

# Thoughts on Shavuot

Rabbi Bernie Fox

5779

Edition 32, Volume 4

## Seeking Truth

***And please, Hashem, our L-rd, make the words of Your Torah pleasant in our mouths and in the mouths of all Your people, the House of Israel. And may we and our offspring [and the offspring of our offspring] and the offspring of Your people, the House of Israel - all of us - be knowing of Your Name and studying Your Torah for its sake. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who teaches Torah to His people, Israel. (Morning Torah Blessings)***

### I. The blessings on the Torah

Each morning we recite the *Berchot HaTorah* – the blessings over the Torah. These blessings are composed of three components. They open with a reference to the commandment to study Torah. This is followed by petitioning Hashem to assist us in this study. The blessings conclude with an expression of gratitude to Hashem for selecting us from among the nations to be his Chosen People and to receive His Torah.

There are two interesting aspects of our petition. First, we ask that Hashem make the study of Torah pleasant for us. In other words, we ask not only for His assistance in securing success in our studies; we ask that the experience of study should be enjoyable.

Second, we ask that Hashem help us study for the proper purpose.<sup>1</sup> Why do we seek Hashem's help in guiding us to study for the proper purpose? Our discussion will focus upon this second issue.

***Always, a person should engage in Torah and mitzvot even if not for their [true] purpose. For through [engaging in them] not for their [true] purpose, one comes to [engage in them] for their true purpose. (Mesechet Pesachim 50b)***

***[Regarding] any person who performs [the mitzvah] not for its [true] purpose, it would have been better for the person to have not been created. (Mesechet Berachot 7a)***

### II. Performing mitzvot for their true purpose

Before considering how our question might be answered, let us consider a related issue. The two statements above discuss the performance of commandments for personal gain. An example is performing *mitzvot* to conform to the standards of one's community. We can easily imagine a person who is not fully committed to observance but engages in Torah practices so that he or she will be accepted within the community. The first statement above encourages this behavior. The sage argues that through consistent engagement in Torah practice the person may advance in commitment. Eventually, the person will observe the commandments for their true purpose.

The second statement seems to contradict the first. This sage asserts that one who observes the commandments for some personal gain, is better to have not been created. How can these two statements be reconciled?

Rav Yitzchok Isaac Chaver suggests a simple and eloquent solution to this problem. He explains that the first statement encourages observance motivated by a personal agenda as a strategy for advancement. It addresses a person who would like to observe the



<sup>1</sup> Some versions of the blessings omit reference to proper purpose.

Torah for its true purpose. However, he cannot move himself to observe the *mitzvot* for this exalted purpose. The sage encourages this person to think strategically. How can he motivate himself? He should identify and adopt a personal motivation as a step toward performing *mitzvot* for their true purpose. This person's ultimate goal is to perform the commandments for their true purpose. He is adopting a strategy to arrive at that goal. The second statement addresses a person who does not have a higher aspiration than his personal motivation. This person observes the commandments for a personal end and does not seek to advance himself or herself to a greater spiritual level. This person has perverted the *mitzvot*. He or she has made them a means for personal gain. It would have been better if this person had not been created.<sup>2</sup>

***Antignos of Socho received the tradition from Shimon the Righteous. He would say: Do not be as servants, who serve their master for the sake of reward. Rather, be as servants who serve their master not for the sake of reward. And the fear of Heaven should be upon you. (Mesechet Avot 1:3)***

***However, the science most needed for the [understanding of] the Torah is the most advanced science. It is the science of theology.<sup>3</sup> We are obligated to study it for the purpose of understanding and arriving at [the truth] of our Torah. But it is forbidden to study it for the purpose of gaining worldly benefits. (Rabbaynu Bachya ibn Paquda, Chovot HaLevavot, Introduction)***

### **III. *Mitzvot* express love for and awe of Hashem**

The above discussion distinguished between performing commandments for the proper reason and performing them for personal gain. What is the proper reason for observing *mitzvot*? The first statement above addresses this issue. The sage explains that we should aspire to serve Hashem and to observe His commandments as servants who serve their master naturally, without expectation of reward. Rambam – Maimonides – in his comments on this mishne, explains that we are to perform the commandments as an expression of our love of

Hashem. He notes that this sage adds that we should also be motivated by our awe of Hashem. In other words, one who is deeply in love wishes to fulfill the wishes of the beloved. There is no consideration of personal gain. The needs and desires of the self are subdued by the drive to serve the beloved. Similarly, one who is in awe of a king performs his sovereign's wishes without thought of personal gain. It is a simple and natural response to recognition of their relative stations.

Rabbaynu Bachya discusses the study of theology – within which he includes the study of Torah. He explains that one's purpose must be to seek truth and understanding. It is forbidden to study Torah for personal gain.

Is Torah different from other *mitzvot*? Do we perform other *mitzvot* in service of Hashem but study Torah in service of truth? This is not Rabbaynu Bachya's contention. Torah study is a means of serving Hashem.<sup>4</sup> However, one must distinguish between the objective that is inherent in an action and its higher purpose.

### **IV. Objective and purpose**

An illustration will help clarify this distinction. Every organization – including commercial ones – should have a clearly defined mission. Is it correct for a commercial organization to describe its mission as enriching its owners? This is not the mission. The mission is the specific objective of its business. For a clothing retailer, the mission may be to provide customers with high quality evening-wear and excellent service. Through these means the retailer seeks to attire its customers in stylish and well-tailored outfits. This is the mission or the inherent objective of the business. Of course, if the business meets this objective but loses money each quarter, its owners will close it. This is because in addition to this mission, the business has an ultimate purpose. It must make a profit for its owners.

Rabbaynu Bachya is explaining that the inherent objective of Torah study must be the pursuit of truth. Of course, he agrees that this pursuit is a means of

<sup>2</sup> Rav Yitzchok Isaac Chaver, *Ohr Torah*, Commentary on *Ma'a lot HaTorah*.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbaynu Bachya describes this science as dealing with "knowing Hashem the Blessed One, knowing His Torah, and other spiritual matters, such as [the study of] the soul, the intellect, and the angels".

<sup>4</sup> See Rambam, *Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 5*.

serving Hashem. When one studies Torah to gain recognition or for some other personal end, this person is not engaged in authentic Torah study. The perversion of the objective alters the very identity of the activity.

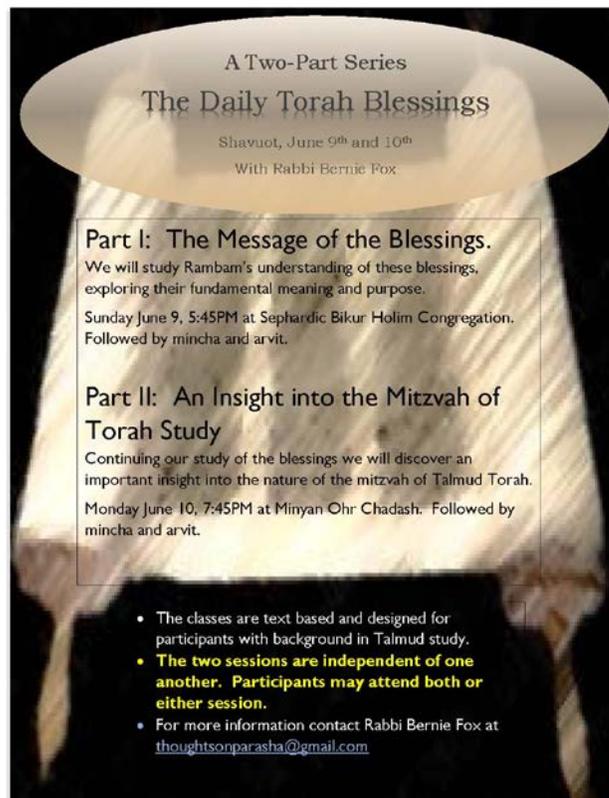
#### V. Torah study is unique

Let us now return to our original question. Why do we petition Hashem to assist us in studying Torah for its true purpose? From Rabbaynu Bachya's comments an important distinction arises between the study of Torah and the performance of other *mitzvot*. If one performs other *mitzvot* motivated by a personal objective, the performance remains valid. Consider a person who takes hold of and lifts the four species on Succot so everyone can admire his or her beautiful *etrog* – citron. As long as the person intends to fulfill the *mitzvah*, the performance is valid. The *mitzvah* is fulfilled. However, if one studies to earn the admiration of others and not in search of the truth, the fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of Torah study is impacted. By definition, study is a search for truth. When this objective is compromised, so is the fulfillment of the *mitzvah*. For this reason, we ask Hashem to help us study for the true objective – to discover the truth.

#### VI. Torah study: searching for truth

This discussion has addressed two important issues regarding Torah study. Why study Torah? How do we overcome the natural resistance to increasing our commitment to Torah study? Torah study is a search for truth. We live in the information age. The enormous information market demonstrates that we want to be informed and we want to understand the world around us. Torah study provides us with a more profound and meaningful understanding of our world and our lives.

Our sages recognized that commitment to Torah study can be challenging and they invited us to be strategic. They suggested that we adopt, as an expedient, a personal motivator. With time, our commitment will strengthen and our artificial motivator will be replaced by the drive to seek truth.



A Two-Part Series  
**The Daily Torah Blessings**  
Shavuot, June 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>  
With Rabbi Bernie Fox

**Part I: The Message of the Blessings.**  
We will study Rambam's understanding of these blessings, exploring their fundamental meaning and purpose.  
Sunday June 9, 5:45PM at Sephardic Bikur Holim Congregation.  
Followed by mincha and arvit.

**Part II: An Insight into the Mitzvah of Torah Study**  
Continuing our study of the blessings we will discover an important insight into the nature of the mitzvah of Talmud Torah.  
Monday June 10, 7:45PM at Minyan Ohr Chadash. Followed by mincha and arvit.

- The classes are text based and designed for participants with background in Talmud study.
- **The two sessions are independent of one another. Participants may attend both or either session.**
- For more information contact Rabbi Bernie Fox at [thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com](mailto:thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com)

Send comments or questions to [thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com](mailto:thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com).

Subscribe or unsubscribe at [thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com](mailto:thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com).

To sponsor an edition of Thoughts, please contact [thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com](mailto:thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com).

An extensive archive of past issues of *Thoughts* is available at the following site:

<https://www.ou.org/torah/parsha-series/rabbi-fox-on-parsha/#>

Rabbi Bernie Fox