

# Embracing the Infinite



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לא־יִמוּשׁ סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה מִפִּיךָ  
וְהִגִּיתָ בוֹ יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה  
יְהוֹשֻׁעַ א:ח

Let not this Book of Torah  
cease from your lips,  
but recite it day and night...  
Joshua 1:8

תּלְמוּד גְּדוֹל שֶׁהַתְּלִמוּד מְבִיא לִיְדֵי מַעֲשֵׂה  
קִידוּשִׁין מ, ב

Study is greater,  
as study leads to action.  
Kiddushin 40b

Shavuot celebrates our acceptance of Torah and mitzvot; and yet, there often seems to be an underlying tension in our duty to study the former and perform the latter. The two sources above exemplify approaches to the relationship between Torah and mitzvot that are radically opposed: the first demands a total, constant commitment to study, while the second asserts that the value of study is in its expression, a life of mitzvot. What can we learn from these approaches? Can we reconcile them? And how can they inform our own study and practice as we prepare for *Z'man Matan Torateinu*?

The Talmud (Menahot 99b) understands “recite it day and night” literally: the only time a Jew can abstain from Torah study is that time which is neither day nor night. Said differently, Torah study must be constant, ceaseless, with no exceptions. In choosing a hyper-maximalist interpretation for this verse, the Talmud makes an

apparently impossible demand of us. Even the most dedicated student will inevitably have to attend to mundane but vital tasks—not to mention the performance of mitzvot. After all, when we sound the shofar or shake the lulav, we are not studying Torah. Is “recite it day and night,” then, only an aspirational standard, rather than a practical requirement?

Another way to explore the tension between Torah study and the practice of mitzvot is through the lens of constancy. In the blessings of Shema which we recite twice daily, we find the instruction to keep the words of Torah alive with us at every moment—upon waking and retiring, in our homes, and while on the road (Deuteronomy 6:6-7):

וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם  
עַל־לִבְךָ: וְשָׁנַנְתָּם לְבִנְיָךָ וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָם בְּשַׁבְּתֶךָ  
בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִכְתֶּךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ.

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (1906–1980) points out that this instruction to be constantly immersed in Torah could apply more pertinently to mitzvot in general. Indeed, when we look at the entire array of mitzvot, we can easily fill our time and the spaces we occupy with mitzvot. Why then is this consistency required specifically of Torah study?

Rabbi Hutner suggests that the constancy of Torah and of mitzvot are radically different in nature; the constancy of mitzvot is quantitative, while that of Torah is qualitative. A lifetime of mitzvot is cumulative; it requires many mitzvot aggregated over one's life. The pursuit of

Torah, however, is one continuous activity that stretches through, from the first lesson we ever learn, to the end of our lives.

With this definition of constancy of Torah study we return to the tension between "recite it day and night" and "study leads to action": How do we reconcile the call to action with the primacy of incessant study?

הוֹי כָּל־צֹמֵא לִכְנוּ לַמַּיִם  
יִשְׁעִיהוּ נְהֵא:

Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water  
Isaiah 55:1

We can understand the constancy of Torah study, through the imagery of water. Water expands and takes up all available space. Likewise, the enterprise of mastering Torah is all-encompassing; it too expands, and takes up every minute of life. What happens when we have to pause our Talmud Torah for action and attend to the needs of the dead or a bride?

Imagine a stone is thrown into a body of water: water is displaced, but its quantity never changes. Water makes room and accommodates the stone, and never suffers or loses any part of itself in the process. Like water, a lifetime of Talmud Torah, though expansive, is accommodating. It may flow into every minute of available time, but when interrupted by a mitzvah, it adjusts and accommodates, without being in any way diminished.

As we approach *Z'man Matan Torateinu*, the imagery of water invites us to renew our own flow, and let our Torah study expand into all possible nooks of interstitial time. All the while appreciating that our Torah will envelop and sacralize both the moments we dedicate to the vital tasks that enable our learning and to the intended sacred outcome; action, *ma'aseh*. ❁

