



## Effort Counts... Sometimes (5761)

*I give thanks before You, Hashem my Lord, that You made my portion among those who dwell in the Beit HaMidrash and not among those who dwell on the street corners. I rise in the morning, and they rise. I rise to engage with the words of Torah, and they rise to deal with worthless issues. I toil, and they toil. I toil and receive reward. They toil and do not receive reward. I run, and they run. I run to life in the world to come, and they run to a desolate pit.*

*(Talmud, Tractate Berachot 28b)*

The festival of Shavuot celebrates receiving the Torah at Sinai. On Shavuot, it is appropriate to contemplate and discuss the *mitzvah* of Talmud Torah – Torah study.

The Mishne of Tractate Berachot states that reciting a short prayer before entering and leaving the *Beit HaMidrash* – the study hall – is appropriate. The Talmud discusses the mishne and recommends texts for the prayers. The above is the text for the prayer recited when leaving.<sup>1</sup>

In this prayer, we give thanks for the opportunity to study the Torah, contrast those who study the Torah with those who dwell on street corners, and express appreciation for the opportunity to be involved in a worthy pursuit rather than meaningless activities.

Who are these people dwelling on street corners? Rashi explains that this is not a reference to derelicts. The phrase refers to anyone who is engaged in idle talk. In

other words, the prayer contrasts the meaningful activity of Torah study with engaging in gossip or idle talk.<sup>2</sup>

In this prayer, we also acknowledge that the Torah student and those engaged in other pursuits all toil. However, we assert that only the student's toil is rewarded. Rav Yisrael Meir HaKohen Zt"l – the Chafetz Chayim – asks the obvious question. The ordinary person who is not engaged in Torah study is rewarded! Artisans create products; perhaps they construct beautiful jewelry. They then sell their creations. The reward for their toils is the payments received. This reward may not be as valuable as the merit earned through studying the Torah. However, how can we claim that only the Torah student is rewarded?

He responds that the answer lies in a more careful text analysis. The prayer is discussing the reward for toil – in other words, the effort. Artisans are not rewarded for their efforts. They are paid for their products. Imagine an artisan invested many hours into creating an excellent product, but when delivering a superb product to the buyer, the artisan dropped and shattered the creation. Can the artisan demand payment for the effort? Of course not. Artisans are rewarded for their products, not their efforts or toils.

In contrast, Torah scholars are rewarded for their efforts. Consider the Torah scholar who spends many hours attempting to understand a problematic section of the Talmud. In the end, complete understanding remains elusive. Perhaps the scholar ends the session with more questions than answers. Nonetheless, the *mitzvah* of Talmud Torah has been fulfilled and is rewarded.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This text is also included in the "Hadran." The Hadran is typically recited when completing a Mesechta of the Talmud or another substantial Torah work.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), *Commentary on the Talmud*, Mesechet Berachot 28b.

<sup>3</sup> Rav Shmuel Greenman, *Sefer Chafetz Chayim al HaTorah*, p 178.

## Two Models of Torah Study (5761)

*And you should teach them to your children – to speak of them – when you dwell in your house and travel on the road, when you lie down, and when you arise.*  
(Devarim 11:19)

*And you should teach them clearly to your children. And you should speak of them when you dwell in your houses and travel on the road, when you lie down, and when you arise.* (Devarim 6:7)

These two passages are almost identical. Nonetheless, each is the basis for a different law. Rambam – Maimonides – explains that the first *pasuk* is the source of the obligation to teach one's children.<sup>4</sup> The second is the source of the more general obligation of the Torah scholar to teach deserving students. This passage refers to these students as children, expressing the special relationship between teacher and student. The students are the children of the Torah scholar. This is not the result of a biological relationship. The intellectual bond between them creates the relationship.<sup>5</sup>

Why is the obligation of the father to teach his children derived from the first passage? Why is the responsibility of the Torah scholar derived from the second?

Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik *Zt"l* explained that a subtle difference in the *pesukim* determines the derivations. The first *pasuk* discusses teaching. This means to transmit the Torah from father to child. Virtually every child is suitable for this mission. Children will master the Torah to varying degrees. However, regardless of the child's potential as a scholar, the child must be taught Torah.

The second *pasuk* describes a different type of Torah learning. It describes elucidating the Torah and instilling erudition. Every child cannot achieve this level of scholarship. Only the fitting student succeeds in

achieving this mastery. The advanced understanding described in this passage cannot be required of every child. This *pasuk* can only refer to the obligation of the teacher and the appropriate student.<sup>6</sup>

## The Ups and Downs of Torah Reading (5761)

*And Hashem spoke all of these words saying:*  
(Shemot 20:1)

This passage introduces the *Asseret HaDibrot* – the Decalogue. The Torah text includes cantillations. The Sages implemented these musical notes. However, the concept of reading the Torah with cantillations is derived from the Torah itself. The cantillations serve an essential function. The Torah's text does not include punctuation marks. The cantillations provide punctuation. They also help communicate each text's message.<sup>7</sup>

There are two versions of cantillations for the *Asseret HaDibrot*. These are called the "upper" and "lower" cantillations. The lower cantillations divide the *Asseret HaDibrot* into fourteen *pesukim*. The upper cantillations divide the text into ten *Dibrot* or statements.

There are various customs regarding the proper cantillations to be used when reading the *Asseret HaDibrot* in public.

1. The most prevalent custom is to use the upper cantillations.
2. An alternative custom is to utilize the upper cantillations when reading the *Asseret HaDibrot* on Shavuot. However, the lower cantillations are followed when reading the texts within their weekly Torah portions.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:1.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:2.

<sup>6</sup> *Kuntres Moadim MeTorat Brisk*, p 71.

<sup>7</sup> Mesechet Megilah 3a.

## Thoughts on Shavuot 5784

3. There is a third custom. This practice is to use only the lower cantillations when reading the *Asseret HaDibrot*.

This third custom is based upon a critical consideration. As explained, the lower cantillations divide the text into its passages. It is generally prohibited to break up or merge Torah passages.<sup>8</sup> Because the upper cantillations divide the *pesukim* into *Dibrot* and ignore the *pesukim* structure, these cantillations violate this general rule. However, the prevalent practice is to use the upper cantillations. How can the practice be explained?

The difference between the upper and lower cantillations must be more carefully analyzed to answer this question. The Torah is written in narrative form. It recounts the Sinai Revelation. In the narrative, the *Asseret HaDibrot* are presented. In other words, the Torah does not include a direct statement of the *Asseret HaDibrot* per se. Instead, it contains an account of Revelation, and in that account, it describes the *Asseret HaDibrot*.

Let's consider an analogy. You are reading a book about the writing of the United States Constitution. The author explains the origins of the ideas and values contained in it. He describes how it was written and outlines the contributions of various individuals. Of course, in telling the story, he includes the Constitution's text. You read the book. Have you read the Constitution? Not really. You read the story of its creation, and that story included the text of the Constitution. I remember that I once had a facsimile of the Constitution. It was printed with raised letters on a brown parchment-like paper. It looked like the real thing. I was not reading a narrative that included the Constitution's text when I read that. I was reading a copy of the Constitution.

The lower cantillations preserve the narrative form in which the *Asseret HaDibrot* are presented. The upper cantillations extract the *Asseret HaDibrot* from its narrative context and present them as transmitted at Sinai. When one hears the *Asseret HaDibrot* read with their upper

cantillations, one does not hear their story. One hears them as they were transmitted at Sinai.

The restriction against dividing and merging *pesukim* can now be better understood. The Torah must be read with complete accuracy. This includes meticulous adherence to the punctuation dictated by the lower cantillations. If the narrative of the *Asseret HaDibrot* is read, the lower cantillations must be utilized. The custom of using the upper cantillations is based on the premise that, at times, we are not reading them as part of a narrative. Instead, we are extracting them from their narrative and reading them separately from it. We are reading them as they were delivered at Sinai. We are not recounting the events at Sinai. We are recreating and reliving them. The requirement to adhere to the lower cantillations does not apply in this situation.

---

<sup>8</sup> Mesechet Ta'anit 27b.