

TALMUD TORAH - INTRODUCTION

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

The laws of Talmud Torah include two positive Mitzvot:

- a. To study Torah;
- b. To honor her [Torah's] teachers and scholars...

Q1: Why does Rambam include Talmud Torah in Sefer Mada (The first of R's fourteen books - dealing with basic philosophical and attitudinal issues)? And why it's particular placement after Hilkhhot De'ot (attitudes) (shouldn't it be before) and before Avodah Zarah (Laws of Idolatry)?

YE: (Yitz Etshalom):Although our rabbis have commented on various Mitzvot that they are "equal to all the Mitzvot" - e.g. denouncing idolatry, living in Eretz Yisra'el, etc., Rambam only makes this statement in regards to Talmud Torah (3:3). And, he makes that statement quite forcefully (see there). I believe that the placement of Talmud Torah is quite intentional as follows: Rambam, being a philosophically oriented religionist, sees the basics as cognitive - he also sees a direct relationship between the cognitive and behavioral. Yesodei haTorah (The Basics of the Torah) must come first, as it establishes the basic propositions for the rest of the work. De'ot must follow, as it establishes the fundamental relationship between man and God - to imitate God. Talmud Torah then becomes the vehicle for learning about how to accomplish this goal. Since the basic is the cognitive affirmation of God, Avodah Zarah is the first point of knowledge- followed by Teshuvah (Repentance), which is the ultimate statement about the relationship with God.

Q2: Why does Rambam include honor for scholars here - shouldn't that be included in Hilkhhot Mamrim, where the definitions of a scholar are found? (Parenthetically, why are the laws of honor for parents included in Hilkhhot Mamrim? Wouldn't they be more appropriate in Hilkhhot Evel (Laws of Mourning), since mourning for parents is part of honor?)

YE: Whereas honor for parents is fundamentally a biological affair - regardless of their behavior, we are obligated to honor them, the station and honor due a Talmid Hakham is a function of two things: his knowledge and the quality/quantity of his teaching (i.e. how many student and what level of learning) - see BT Ketubot 17.

Q3: Note how Rambam defines the Mitzvah in the Introduction - "Lilmod Torah" - one would expect a time definition, such as "to study Torah every day" (as we find in the introduction of the Laws of Tefillah) or "to study Torah day and night" (similar to that which he says in the introduction of the

Laws of Reading the Sh'ma).

YE: Talmud Torah does have a notion of set time (see BT Menachot 99, Nedarim 8a); however, unlike Tefillah and Sh'ma, it is more of a framework for the minimal Mitzvah. Regarding Tefillah, the ultimate goal is worship of God daily; for K'riat Sh'ma, it is reciting those particular words at those two times; however, the ultimate goal of Talmud Torah is: Learning! As Rabbi Soloveitchik zt"l pointed out numerous times, the Rambam seems to indicate, in the introduction, the ultimate goal of the Mitzvah; whereas, in the text, he details the specific parameters and methods for achieving that goal. For instance, In the Laws of Repentance, the introduction reads "that the sinner should return"; yet in the text, Rambam immediately introduces verbal confession - the detail and vehicle for achieving the goal. R. Soloveitchik zt"l made the same observations about Tefillah (Intro: To worship: Text: To pray) and mourning.

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