

In this week's double portion (and in other parts of the Torah), there are verses that implicitly and explicitly urge us to study Torah.

Etz Hayim, pp. 1170-1171 (Deut. 30:2): "For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, nor is it beyond reach." It's not necessarily easy, but it's not too hard. Therefore, what must we do? Study. The Midrash says,

[God said to Israel:] And should you say that I have given the law to your disadvantage, [know that] I have given it for your benefit, for the ministering angels eagerly desired it, but it was hidden from them.... My children, the law is too abstruse for the ministering angels, but for you it is not too abstruse.¹

The *Midrash* contrasts a fool with a wise person concerning how to go about learning Torah.

R. Jannai said: This can be compared to a loaf suspended in air; the fool says, 'who can bring it down?' But the wise man says: 'Did not someone suspend it?' And he takes a ladder or a stick and brings it down. So anyone who is a fool says: 'When will I succeed in reading the whole law?' But the ... wise ... learns one chapter every day until completing the whole law.²

In other words, learn a bit at a time. Further, regarding completing the whole law, Rabbi Tarfon taught,

You are not required to finish the task, neither are you free to neglect it. If you have studied much Torah, your reward will be abundant.³

The *Midrash* continues,

God said: 'It is not too hard, but if you find it too hard, it is your own fault, because you do not study it.'⁴

Etz Hayim, pp. 1174-1175 (Deut. 31:10-12): "And Moses instructed them as follows: Every 7th year ... at Sukkot, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God in the place that He will choose, you shall read this Torah aloud in the presence of all Israel. Gather the people – men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities – that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Torah." Thus, Torah is not reserved for elite academicians – it is to be a pursuit of all Jews.

In *Pirkei Avot*, Ben Bag-Bag urges: "Study it and study it – you will find everything in it."⁵ This suggests the following question: Is Ben Bag-Bag telling us to focus on sacred texts only, or is he telling us that Torah leads to everything else including subjects to be studied beyond our sacred texts? It appears to me that our sages took the broader view.

Etz Hayim, p. 1186 (Deut. 32:7): "Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past; ask your father, he will inform you, your elders, they will tell you." Rashi's commentary suggests that this verse urges us to learn history.⁶

Etz Hayim, p. 10 (Gen. 1:10): "... God said ... 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all living things that creep on the earth.'" But our muscle power does not suffice for us to rule the sharks of the sea, the eagles of the sky, or creepers on the earth from mighty lions to microscopic disease-causing bacteria. In order to carry out this Torah, we must study God's creation; develop technology from primitive tools for cooking and eating, to advanced smartphones and supercomputers; and use it to perform mitzvot.

¹ [MR], p. 149

² [MR], p. 150

³ [P] 2:21. See [S], p. 263

⁴ [MR], p. 150

⁵ [P] 5:24. See [S], p. 276

⁶ [R], p. 289

We, the Jewish people, pride ourselves on our contributions to scientific and cultural progress. A large factor in our ability to make contributions disproportional to our percentage of the human population stems from our tradition of Torah study. It's not just the text; it's also that our methods of study can lead to scholarly and practical success:

- As Moses taught, we learn not only our mitzvot, but also our history, and we build on the lessons learned.
- As Ben Bag-Bag taught, we turn topics over repeatedly to examine them from every aspect.
- As Rabbi Ishmael taught, we learn by employing a variety of methods of interpretation.⁷
- One of Rabbi Ishmael's methods is *gezerah shavah*, making connections – in modern parlance, hyperlinks - between two texts from similar wording. Shimon Ben Azzai expanded on this method, teaching that we learn by making connections between different verses and different ideas, perhaps by *gezerah shavah*, perhaps by logical deduction. Elie Wiesel teaches us:

One legend depicts ... Ben Azzai ... discoursing on the secrets of the Torah. Suddenly a flame descended from the sky and enveloped the group. Ben Azzai was asked, "Did this occur because you study the fiery mystery of the Merkavah [the chariot in the vision of Ezekiel]?" That would have explained the fire, since God is in the fire too. "Not at all," answered Ben Azzai. "I pursue quite ordinary studies. I link the words of the Torah to those of the prophets, and those of the prophets to the *K'tuvvim*, and it is the words themselves that have started to dance and to rejoice, as they did on the day when, lit by divine flame, the law was given on Sinai. The words are the same and so are the flames."⁸

A figurative interpretation: study brings divine illumination into the world.

And so it is estimated that "22% of all individual recipients [of Nobel prizes] worldwide between 1901 and 2016, and ... 36% of all US recipients during the same period" were Jewish or of significant Jewish ancestry⁹, with higher percentages for scientific fields and for female awardees. And so it is that by studying God's creation, the Jewish people have made the state of Israel a world leader in solar energy, water conservation and recycling, drip irrigation farming, desert reclamation and desert agriculture, pharmaceuticals, medical research and medical equipment, disposable diapers, and high tech – pioneering in the development of cell phones; computer hardware including flash drives and Intel chips; software including MS Windows (developed by MS Israel), ICQ, and Waze; and defense systems that improve on American technology and are shared with the US.

So, now, let's hit the books for Musaf.

References

[MR] *Midrash Rabbah* – Deuteronomy, Soncino, London, 1977

[P] *Pirkei Avot* - see [S], pp. 257 – 280.

[R] Rabbi Abraham Ben Isaiah and Rabbi Benjamin Sharfman, eds., *The Pentateuch and Rashi's Commentary: A Linear Translation into English, Deuteronomy*, S.S. & R. Publishing, Brooklyn, 1949

[S] *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*, Rabbinical Assembly, New York, 1998

[W] Elie Wiesel, *Sages and Dreamers*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1991

⁷ [S], p. 70.

⁸ [W], p. 251

⁹ https://www.jinfo.org/Nobel_Prizes.html - viewed September 13, 2017