

Learning

a resource for Tikkun Leyl Shavuot

An invitation to learn

The tradition of studying together on Tikkun Leyl Shavuot – the eve of Shavuot – epitomises the Jewish passion for and commitment to communal learning. The model of Chavruta – exploring Jewish texts with a partner or a group – creates a space for reflection, growth, participation, diversity and tolerance. Through this resource we hope to bring together the tradition of Tikkun Leyl Shavuot and the model of Chavruta to supplement your learning event.

These pages contain six sources which address the theme of ‘Learning’ – exploring the relationship between teachers and students, God and scripture, and the ultimate purpose of learning. Each source consists of either one or two texts, plus some discussion questions to get the conversation flowing. We have also included two additional passages: a prayer on entering a place of study and a closing reflection.

It is not necessary to explore every text, nor to answer every question. You may wish to study with a partner or in a group (or both) and the session may last for twenty minutes or for hours on end ... the decisions are yours! However you choose to learn or teach the material, we hope that you will find it both stimulating and illuminating.

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Prayer on entering a place of study

יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ
ה' אֱלֹהֵי וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי
שְׁתְּאִיר עֵינַי בְּמַאֲזֵר תּוֹרָתְךָ
וְתַצִּילֵנִי מִכָּל מַכְשׁוֹל וְטָעוֹת ...
כִּי ה' יִתֵּן חֶכְמָה
מִפִּי דַעַת וְתְבוּנָה

May it be Your will

God, my God, and the God
of my ancestors,

that you guide my eyes with
the light of Your Torah

and save me from stumbling
and making mistakes ...

For God gives wisdom

and from God's mouth
come knowledge and
understanding.

THE MITZVAH OF LEARNING

Deuteronomy 11:18–21

¹⁸Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart: bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead, ¹⁹and teach them to your children – reciting them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up; ²⁰and inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates – ²¹to the end that you and your children may endure, in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to assign to them, as long as there is a heaven over the earth.

Translation: JPS, 1999

דברים י"א:ח-כ"א

¹⁸וּשְׂמַתֶּם אֶת-דְּבָרֵי אֱלֹהֵי-לְבַבְכֶם וְעַל-נֶפְשְׁכֶם וְקִשְׂרֹתֶם אֹתָם לְאוֹת
עַל-יְדֵיכֶם וְהָיוּ לְטוֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם: ¹⁹וְלִמַּדְתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת-בְּנֵיכֶם לְדַבֵּר
בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִכְתְּךָ בְּדַרְךָ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ: ²⁰וְכָתַבְתֶּם עַל-
מְזוֹזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: ²¹לְמַעַן יִרְבוּ יְמֵיכֶם וְיָמֵי בְנֵיכֶם עַל הָאֲדָמָה
אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה' לְאַבְתֵּיכֶם לָתֵת לָהֶם כִּימֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

Points to consider

Why are we commanded to learn?
Why are we commanded to teach?

Is learning a means to an end
or an end in itself?

STUDY AND ACTION

Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 40b

Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were once reclining [to eat] in the upper storey of Nitza's house in Lod, when this question was asked before them: "Is study greater, or is action greater?"

Rabbi Tarfon answered, saying: "Action is greater."

Rabbi Akiva answered, saying: "Study is greater."

Then they all answered and said: "Study is greater, for it leads to action."

Translation based on Soncino

תלמוד בבלי קידושין דף מ' ע"ב

וְכָבֵר הָיָה רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן וְזִקְנִים מְסוּבִין בְּעֵלִית בֵּית נִתְזָה בְּלוֹד, נִשְׁאַלָה שְׂאִילָה זֹו בְּפִנְיָהֶם: תְּלָמוּד גָּדוֹל אוֹ מַעֲשֵׂה גָּדוֹל?

נִעֲנָה רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן וְאָמַר: מַעֲשֵׂה גָּדוֹל,

נִעֲנָה רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְאָמַר: תְּלָמוּד גָּדוֹל,

נִעֲנוּ כּוֹלָם וְאָמְרוּ: תְּלָמוּד גָּדוֹל, שֶׁהַתְּלָמוּד מְבִיא לְיַדֵּי מַעֲשֵׂה.

Moon is teaching Bible

Moon is teaching Bible.
Cyclamen, Poppy, and Mountain
listen with joy.

Only the girl cries.

Poppy can't hear her crying –

Poppy is blazing in Torah,

Poppy is burning like the verse.

Cyclamen doesn't listen to the crying –

Cyclamen swoons

from the sweetness of the secret.

Mountain won't hear her crying –

Mountain is sunk

in thought.

But here comes Wind,

soft and fragrant,

to honour hope, to sing

the heart of each flying rider,

each ardent hunter

swept to the ends of the sea.

From "The Spectacular Difference, selected Poems, Zelda", translated by Marcia Falk.

Points to consider

Is action the only goal of study?

What others might there be?

Does study lead to action?

GOD TOO LEARNS

Tanna DeBei Eliyahu (Ed. Ish Shalom), section 17

Another comment: "[Gaze] upon King Solomon" (Song of Songs 3:11).

[Compare God] to a mortal king who, as he sits on his throne, has the elders of his principality sit before him, and from each of them learns a lesson in wisdom, a lesson in understanding, a lesson in knowledge, and a lesson in insight. But for the King, the King of kings, blessed be He, may His great name be blessed for ever and ever and ever – it is not so! Rather, as He sits on His Throne of Glory, a third of each day He reads [Scripture] and recites [Mishnah], a third of each day He makes judgment, and a third of each day He provides and nourishes the righteous and the disciples of the wise with wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and insight.

Translation based on William G. (Gershon Zev) Braude and Israel J. Kapstein

תנא דבי אליהו (איש שלום) פרשה י"ז

דְּבַר אַחַר "בְּמִלָּךְ שְׁלֹמֹה" (שיר השירים ג':א), לְמִלָּךְ בְּשֵׁר וְדָם שְׁהִיָּה יוֹשֵׁב עַל כִּסֵּאוֹ, וְהָיוּ זִקְנֵי מְדִינָתוֹ יוֹשְׁבִין לְפָנָיו וְלָמְדוּ מֵהֶן דְּבַר אֶחָד שֶׁל חֻכְמָה וְדְבַר אֶחָד שֶׁל בִּינָה וְדְבַר אֶחָד שֶׁל דִּיעָה וְדְבַר אֶחָד שֶׁל הַשְּׂפָל, אֲבָל מִלָּךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים בְּרוּךְ הוּא יְהִי שְׂמוֹ הַגָּדוֹל מְבוֹרָךְ לְעוֹלָם וְלְעוֹלָמֵי עוֹלָמִים אֵינּוּ כֵן, אֶלָּא יוֹשֵׁב בְּכִסֵּא כְבוֹד שְׁלוֹ, שְׁלִישׁ הַיּוֹם קוֹרֵא וְשׁוֹנֶה, וְשְׁלִישׁ הַיּוֹם דָּן אֶת הַדִּין, וְשְׁלִישׁ הַיּוֹם זֵן וּמְפָרְגִים אֶת הַצְּדִיקִים וְאֶת תְּלַמֵּי־יָדַי חֻכְמִים בְּחֻכְמָה בְּבִינָה בְּדִיעָה וּבְהַשְּׂבָל.

Points to consider

What is the difference between wisdom, understanding, knowledge and insight? Where do these things come from?

In what ways does this text present God as a student and as a teacher?

LEARN ALL NIGHT

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, 'Laws of study of Torah', 3:15

Even though it is a commandment to learn by day and by night, most of one's wisdom comes at night. Therefore, someone who wants to merit the crown of Torah will be careful not to waste even a single night on sleeping, eating, drinking, talking, et cetera, but will learn Torah and words of wisdom instead. The Sages said that there is no crying out of Torah except at night, as it is written, "*Arise, cry out in the night*" (Lamentations 2:19). Anyone who learns Torah at night, the thread of loving-kindness follows him by day, as it is written, "*The Lord will command His steadfast love in the daytime, and in the night His song shall be with me, a prayer to the God of my life*" (Psalm 42:9). Any house in which words of Torah are not heard at night, fire will devour it.

Translation based on Immanuel O'Levy

רמב"ם, משנה תורה, הלכות תלמוד תורה פרק ג' ט"ו

אף על פי שמצוה ללמוד ביום ובלילה, אין אדם למד רב חכמתו אלא בלילה; לפיכך מי שרצה לזכות בכתר התורה, יזהר בכל לילותיו, ולא יאבד אפלו אחת מהן בשינה ואכילה ושתייה ושיחה וכיוצא בהן, אלא בתלמוד תורה ודברי חכמה. אמרו חכמים, אין גרנה שלתורה אלא לילה, שנאמר "קומי רני בלילה" (איכה ב':ט). וכל העוסק בתורה בלילה, חוט שלחסד נמשך עליו ביום, שנאמר "יומם, יצוה ה' חסדו, ובלילה, שירה עמי - תפלה, לאל חי" (תהלים מ"ב:ט). וכל בית שאין דברי תורה נשמעין בו בלילה, אש אוכלתו.

Points to consider

Do you agree that most of one's wisdom comes at night?

We usually sleep at night and our houses do not burn. How do we make sense of this source?

LEARNING TOGETHER

Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 7a

Rabbi Chama son of Rabbi Chanina said: "Why is it written, '*Iron sharpens iron*' (Proverbs 27:17)? It is to say to you: just as one piece of iron sharpens another, so too do two students of the Sages sharpen each other with *balakbab* [Jewish law]."

Rabbah bar bar Chanah said: "Why

is Torah compared to fire, as it is written, '*Is my word not like fire – declares the Eternal*' (Jeremiah 23:29)? It is to say to you: just as fire does not ignite itself, so too do words of Torah not exist alone."

Translation: Soncino

תלמוד בבלי, תענית דף ז' ע"א

אמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא: מאי דכתיב "ברזל בברזל יחד" (משלי כ"ז: י"ז), לומר לך: מה ברזל זה, אחד מחדד את חבירו אף שני תלמידי חכמים מחדדו זה את זה בהלכה.

אמר רבה בר בר חנה: למה נמשלו דברי תורה כאש, שנאמר "הלוא כה דברי כאש נאם ה'" (ירמיה כ"ג: כ"ט), לומר לך: מה אש אינו דולק יחידי אף דברי תורה אין מתקיימין ביחידי.

Points to consider

Is the purpose of learning with a partner to "sharpen each other" or to "ignite the fire" of Torah?

Can we find paradise through individual study? Why or why not?

Nathan Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore* (1989)

A rabbi fell asleep and dreamed that he had entered Paradise. There, to his surprise, he found the sages discussing a knotty problem in the Talmud.

'Is this the reward of Paradise?' cried the rabbi. 'Why, they did the very same thing on Earth!'

At this, he heard a voice chiding him, 'You foolish man! You think the sages are in Paradise. It's just the opposite! Paradise is in the sages.'

YOU WILL UNDERSTAND

Proverbs 2:1–9

¹My son, if you accept my words
And treasure up my commandments;
²If you make your ear attentive to wisdom
And your mind open to discernment;
³If you call to understanding
And cry aloud to discernment,
⁴If you seek it as you do silver
And search for it as for treasures,
⁵Then you will understand the fear of the Lord
And attain knowledge of God.
⁶For the Lord grants wisdom;
Knowledge and discernment are by His decree.
⁷He reserves ability for the upright
And is a shield for those who live blamelessly,
⁸Guarding the paths of justice,
Protecting the way of those loyal to Him.
⁹You will then understand what is right, just,
And equitable – every good course.

Translation: JPS, 1999

Points to consider

What does it mean to “understand the fear of the Lord”? What does it mean to “attain knowledge of God”? Are these the same thing?

What is the ultimate purpose of learning?

משלי פרק ב': א-ט'
¹בְּנֵי אִם־תִּקַּח אִמְרֵי
וּמִצְוֹתַי תִּצְפֹּן אֶתְדָּ:
²לְהִקְשִׁיב לְחֻכְמָה אֲזַנְדָּ
תִּטָּה לְבָבְךָ לְתַבּוּנָה:
³כִּי אִם לְבִינָה תִקְרָא
לְתַבּוּנָה תִתֵּן קוֹלְךָ:
⁴וְאִם־תִּבְקֹשֶׁנָּה כִּכְסָף
וּכְמַטְמוֹנִים תִּחְפְּשֶׁנָּה:
⁵אֲזַ תִּבִּין יְרֵאת ה'
וְדַעַת אֱלֹקִים תִּמְצָא:
⁶כִּי־ה' יִתֵּן חֻכְמָה
מִפִּיּו דַעַת וְתַבּוּנָה:
⁷וְיִצְפֹּן לְיִשְׂרָאֵל תּוֹשֵׁיָהּ
מִגֵּן לְהִלְכֵי תָם:
⁸לְנֹצֵר אֲרָחוֹת מִשְׁפָּט
וְדָרְךָ חֲסִידָיו יִשְׁמֹר:
⁹אֲזַ תִּבִּין צְדָק וּמִשְׁפָּט
וּמִיִּשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־מַעֲגַל־טוֹב:

Closing reflection

Mari son of Rabbi Huna said: אָמַר מָרִי בֶר רַב הוּנָא:
When saying goodbye to a friend, a לא יִפְטֹר אָדָם
person should always be מַחֲבָרוֹ אֶלָּא
in the middle of studying, מִתּוֹךְ דְּבַר הַלְכָה,
some aspect of Torah with them. שְׂמִתּוֹךְ
In that way their friend כֶּךָ זוֹכְרוֹ.
will remember them for it.

Talmud, Eruvin 64a

Limmud is an international
community of Jewish learning
founded in the UK in 1980.

Almost every week, there will be a Limmud activity or event somewhere in the world. These are organised by independent grassroots groups following shared values which include choice, diversity and volunteerism. Groups, volunteers, participants, presenters and supporters connect through the Limmud experience and by collaborations such as this Tikkun Leyl Shavuot project.

This material was collected by Jeremy Tabick and Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, led by Albert Ringer. Edited by Robin Cooke and Sam Grant. Inspired by Shelley Marsh. Designed by Uri Berkowitz.



Limmud promises that wherever you find yourself, Limmud can take you one step further on your Jewish journey.

Find out for yourself and get involved
at limmud.org or limmudinternational.org

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