

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

TALMUDIC METHODOLOGY
By: Rav Moshe Taragin

TORAH STUDY VS. MITZVA PERFORMANCE

Judaism is unique in assigning Torah study the central role within religious experience. Torah study as the cardinal value forms the cornerstone of our tradition. Phrases such as "Talmud Torah ke-neged kulam" (literally: Torah study is equal in value to all other mitzvot - see Pe'a 1:1) and "Ve-hagita bo yomam va-laila" (You shall study the Torah day and night - see Yehoshua perek 1) firmly establish talmud Torah as the central and controlling facet of avodat Hashem. There are, however, two gemarot (Kiddushin 40b and Bava Kama 17a) which question the significance of abstract Torah learning relative to performance of mitzvot in general. This article will examine these two sugyot and the crucial conclusions which can be drawn from that analysis.

The gemara in Kiddushin records the conversation that took place between several rabbinic scholars during a meal which they shared. The relative value of Torah study versus ma'aseh - performance of mitzvot - was being pondered. R. Tarfon contended that ma'aseh was superior to Torah study. R. Akiva responded that Torah study was premium, and ultimately, this opinion was unanimously accepted by the Chakhamim. The logic advanced was intriguing: since Torah study facilitates mitzva performance, it is deemed more valuable; evidently, since it has the capacity to promote comprehensive and purposeful fulfillment of the mitzvot, it is assigned greater worth. This conclusion, however, must be examined in light of a second gemara in Bava Kama. After describing the funeral ceremony of Chizkiyahu Ha-melekh (during which they placed a sefer Torah upon his 'bier' and proclaimed: "This person fulfilled all which is written in this Torah), the gemara considers the procedure for funerals to be followed for subsequent Torah personalities who depart. The gemara, ultimately, suggests that we indeed proclaim about others that they performed mitzvot but we do not announce that they also learned (assumedly, this supreme praise was reserved for Chizkiyahu). This passage would imply greater value to learning; we are willing to praise pious people for their actions but not for their learning. Evidently, the latter represents a superior value the praise for which is reserved only for men of great accomplishment. This conclusion would then be consistent with Kiddushin 40b.

However, the gemara Bava Kama invokes Kiddushin as an apparent contradiction to our higher valuation of learning!! This contradiction is resolved by distinguishing between teaching and learning - a distinction we will develop at a later stage. What is the basis of the gemara's question?

Kiddushin suggested primacy for Torah study and Bava Kama's 'funeral protocol' does not violate this hierarchy; why can't we exalt mitzva performance while reserving the higher value of Torah study for uniquely exceptional personalities?

Rashi addresses this question and in the process effectively transforms the seeming conclusion of the passage in Kiddushin. When the gemara declared that "Torah study is great since it generates mitzvot" it really intended to raise mitzva performance as the higher occupation. Torah study is endowed with importance because it facilitates the end of mitzva performance. If that is the case, then announcing that someone fulfilled mitzvot but did not study is illogical. If we are willing to mention the mitzva performance of the departed, we should certainly address his Torah study. If we reserve any praise for exceptional individuals, it should be for their more exalted accomplishments!! In effect, Rashi concludes that mitzva performance remains superior to Torah study, which is glorified by the gemara precisely because it advances mitzvot.

Of course, Rashi's position seems in direct conflict with the gemara in Kiddushin. The actual phrase 'Great is Torah study for it promotes mitzva performance' is ambiguous about which value is greater; and indeed it can be read in Rashi's manner. However, the gemara in Kiddushin explicitly ruled that Torah study is greater. R. Akiva's rebuttal of R. Tarfon's initial stance was unanimously accepted!!

Tosafot in Kiddushin, after questioning Rashi's position, offer a possible solution for Rashi. Quite possibly the value assigned to Torah study by gemara Kiddushin was not sweeping, but rather very specific to particular circumstances. In general, mitzvot might be superior to Torah study. Indeed, at a funeral, praise about mitzvot performance would constitute a more impressive eulogy. Kiddushin was addressing the prioritization scheme for someone who has NOT yet studied. At this stage, Torah knowledge is more crucial and must be advanced even at the cost of mitzva performance. Torah study will, in effect, form the foundation for future religious experience and must be prioritized - even at the expense of potentially more valuable pursuits. This resolution is corroborated by a story in Yerushalmi Pesachim cited in the context of the episode in Kiddushin. After citing the conversation recorded in Kiddushin, the Yerushalmi (3:7) relates that R. Avahu sent his son to study Torah in Teverya. Upon discovering that his son was concentrating upon gemilut chesed, he wrote a letter which exclaimed: "Are there not graves in Caesarea that I sent you to Teverya??!!" In other words, chesed opportunities are available at home - during your formative developmental years, you should highlight your Torah study. The Yerushalmi in Pesachim might have viewed the sages' conference in Kiddushin not as inquiring as to ultimate abstract worth, but rather as determining priorities for 'freshman.'

Tosafot, however, adopt a different approach. That Torah study is superior to mitzvot - because it serves as the gateway to those very mitzvot - is indisputable. The question raised in Bava Kama concerned the logic of recognizing mitzvot performance that took place in the absence of Torah

study. Since profound mitzva performance is impossible without Torah study, by lauding the former we are, in fact, assuming the latter!!! In effect we are not withholding any praise by noting mitzva performance, because it is predicated upon Torah knowledge.

SUMMARY:

Rashi and Tosafot explain the gemara's question in Bava Kama in different manners. According to Rashi, we assume mitzvot as being superior to Torah and question the validity of praising for mitzvot and withholding praise for Torah study. According to Tosafot, Torah study remains superior but it is assumed by mitzva performance. Celebrating mitzvot and ignoring Torah study is counter-logical.

The gemara's answer to this question (whatever the question was) reads as follows: We must distinguish between teaching and learning. According to Rashi, indeed, learning is inferior to mitzvot. Teaching, however, is superior and that is the praise which is generally withheld. At funerals we readily acclaim mitzvot and necessarily Torah study (a lesser accomplishment) but withhold praise regarding teaching Torah to others which is assigned the highest value.

Tosafot understand the gemara's response slightly differently. We commend mitzva performance and imply Torah study - its natural prerequisite - as well. Even though Torah study is superior, we are willing to relate to that accomplishment. We reserve the praise for teaching Torah - the highest value - for extraordinary people.

Tosafot and Rashi reach different conclusions about the rank of Torah study relative to mitzvot. This forced them to understand the gemara's debate differently. According to Rashi, ma'aseh remains supreme to learning, whereas, according to Tosafot, learning is more significant than mitzva performance.

Though these conversations were conducted at an abstract level concerning which value in theory is more significant, attention should be paid to the practical ramifications of these positions. According to Rashi, Torah study cannot justify ignoring mitzvot. If someone during his Torah study is confronted by an opportunity for a mitzva, he must halt and perform the 'more important mitzva.' This notion is verified by the gemara in Mo'ed Katan (9a) which asserts that mitzvot which others can't perform take precedence over learning. If the mitzva can be fulfilled by others just as well and one is already involved in Torah study, he may continue his learning uninterrupted. This same spirit is engendered by the gemara in Ketubot (7a) which demands the ceasing of learning to participate in a funeral - assuming that a sufficient gathering is not attending. If enough of a crowd (see the gemara regarding the determination of this amount) is already in attendance, Torah learning may continue. These decisions (prioritizing mitzva performance to Torah learning) are fully consistent with Rashi's evaluation. How would Tosafot harmonize

these practical guidelines with their abstract hierarchy; if Torah study is really superior to mitzva performance, then it should not be suspended for a mitzva!!

The answer to this question is provided by the Me'iri to Mo'ed Katan (also provided by the Meshekh Chokhma in the end of parshat Bo). The Yerushalmi in Berakhot perek 2 writes of someone who learns without intent to fulfill the mitzvot that "it is better that he had not been born." Intent to translate Torah into performance of mitzvot is a basic qualification of Torah study itself. Without this intent, the very Torah study is flawed. Despite the practical considerations mentioned in this article, at a fundamental level, Torah study and mitzvot must be seen as fully integrated. Each represents the fulfillment of the Divine will. Torah study allows one to comprehend that will, while mitzvot implement that will. The differences between them are thus necessary but artificial. Given this backdrop, we might justify interrupting Torah for mitzvot, according to Tosafot. In theory, Torah study is more valuable and should take precedence. If, however, Torah study takes place at the expense of mitzvot, then it could be considered 'Torah study without intent to fulfill' and would not even be Torah study. In order to preserve the very nature of the Torah study which in theory takes precedence over mitzvot, I must interrupt that study to perform those mitzvot. In truth, from an abstract standpoint, Torah study reigns supreme. However, in the real world of action, mitzvot must take priority so that the Torah remains authentic.

Shabbat Shalom
Moshe Taragin