם לֹא
יַעֲשֶׂה הַמִּצְוָה וַיִּחְזֹר לְתוֹרָתוֹ.

In the opening statement of the ruling, the Shulchan Aruch makes it clear that the intention is not to minimize the importance of Torah study. Many sources make this point (see “Torah Study,” a Morasha Syllabus class, available online here: <http://nleresources.com/nle-morasha-syllabus/core-beliefs/torah-study-the-foundation-of-jewish-life/>).

The specific formulation echoes the following Mishnah, which has made its way into the daily *siddur* (prayer book):

16. Mishnah Peiah 1:1 – How does Torah study compare with other mitzvot?

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), *reiyon* (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 דְבָרִים שֶׁאֵין לָהֶם
שְׁעוּר. הַפֶּאֶה, וְהַבְּכוֹרִים,
וְהָרֵאיוֹן, וְגַמְלוֹת חֲסָדִים,
וְתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה. אֵלוּ דְבָרִים
שֶׁאֵדָם אוֹכֵל פְּרוּתֵיהֶן
בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְהַקֶּרֶן קִיָּמַת לוֹ
לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא. כְּבוֹד אָב וְאִם,
וְגַמְלוֹת חֲסָדִים, וְהַבָּאָת
שְׁלוֹם בֵּין אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ
וְתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה כְּנֶגֶד כָּלֵם:

Given the great importance of Talmud Torah, why should it be disregarded for another mitzvah (that nobody else will perform)? If we do not break off in the middle of a mitzvah to go do another mitzvah, even if no one else is available to do it, why is Talmud Torah different? Why does the principle of *osek bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah* not apply?

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 – Why does involvement in Talmud Torah not exempt you from other mitzvot?

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 בן
בתלמוד תורה. הואיל ועקרה
לידיעת קיום שאר מצות,
מבטלין אותה בשביל כל מצוה
שאין אפשר לקיימה על ידי
אחרים. כן היא שטת גדולי
המפרשים.

The Meiri's statement echoes a passage in the Yerushalmi that berates a Torah scholar who does not translate his Torah study into action.

18. Yerushalmi Berachot 1:2 – How do we view a person who learns Torah without translating it into action?

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."
"שיליתו על פניו ולא יצא לעולם."

Learning Torah with the goal of discovering God's will, must lead to a stage of implementation through mitzvot. The Torah learning is like pregnancy, and the mitzvah is the birth that follows. A person who learns without applying his learning has, metaphorically, caused a miscarriage.

When a mitzvah obligation comes up in the middle of learning Torah, the very nature of Torah study – learning that leads to action – decrees that a person must stop and do the mitzvah. Proper Torah study must be geared towards the stage of practical application. Thus, we interrupt learning to do another mitzvah not because the other mitzvah is more important, but because failing to do so would imply a flaw in the Torah study itself.

The Raavad and Meiri's approach is in sync with the Gemara's conclusion concerning the Talmudic debate over which is greater: study (*talmud*) or action (*ma'aseh*)?

19. Kiddushin 40b – Which is greater – learning or action?

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.”

וּכְבָר הָיָה רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן וְזִקְנִים
מְסוּבִין בְּעֵלִית בֵּית נַטְזָה בְּלוֹד
וְנִשְׁאַלָה שְׂאִילָה זוֹ בְּפָנֵיהֶם
תְּלַמוּד גָּדוֹל אוֹ מַעֲשֵׂה גָדוֹל?
נִעֲנָה רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן וְאָמַר, “מַעֲשֵׂה
גָדוֹל.” נִעֲנָה רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְאָמַר
“תְּלַמוּד גָּדוֹל.” נִעֲנוּ כּוֹלָם וְאָמְרוּ,
“תְּלַמוּד גָּדוֹל שֶׁהִתְלַמוּד מְבִיא
לְיָדֵי מַעֲשֵׂה.”

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

The Vilna Gaon has a unique view of the mitzvah of Torah study. It is unquantifiable.

20. Shenot Eliahu Mishnah Peiah 1:1 – There is no minimum or maximum quantity of Torah study.

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 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.

וְהַכֵּלל בְּזֶה שֶׁאֵין מְבַטְלִין תְּלַמוּד
תּוֹרָה אֶפְילוֹ לְמַצְוָה אִם יְכוּלָה
לְהַעֲשׂוֹת עַל יְדֵי אֲחֵרִים. וְהִשְׁכֵּל
מִחֵיב בְּזֶה, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁכָּל תִּיבָה
וְתִיבָה בְּפָנֵי עֲצֻמָּה הִיא מִצְוָה
גְּדוֹלָה וְהִיא שְׂקוּלָה כְּנֶגֶד כּוֹלָם.
אִם כֵּן, כְּשֶׁלּוֹמֵד לְמִשְׁלַל דֶּף אֶחָד
מִקְיָיִם כְּמֵה מְאוֹת מִצְוֹת. וְאִם
כֵּן, בְּוֹדָאֵי יוֹתֵר טוֹב לְקַיִם מֵאַה
מִצְוֹת מִמִּצְוָה אַחַת.

רַק כְּשֶׁאֵי אֶפְשָׁר לְקַיִם עַל יְדֵי
אֲחֵר אֲזִי רִשְׁאֵי לְבַטֵּל וְלָזֶה
שׁוֹנֶה הִתְנַא הָא דְתְּלַמוּד תּוֹרָה
אֵין לָהּ שִׁיעוּר לְמַטָּה לְהוֹרוֹת
כְּנֹזֵכַר לְעֵיל. אוֹ כְּשֶׁצָּרִיךְ לְאָכּוֹל
שֶׁהוּא גַם כֵּן מִצְוָה. וְלוּלִי זֹאת לֹא
הָיָה לָנוּ פְּנָאֵי לְעֲשׂוֹת אֵיזָה מִצְוָה
אוֹ לְאָכּוֹל דְּכִתִּיב וְהִגִּיתָ בּוֹ יוֹמָם
וְלַיְלָה. לְכֹה מִשְׁמִיעֵנוּ דְּלַפְעָמִים
אַף בְּתִבָּה אַחַת יוֹצֵא.

Every word of Torah study is a fulfillment of a mitzvah, which explains why a person should opt for the many mitzvot of Torah study over any single mitzvah.

However, where nobody else will fulfill another mitzvah that arises, one must stop one's study for the sake of that other mitzvah, because one fulfills one's "daily quota" of Torah study even with a single word alone. Torah study beyond this adds to the mitzvah, but it cannot take precedence over another mitzvah that must be fulfilled.

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

The Steipler extends this approach by clarifying the extent of the obligation of Torah learning.

21. Kehilot Yaakov, Berachot 15 – What is the extent of the mitzvah of learning Torah?

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 מִצְוַת תְּלִמוּד תּוֹרָה כִּיּוֹן
שֶׁלֹא נִתְּנָה בּוֹ תּוֹרָה שִׁיעוּר,
מִמִּילָא הַחַיִּיב הוּא
כְּפִי יְקָלְתּוּ. וְעַל זְמַן שֶׁהוּא
אָנוּס מִלְלַמַּד אֵין זֶה בְּגֵדֶר
מִבְטָל מִצְוָה בְּאוֹנִים, אֶלָּא זֶהוּ
גְבוּל חַיִּיבוֹ שֶׁהוּא עַד כַּמָּה
שֶׁאֵפְשֶׁר לוֹ.

There are two halachic categories for situations where a person is exempt from performing a mitzvah: 1) being *be'ohness*, meaning that there is an obligation, but one is unable to discharge it due to uncontrollable circumstances; 2) being *patur* – a person is not obligated to do the mitzvah at all. *Ohness* describes a situation where, for instance, someone was not able to get to synagogue to hear Shofar blowing and therefore could not fulfill the mitzvah. *Patur* describes, for example, a young child, who is not yet obligated to do the mitzvah at all.

The Torah does not spell out the boundaries of the obligation of learning Torah, indicating that the mitzvah is not quantifiable. In other words, the extent of the obligation is defined by a person's available time. Each person must do some Torah study every day and every night (Menachot 99b); beyond that, the extent of the obligation depends on ability.

Based on this explanation, the Steipler explains why one interrupts in the middle of learning Torah to fulfill other mitzvot, and why this is not true for a mitzvah that can be performed by others.

22. Kehilot Yaakov Berachot 15 – Why is Torah study only interrupted by mitzvot that cannot be fulfilled by others?

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

וּבְזֶה יוֹבֵן הָא דְמִבּוֹאֵר בְּמוֹעֵד
קָטָן דְּאֵין תְּלִמוּד תּוֹרָה נִדְחָה
אֶלָּא לְמִצְוָה שֶׁאֵין אֲפֻשֶׁר
לְעֲשׂוֹת עַל יְדֵי אֲחֵרִים.

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.

דְּקִשְׁאֵפְשָׁר לְעִשׂוֹת עַל יְדֵי
אַחֵרִים כְּכֹר אֵינוֹ אָנוּס לְבַטֵּל
תְּלִמּוּד תּוֹרָה כִּינּוֹן דְּלִיכָא בְּטוּל
מִצְוָה רַק שְׂיָהָא לְאַדָּם זֶה
הָעוֹסֵק בְּתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה הֶפְסִיד
שָׁל קַיָּים מִצְוָה בְּזָה אִמְרִינּוּ
דְּאִדְרָבָא קַיָּים מִצְוָה דְּתִלְמוּד
תּוֹרָה עֲדִיף, דְּתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה
כְּנֻגַד כּוֹלָם.

The principle of *osek bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah* only applies where there is a clash between two obligations. When a mitzvah obligation arises that no one else can perform, he is **not currently obligated** to study Torah, because the obligation of Torah study is defined in terms of available time, i.e. mitzvah time is not deemed available time. Therefore, he must perform the other mitzvah, because it does not clash with the obligation of learning Torah.

On the other hand, if the mitzvah can be done by another person – for instance, other people could help Mr. Robbins with setting up the tables for the fund-raiser for the orphans – he should continue to study Torah, because the study of Torah is greater than any other individual mitzvah.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II

- With regards to Torah learning we find an interesting paradox: On the one hand, *talmud Torah kineged kulam* – Torah study is considered equivalent in value to all the mitzvot; but, on the other hand, we find that someone in the middle of learning Torah should break off and perform another mitzvah!
- This difficulty was brought up in the Talmud (Source 14), when two Tannaim pointed out seemingly contradictory verses about how Torah study compares to other mitzvot. Their resolution, which was recorded as practical halachah, is that if one is learning Torah and another mitzvah opportunity arises, the decision of what to do depends on whether others can fulfill the mitzvah or not. If others can get it done – Case 4a – one should continue learning. However, if the mitzvah cannot be fulfilled by others – Case 4b – the person must interrupt his studies and perform the mitzvah.
- This tension between Torah study and other mitzvot was addressed in another way by later commentators, who tried to figure out why the principle of *osek bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah* does not apply to Torah study. We found two basic approaches to this question:
 - A. The Meiri and the Raavad: Torah learning that is not put into practice is fundamentally flawed, because the Torah teaches us how to live. True Torah learning should lead to action. You should live by what you learn. Therefore, Torah study naturally gives way to mitzvah performance, since the purpose of the study is to reach the mitzvah performance.

- B. The Vilna Gaon:** The obligation to learn Torah is not quantifiable. There is no minimum (the minimum is one word of learning) and no maximum. This is in contrast to other mitzvot, which have a specific *shiur* (quantity). Therefore, when up against a mitzvah that others can perform, one is better off sticking to Torah study, which is the greater mitzvah (having no upper limit; every word is a mitzvah). However, when presented with a mitzvah that others cannot fulfill, one must interrupt the Torah study, because the mitzvah of Torah study has already been performed on the minimal level.
- C. The Steipler:** The Steipler explains further that the mitzvah of Torah study has no fixed quantity; rather, the quantity of the mitzvah depends on a person's available time. This means that when time is not available, there is no obligation to study Torah. Thus, if someone engrossed in Torah study is faced with a mitzvah that others cannot perform, the time to continue the mitzvah of Torah study is simply "not available," and the obligation of Torah study does not apply. This contrasts with the classic scenario of *osek bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah*, in which there is a clash of obligations and he continues with the first mitzvah.

**CLASS
SUMMARY**
If I am doing one good thing – a mitzvah – and another opportunity or obligation presents itself, how should I act?

Continue with the mitzvah you are doing. It is improper, and possibly even forbidden, to stop one mitzvah to do another. Even if you could push yourself to get both mitzvot done, you should just focus on the first one and do it in the best possible way. Do not try to multitask mitzvot. However, if getting both mitzvot involves no special trouble or effort, by all means do both.

What are the principles and concepts underlying the prioritization of mitzvot?

The guiding principle is *osek bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah* – someone involved in one mitzvah does not have to break off and do another. God obligated us in the positive mitzvot only when we are not involved in mitzvah activities. This principle is derived from two different biblical verses. Common sense dictates that one should not drop the mitzvah he is doing in favor of some other mitzvah opportunity that comes up. However, the verse tells us to go further:

1. It is forbidden to do the second mitzvah – dropping the first mitzvah would be tantamount to *bizui mitzvah*, disgracing the first mitzvah (Ritva).
2. One is exempt from the second mitzvah even if he theoretically could do both. If no special effort would be required, he does both (Ran).

Does it make a difference which mitzvah I am doing and what other mitzvah comes up?

You should continue to do the first mitzvah even if it is less weighty than the second, and even if it is of rabbinic-level obligation and the second is of biblical-level obligation (as a number of later authorities write). The principle applies both where the second mitzvah obligation is yet to come, and you are planning its fulfillment (like Yosef's coffin bearers, who jeopardized their Pesach sacrifice by involvement in the mitzvah that had come up earlier), or when the second mitzvah obligation is already extant – such as the obligation to recite the Shema.

Someone who is *passively continuing* to fulfill a mitzvah that does not clash at all with the second obligation (such as wearing tzitzit or tefillin) should of course fulfill the second mitzvah.

What if I am learning Torah and the opportunity to do a mitzvah arises – do the same rules apply?

Torah study has a separate set of rules. If you are learning Torah, and a mitzvah comes up that could be done by others – you should continue learning. If you are the only qualified one available, you should interrupt learning and do the mitzvah.

This is an exception to the rule of osek bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah. We saw several approaches as to why Talmud Torah is special.

- A. The purpose of Torah study is to perform the mitzvot studied therein; failing to practice a mitzvah would imply that the learning itself is flawed.
- B. Torah study is not quantifiable, having no minimum or maximum. The mitzvah is fulfilled by a single word, but it can be extended infinitely. Once the mitzvah has been performed at the minimal level, one fulfills other mitzvot, if they cannot be performed by others.
- C. The mitzvah of Torah study has no fixed quantity; rather, the quantity of the mitzvah depends on a person's available time. This means that when time is not available, there is no obligation to study Torah. Thus, if someone engrossed in Torah study is faced with a mitzvah that others cannot perform, the time to continue the mitzvah of Torah study is simply "not available," and the obligation of Torah study does not apply.

**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

“Osek Bemitzvah,” by Rabbi Daniel Feldman, available online at:

http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/727702/Rabbi_Daniel_Z_Feldman/Oseik_Bimitzvah_Patur_Min_Hamitzvah

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.