

TALMUD TORAH 4:9

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

9. We do not sleep in the *Beit Midrash* (Hall of Study) and anyone who sleeps in the Beit Midrash, his Torah will become torn up into shreds. This is akin to what Solomon said in his wisdom: "Drowsiness will clothe them in rags." [Mishlei (Proverbs) 23:21]. Conversation in the Beit Midrash should only consist of words of Torah. Even if someone sneezes, we do not say *Refuah* (health!) in the Beit Midrash - and certainly other matters [are prohibited]. The holiness of the Beit Midrash is greater than that of a *Beit K'nesset* (synagogue).

Q1: Why is this string of Halakhot, relating to the sanctity of the Beit Midrash, placed here, at the end of this chapter?

HH (H.H.): The sanctity of the Beit Midrash symbolizes the sanctity of Torah study.

JB(Jay Bailey): Well it fits in thematically with what we've been talking about in this chapter, namely, issues of etiquette: who talk when, to whom, and how. This is an extension of those rules, with the crux being "Conversation...should only consists of words of Torah". The last section is a demonstration of how far this goes. Interestingly enough, R has once again transplanted a concept more or less out of context. His reference to Mishlei is about a drunkard who is drowsy, not a person who is sleepy and dozes in the study hall.

As to why this is at the beginning and not the end, I believe R himself said it best when he was challenged to explain why there are a certain number of animals sacrificed at a particular time. He said that there has to be a number. If it were 8, you'd ask why 8 and if 23 you'd ask why 23. Basically, SOMETHING has to be last, and it is not always possible to come up with a reason why something does or does not merit it.

Q2: Again, to issues of sequence: why is the statement about the sanctity of the Beit Midrash mentioned at the end of this Halakha? Wouldn't it have been more reasonably placed at the beginning, as an explanation for these laws?

HH: Emphasis?

JB: If that were the case, we would then expect a full analysis of the difference in the holiness of the two places. We'd expect R to state this fact and then ask "keitzad"? (how is this seen?). Instead, his putting it at the end allows it to be a simple statment without going into it.

Q3: What does it mean for someone's Torah to become "torn up into shreds" - and why is this connected to sleeping the Beit Midrash?

HH: If one sleeps in the Beit Midrash, one either shows disrespect for it or breeds disrespect in oneself for it. This lack of respect for the Beit Midrash will eventually be transferred to Torah study. Lack of respect for Torah study will lead to abandonment of study, i.e., one's Torah will be torn up into shreds. (Quite a worst-case chain of argument!)

JB: Think Oliver North. 'nuf said.

Q4: Why is saying "God bless you" the example used here for [forbidden] non-Torah speech in the Beit Midrash?

JB: Because it demonstrated that even words that are functional, not fanciful, should not be uttered. See Brachot 53a regarding this notion, where it discusses making a bracha for the havdala candle, and whether one person should make it or everyone should...

Q5: Why is the Beit Midrash holier than the Beit K'nesset

JB: Because they used to pray in the Beth Midrash in addition to studying, whereas the synagogue was only used for prayer. As a matter of fact, there is a Talmudic principle that says "Greater is the house in which flourishes Torah, than one in which flourishes prayer." (Megillah 27a) (Note: You ARE allowed to say "God Bless You" in a synagogue.)

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