

The Ways of the Talmud

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Chapter One

Introduction

One who desires to become wise should increase their sitting (Niddah, 70b). In other words they should sit on a text, investigating it well. For it is not enough to study a text once or twice, but he must look into it time after time because every time he reviews he will discover something completely new. This is what our Rabbis of blessed memory meant when they said: There is no comparison between a text that is studied 100 times and a text that is studied 101 times (Chagiga 9b)

Another explanation is that one should not go out to work selling their produce but rather they should increase their study, sitting apart and meditating as our Rabbis of blessed memory said: "Not, all who work a lot become wise" (Avos, 2:5). And they also said: "One who desires to become wise should pray in a southern direction and one who wants to be rich should pray in a northern direction." (Baba Basra, 25b)

Take this principle in your hand, anything which you desire to know, which can not be grasped on the first attempt because of some obstacle, will not be comprehended except with by a great amount of work and strain. Therefore, try energetically and diligently time after time to reach that which you desire to know.

Or if one really feels that he will not attain his goal, he must try with all of his strength to prepare himself to work with all his ability to reach it. For persistence and diligence in all matters are a necessity and it is impossible without them.

With all of this, one must also ask for mercy and help from Heaven and do not say 'It is my strength and power that has made me successful. Like it says in the last chapter of the Niddah 70b "What should a man do to become wise? Increase his sitting and decrease his work. Did not many try this and it was of no avail to them? Rather, let them pray for mercy from Him to whom is the wisdom."

This is what King Solomon meant when he said "One who studies a text, shall find good, and he who trusts in God shall be happy (Proverbs, 16:20). In other words, a person who studies diligently to discover what is intended or desired, this is good, however, he must also trust in God and not in the powers of his intelligence or strength and then he will find happiness for he will attain his desire with God's help.

Be Exacting with the Language

The basic principle of all intensive study is to be extremely exacting with the language of the text. One must try to see if there are any extra words or repetitive subjects and if there is a new idea in the topic or statement or not. Examine every change in language, law or subject matter between the current text and another.

You must carefully investigate, examine and inquire well about the text under study, striving to extract the meaning of the text in such a way that each and every word, and every part of the text teaches us something completely new that could not have been understood from any previous source. You must then know and determine the source and essence (factor). And define all its limitations within the subject matter in order to clearly understand what is the case and what is the law.

In the beginning of your study, accept as a premise and make part of your thinking, that each and every speaker, whether he asks or answers a question, is extremely intelligent. All their words are words of wisdom, understanding and knowledge. They do not contain something crooked or twisted. This is what our Rabbis of blessed memory meant (Shevos 48b) when they said "Are we dealing with fools!" Therefore, you must look deeply into all their words and see if they have meaning which is strong and healthy with solid insight or are they tasteless, unsalted and weak? Are they reasonable or not?

Now, it is up to us to validate the logic behind their words and to correct their statements in a way that they become pleasing, acceptable and reasonable to the mind. We should never commit the great sin and crime of ascribing bad or weak reasoning to their words. Because none of their words are erroneous, for all of them are the words of the living G-D. "If the words of Torah are empty, the emptiness comes from you". This is what our Rabbis meant when they said "At first how did he reason, and in the end how did he reason?"

Commentaries

When you begin your study of the commentaries you must put your attention upon which words the author is speaking or explaining and observe what he is adding and what is the language of the Talmud in order to discover the author's intention. Is he smoothing out the language, or explaining the subject, or answering a difficulty, or removing a doubt, or rejecting another commentary. Also observe if there is a difference between the author's Talmudic text and our Talmudic text. After you know the intention of his words and his explanation you should carefully examine them to see what could have been an opposite or alternative explanation. Because only then will you know what he came to guard from or reject.

The correct way to study is first to understand the Talmud to the best of your ability and only then study the commentary. Then see whether what you understood agrees with the commentators explanation. After you understand the commentator's intention, analyze what was his explanation coming to reject or avoid and what forced him to explain the way he did. Because as long as you do not know his intention and the explanation he wants to establish, how will you know what he is rejecting?

You should carefully analyze the Talmud or verse on its own and afterwards analyze the commentary on its own being very exacting. After this you should analyze the commentators

overall opinion (shita) and then return to see how all what you now understand fits back into the language of the Talmud.

In every commentary that you read whether it is Tosafose or other commentators, after you know their intentions whether it is a doubt or a difficulty, you should then return to look into the commentary of Rashi. Observe if Rashi was sensitive to the same problem and gave a solution and if they both used the same logic or do they disagree in their solutions. In general you should always analyze a section of Talmud by knowing where the commentators have the same overall opinion (shita) and where they disagree.

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