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Retaining Torah

This week's parashah contains Moshe's enigmatic song. Chazal learn two different – but related – teachings on how to learn Torah properly, from the following *passuk*: “May my teaching drip down like the rain, may my utterance flow like the dew; like storm winds upon vegetation and like raindrops upon blades of grass” (*Devarim* 32:2).

The Talmud derives from this *passuk* that if one is not careful, Torah learning can actually kill him:

R' Benaah said: Whoever studies Torah for its own sake, his Torah becomes an elixir of life to him.... But whoever studies Torah not for its own sake, his Torah becomes a deadly poison to him, as it says, “May my teaching drip down like the rain,” and “arifah” [whose form “yaarof” is used in this verse to mean “drip down”] means nothing other than “killing,” as it says, “And they shall axe the back of the heifer’s neck [‘ve’arfu] in the valley” (Devarim 21:4). (Taanis

7a)

Understand the power of Torah. When learned with the proper motivation, it is a *sam chaim*, an elixir of life. But if learned *lo lishmah*, not for its own sake, that same Torah will become a *sam hamaves*, a deadly poison. If a person's intent in learning Torah is to use it for his own selfish interests, or to sharpen his intellectual acumen to tear others down, he transforms the essence of Torah – which is *Toras Chaim*, the source of life – into a deadly toxin that drives him away from the Almighty.

Drawing on this verse, the Sages shed light on a different aspect of how Torah, when not learned properly, can cause damage.

The Sifri says:

A person should always collect his Torah learning into general principles and extract their details, for if one leaves his learning as a collection of details, they will make him weary and he will not know what to do, as it is written, “May my teaching drip down like the rain.” The word “lekach – teaching” refers to Torah, as it says, “For I have given you a good teaching (lekach), do not forsake my Torah” (Mishlei 4:2), and the word “arifah – drip down” means to gather in. (Sifri 32:2)

The Sifri gives a metaphor to illustrate the point. A traveler does not take his money with him in small denominations, because that would be burdensome and impractical. Rather, he changes his money into large bills, which are easily transportable and can be exchanged for smaller bills when necessary.

The Sifri is teaching a crucial lesson about how to retain your Torah effectively. The Torah is a compilation of thousands of details. If you try to store your learning as minutiae, it will

become too burdensome to maintain, and exceedingly difficult to access. This will result in your forgetting much of what you have learned, which Chazal liken to a woman giving birth and burying her child (*Sanhedrin* 99a). Learning Torah will become a very painful endeavor.

What is the solution? You need to collect the myriad details into organized, summarized *klalim* – fundamental, overarching principles. This technique enables you to hold onto enormous amounts of material, and instead of being a crushing burden, it will be a well-organized and accessible summary of any aspect of Torah you learn.

This is why our Sages teach that the strategy for mastering Torah is to use *simanim*, general principles that amalgamate reams of details into an interconnected, orderly system, as the Talmud states, “Rav Chisda said: The only way to acquire Torah is through *simanim*, as the Torah says, ‘*sima befihem* – place it in their mouth’ (*Devarim* 31:19). Do not read it as ‘*sima*’ [place it], but rather as ‘*simana*’ [its symbol].” (*Eruvin* 54b)

Pleasure through Organization

The Ramchal, in his introduction to *Derech Hashem*, describes the power of organization and the pleasure it gives to one who learns Torah this way. It is worth reading his explanation in his own words:

When one knows a number of things and understands how they are categorized and systematically interrelated, then he has a great advantage over one who has the same knowledge without such distinction. It is very much like the difference between looking at a well-arranged garden, planned in rows and patterns, and seeing a wild thicket or forest

growing in disarray.

When an individual is confronted by many details and does not know how they relate to one another or their true place in a general system, then his inquisitive intellect is given nothing more than a difficult, unsatisfying burden. He may struggle with it, but he will tire and grow weary long before he attains any gratification. Each detail will arouse his curiosity, but not having access to the concept as a whole, he will remain frustrated.

If one wishes to understand something, therefore, it is very important that he be aware of other things associated with it, as well as its place among them. Without this, one's longing for truth will be frustrated and he will be pained by his unsatisfied desire.

The opposite is true when one knows something in relation to its context. Since he sees it within its framework, he can go on to grasp other concepts associated with it, and his success will bring him pleasure and elation.

Organizing your Torah knowledge into general, interrelated principles makes long-term retention a real possibility, and causes your Torah learning to become a source of deep pleasure and gratification.

Learn the Rambam

When Rabbi Weinberg was an 18-year-old yeshiva *bachur*, he asked Rav Ruderman, the venerated rosh yeshiva of Baltimore's Ner Israel, how he had mastered all of Shas, the entire Talmud. Rav Ruderman told him that in Poland he could not learn Torah at night, by

candlelight, due to his poor eyesight. Instead he would take long walks in the Polish forest and review pages of Gemara that he had memorized. That is how he mastered the Talmud.

Rav Ruderman was a yeshiva *bachur* in a shtetl in prewar Poland. Rav Noach, was a yeshiva *bachur* in America in the 1950s. How could he possibly employ the same strategy as Rav Ruderman? His frustration drove him to seek a solution, until he stumbled upon the above Sifri about the importance of structuring Torah learning into *simanim*. Rabbi Weinberg realized then that the Rambam's *Mishnah Torah* is a comprehensive, highly organized structure of all of *Torah Shebe'al Peh*, the Oral Law, and by mastering it and memorizing *simanim* -- a one word summary that encapsulates the subject matter -- for each of its 1000 chapters, a student could realistically attain proficiency in all of its fundamental principles.

This is why Rabbi Weinberg always encouraged his students to learn the entire *Mishnah Torah* and memorize its 1000 *simanim*. It is the difference between experiencing pain, frustration, and forgetfulness in learning versus deep-seated satisfaction, pleasure, and success in retaining one's Torah learning. With a mastery of the Rambam, Rabbi Weinberg believed that one would learn all of Shas because he now had a platform that made it accessible.



What Will They Remember?

Here's an exercise to stimulate your imagination. Think about what your loved ones will remember about you. Could it be a story or a piece of good advice? Maybe a time when you taught them a meaningful lesson? Perhaps a time when you reprimanded them? Which of your actions will have made a lasting impression?

On the last day of his life, Moshe recited a heartfelt, poetic song to the entire nation. But this was not a song in the sense that we think of a song today. Moshe's song, *Haazinu* (meaning "listen" in Hebrew), was composed in a state of Divine inspiration. Its prophetic words emphasized the collective mission of the Jewish People—past, present, and future. Moshe's song corresponded to a significant transition for the Jewish People—the change of leadership and entrance into the Land of Israel. As the next generation moved onward to new, uncharted experiences, what final words from Moshe would they remember? How does wisdom endure?

These are the same questions we must ask ourselves today. How is a message of lasting relevance best transmitted? We pass on timeless values through example. Striving to live by what we believe in doesn't imply perfected belief. Questions fuel and strengthen us to delve deeper. Striving to live up to our ideals models continual spiritual growth.

Why and how have the ideals of Moshe remained relevant throughout the generations? The Jewish People have always been taught to revere and consult their elders for guidance. The Torah states: "Ask you father and he will tell you, your elders and they will relate to you."

The Hebrew word for elder is *zakein*, which is a

contraction of the Hebrew phrase “*zeh kanah*—this one has acquired.” As stated in the Talmud: “Rabbi Yosi Hagelili says, ‘An “elder” [*zakein*] means one who has acquired wisdom.’”

In a Torah community, there isn't a generation gap but rather a connecting bridge. Revering one's elders is an enduring Torah value that's central to Judaism. The Talmud states: “Whoever teaches his grandson Torah, it is as if he [the grandson] has received it from Har Sinai.”

Respecting the older generations makes a tangible difference in being able to transmit values. These are not communicated through coercion or fear but by lovingly cultivating the bonds of a shared history and an ongoing mission. The Talmud teaches that even an elderly person who is not a scholar should be respected and honored because they have acquired so much life experience. Each of our personal stories of overcoming difficulties and challenges can enrich others.

But sometimes, those we care about may disappoint us. You'll search for just the right words and they'll fall on the proverbial “deaf ears.” We can learn from the example of Moshe to aim higher and keep speaking to the soul. Soulful communication transcends the physical body. The soul is attuned to deeper spiritual matters. The challenge is to reach the very core of the other person. Be patient and keep trying. A person's inner essence is their soul, which is always receptive and pure.

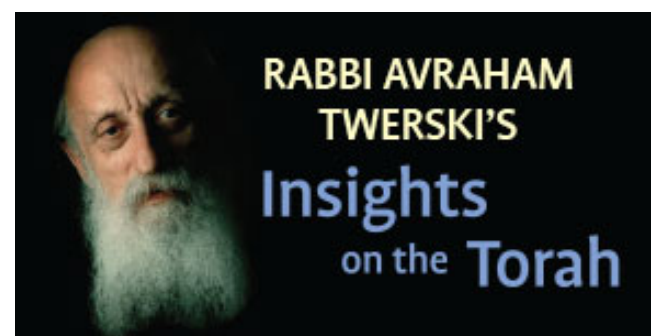
The final words of Moshe were a seventy-line poetic song about the nation's triumphs and difficulties. Its inspiring message resonates and speaks to us now.

Judaism's emphasis on passing our heritage on from generation to generation is expressed through daily thoughts and actions that can transform the mundane into the holy. Heaven can be brought down to Earth by integrating

the Torah's teachings into our lives. Eventually, we'll become what we do repeatedly. Although it's said that actions speak louder than words, heartfelt words of guidance and instruction leave an enduring impression. What will yours be? That's the message you'll pass along and for which you will be remembered.

Making It Relevant

1. Take a few minutes to write down some core values and beliefs that you would choose to pass on.
2. Recall and write down personal experiences that illustrate your values or teach a lesson.
3. Consider writing a short letter to each of your closest loved ones expressing your deepest thoughts and wishes.
4. Share your stories and lessons learned with your children, grand- children, and, with God's help, even more generations. Don't worry if they tell you that they already heard that story; they will come to remember and treasure them in the future.



If They Were Wise

“Were they wise they would comprehend this, they would discern it from their end” (Deut. 32:29).

No one wants to contemplate their end. Most

people act as if they were going to live forever. It has been quipped that we live as if we will never die, and we die as if we never lived. This is a denial of reality, and one cannot possibly have an optimum adjustment to life if one denies reality.

We may verbalize an awareness of our mortality, but our actions betray our feelings. How different our behavior would be if we had an emotional grasp of our mortality.

Both as a rabbi and as a physician, I have attended people in the last days of life when their denial had broken down and they felt that their lives were coming to an end. Many have said, "If I had to do it over again, I would have spent more time with my children. I wish I had gotten to know them better." No one has ever said, "My one regret is that I did not spend more time at the office."

Why is it that this wisdom often comes when one can no longer put it to use?

But that is the irony of life: Our wisdom comes too late.

In my rehabilitation center, adolescents are admitted for treatment of alcoholism and drug addiction. When an adult patient sees a youngster being admitted, he may say, "I wish I had been that lucky, to have been treated for my addiction when I was 15. Here I am at 49, having gone through two unsuccessful marriages and having no contact with my children from either marriage. Everything I could have had in life was lost as a result of my drinking. I have no family, no home, no job."

I suggest to this man, "Why don't you speak with this youngster and tell him how fortunate he is to have an opportunity to overcome his addiction?"

A bit later this patient says, "I tried to talk to the kid, but he won't listen. He's here because

the judge ordered him here. He's going to go back out and get high. But I wasn't any different than that kid. I didn't listen to people who told me that alcohol was going to destroy me."

If only we were wise! Moses says that if we were wise, we would contemplate our end when we were young. We would then live so that we would not have anything to regret when we near our end.



The Song of Unconditional Love

The Torah ends with a song - but not the kind you'd expect. Moses's final prophecy, written in the distinctive two-column format of biblical poetry, doesn't celebrate triumph or offer hope. Instead, it predicts failure, exile, and national catastrophe with absolute certainty.

Why would our greatest prophet choose this harsh message as his farewell declaration? And why deliver it as a song?

The Song of Destiny

At first glance, Moses's prophecy in this week's Torah portion reads like a sobering tale of human failure that unfolds in four acts. First, God showers His chosen nation with kindness - rescuing them from Egypt, nurturing them in the desert, bringing them into the Promised Land. Then, in act two, at the height of their prosperity, the people grow fat with comfort

and turn away from their Creator. This leads to the devastating third act: God's presence withdraws and catastrophe follows: wicked enemies scatter the Jewish people to the corners of the earth. Finally, God avenges His people and cleanses their land.

What makes this prophecy unique is its certainty. Most biblical warnings speak in conditional terms - "If you sin, then consequences will follow." *Bechukotai* and *Ki Savo* offer clear choices with predictable outcomes, giving us agency over our destiny. But this week's Torah portion strips away all conditions. These events will happen, period.

And indeed, the Ramban points out that everything in this prophecy has unfolded exactly as written: God rescued us from Egypt, protected us in the wilderness, brought us to Israel, and blessed us with success. Then, we grew arrogant, sinned, and suffered a painful exile. Given this flawless track record, the Ramban concludes, we can be absolutely certain about the final act of redemption.

But there's a troubling detail buried in this promise. According to the prophecy, we don't earn this redemption through repentance or merit. God saves us simply to vindicate His own name before the nations. Are we really just helpless cases, destined to fail and be rescued only because our enemies are worse?

Love Without Limits

The Malbim offers a stunning parable that unlocks the deeper meaning of this song: A king decides to free a slave who has a well-known history of theft. Despite knowing the slave's character flaws, the king appoints him treasurer of the royal vault. But here's the twist: before giving the slave this position, the king writes a note in his private ledger stating, "I know this man will steal from me." Why does the king write this prediction? Not to warn the slave or prevent the theft, but to remind his future self not to punish the slave when the

inevitable happens. After all, the king made this appointment with full knowledge of what would occur. The responsibility lies with the one who chose, not the one who acts according to his nature.¹

This parable reveals the true message of *Haazinu*: we have a Father who believes in us and loves us unconditionally. The prophecy doesn't seek to crush us with inevitability, but to assure us that even at our lowest, we're never truly lost.

The Talmud² records a fundamental debate that reinforces this theme. Rabbi Yehuda argues that our status as God's children depends on our behavior: "When you act like sons and cleave to the Holy One, you are called sons, but when you do not act like sons, you are not called sons." Rabbi Meir forcefully disagrees: "Either way you are still called sons!" He proves his point by citing verses where God calls Israel "sons" even while criticizing them - "foolish sons," "sons in whom there is no faithfulness," "sons who deal corruptly." Even at our worst, the Torah never stops calling us God's children. The law is decisive: we follow Rabbi Meir. No matter what, we remain God's children.

I once heard an interview with NBA legend Kobe Bryant about his father's role in his basketball career. Kobe described his experience playing in a summer league at age eleven. He scored zero points the entire summer. After his final game, he approached his father, devastated. His father wrapped his arm around young Kobe and said, "Son, I love you whether you score 0 or you score 60." Smiling during the interview, Kobe exclaimed, "I said to myself, 'Cool, I've got the love, now I'm going to go score 60.'" He went on to become one of the greatest scorers of all time.

That's the power of unconditional love. When we internalize this certainty and feel God's arm wrapped around us, we gain the strength to brush off our zero-point days and strive for our

full potential. The song's harsh predictions don't chain us to failure - they create the ultimate safety net, freeing us to reach for the stars. Rock bottom doesn't mark the end - it offers a new beginning, backed by the certainty of God's eternal love. In that light, Haazinu isn't just a prophecy - it's our Father's eternal promise that no matter how far we fall, His love will always be there to lift us back up.

Embracing Our Zero-Point Days

This understanding transforms how we approach both our own failures and those of others. When you face your next setback, pause and ask: "How would I speak to someone I love unconditionally about this situation?" Then extend that same compassion to yourself. God's love doesn't fluctuate with your performance, and neither should your self-worth.

Now comes the harder challenge: extending this same unconditional love to others. Just as Kobe's father wrapped his arm around his devastated son, we can become sources of unwavering support for the people in our lives. The next time someone disappoints you - your child, student, friend, or spouse - remember the Malbim's insight. You entered this relationship knowing human nature. Your role isn't to punish the inevitable stumbles; it's to love through them and help the person rise again.

May we all find strength and peace in the unconditional love that God surrounds us with, no matter whether we succeed or fail!

Shabbat Shalom!
Avraham

1. Malbim on Deuteronomy 31:19
2. Kiddushin 36a