



## **Hilkhot Talmud Torah**

Laws Concerning the Study of Torah

### **Chapter 1:8-12**

8 Every Israelite is under an obligation to study Torah, whether he is poor or rich, in sound health or ailing, in the vigor of youth or very old and feeble. Even a man so poor that he is maintained by charity or goes begging from door to door, as also a man with a wife and children to support, is under the obligation to set aside a definite period during the day and at night for the study of the Torah, as it is said, “But you shall meditate therein day and night” (Josh. 1:8).

9 Among the great sages of Israel, some were hewers of wood, some drawers of water, while others were blind. Nevertheless, they devoted themselves by day and night to the study of the Torah. They are included among the transmitters of the tradition in the direct line from Moses.

10 Until what period in life ought one to study Torah? Until the day of one’s death, as it is said, “And lest they [the precepts] depart from your heart all the days of your life” (Deut. 4:9). Whenever one ceases to study, one forgets.

11 The time allotted to study should be divided into three parts. A third should be devoted to the Written Law; a third to the Oral Law; and the last third should be spent in reflection, deducing conclusions from premises, developing implications of statements, comparing dicta, studying the hermeneutical principles by which the Torah is interpreted, till one knows the essence of these principles, and how to deduce what is permitted and what is forbidden from what one has learned traditionally. This is termed Talmud.

12 For example, if one is an artisan who works at his trade three hours daily and devotes nine hours to the study of the Torah, he should spend three of these nine hours in the study of the Written Law, three in the study of the Oral Law, and the remaining three in reflecting on how to deduce one rule from another. The words of the Prophets are comprised in the Written Law, while their exposition falls within the category of the Oral Law. The subjects styled *Pardes* (Esoteric Studies) are included in Tamul.\* This plan applies to the period when one begins learning. But after one has become proficient and no longer needs to learn the Written Law or continually be occupied with the Oral Law, he should, at fixed times, read the Written Law and the traditional dicta, so as not to forget any of the rules of the Torah, and should devote all his days exclusively to the study of Talmud according to his breadth of mind and maturity of intellect.

## **Chapter 3:1-13**

1 With three crowns was Israel crowned—with the crown of the Torah, with the crown of the priesthood, and with the crown of sovereignty. The crown of the priesthood was bestowed upon Aaron, as it is said, “And it shall be to him and to his seed after him, the covenant of an everlasting priesthood” (Num. 25:13). The crown of sovereignty was conferred upon David, as it is said, “His seed shall endure forever, and his throne as the sun before Me” (Ps. 89:37). The crown of the Torah, however, is for all Israel, as it is said, “Moses commanded us a law, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob” (Deut. 33:4). Whoever desires it can win it. Do not suppose that the other two crowns are greater than the crown of the Torah, for it is said, “By me, kings reign and princes decree justice. By me, princes rule” (Prov. 8:15-16). Hence the inference, that the crown of the Torah is greater than the other two crowns.

2 The sages said, “A bastard who is a scholar take precedence over an ignorant High Priest; for it is said, “More precious it is than rubies” (Prov. 3:15), that is (more to be honored is the scholar) than the High Priest who enters the innermost Sanctuary.\*

3 Of all precepts, none is equal in importance to the study of the Torah. Nay, study of the Torah is equal to them all, for study leads to practice. Hence, study always takes precedence of practice.+

4 If the opportunity of fulfilling a specific precept would interrupt the study of the Torah and the precept can be performed by others, one should not interrupt study. Otherwise, the precept should be performed and then the study be resumed.

5 At the judgment hereafter, a man will first be called to account in regard to his fulfillment of the duty of study, and afterwards concerning his other activities. Hence, the sages said, “A person should always occupy himself with the Torah, whether for its own sake or for other reasons. For study of the Torah, even when pursued from interested motives, will lead to study for its own sake” (see Pesachim 50b).

6 He whose heart prompts him to fulfill this duty properly, and to be crowned with the crown of the Torah, must not allow his mind to be diverted to other objects. He must not aim at acquiring Torah as well as riches and honor at the same time. “This is the way for the study of the Torah. A morsel of bread with salt you must eat, and water by measure you must drink; you must sleep upon the ground and live a life of hardship, the while you toil in the Torah” (Ethics of the Fathers 6:4). “It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task; but neither are you free to neglect it” (*ibid.* 2:21). “And if you have studied much Torah, you have earned much reward. The recompense will be proportionate to the pains” (*ibid.* 5:26).

7 Possibly you may say: When I shall have accumulated money, I shall resume my studies; when I shall have provided for my needs and have leisure from my affairs, I shall resume my studies. Should such a thought enter your mind, you will never win the crown of the Torah. “Rather make the study of the Torah your fixed occupation” (Ethics of the

Fathers 1:15) and let your secular affairs engage you casually, and do not say: “When I shall leisure, I shall study; perhaps you may never have leisure” (*ibid.* 2:5).

8 In the Torah it is written, “It is not in heaven . . . neither is it beyond the sea” (Deut. 30:12-13). “It is not in heaven,” this means that the Torah is not to be found with the arrogant; “nor beyond the sea,” that is, it is not found among those who cross the ocean. Hence, our sages said, “Nor can one who is engage overmuch in business grow wise” (Ethics of the Father 2:6). They have also exhorted us, “Engage little in business and occupy yourself with the Torah” (*ibid.* 4:12).

9 The words of the Torah have been compared to water, as it is said, “O everyone that thirsts, come for water” (Is. 55:1); this teaches us that just as water does not accumulate on a slope but flows away, while in a depression it stays, so the words of the Torah are not to be found in the arrogant or haughty but only in him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, who sits in the dust at the feet of the wise and banishes from his heart lusts and temporal delights, works a little daily, just enough to provide for his needs, if he would otherwise have nothing to eat, and devotes the rest of the day and night to the study of the Torah.

10 One, however, who makes up his mind to study Torah and not to work but to live on charity, profanes the name of God, brings the Torah into contempt, extinguishes the light of religion, brings evil upon himself, and deprives himself of life hereafter, for it is forbidden to derive any temporal advantage from the words of the Torah. The sages said, “Whoever derives a profit for himself from the words of the Torah is helping on his own destruction” (Ethics of the Fathers 4:17). They have further charged us, “Make not of them a crown wherewith to aggrandize yourself, nor a spade wherewith to dig” (*ibid.* 4:7). They likewise exhorted us, “Love work hate lordship” (*ibid.* 1:10). “All study of the Torah, not conjoined with work, must, in the end, be futile, and become a cause of sin” (*ibid.* 2:2). The end of such a person will be that he will rob his fellow creatures.\*

11 It indicates a high degree of excellence in a man to maintain himself by the labor of his hands. And this was the normal practice of the early saints. Thus, one secures all honor and happiness here and hereafter, as it is said, “When you eat of the labor of your hands, happy shall you be, and it shall be well with you” (Ps. 128:2). Happy shall you be in this world, and it shall be well with you in the world to come, which is altogether good.

12 The words of the Torah do not abide with one who studies listlessly, nor with those who learn amid luxury and high living, but only with one who mortifies himself for the sake of the Torah, constantly enduring physical discomfort and not permitting sleep to his eyes nor slumber to his eyelids. “This is the law, when a man dies in a tent” (Num. 19:14). The sages explain the text metaphorically thus: “The Torah only abides with him who mortifies himself in the tents of the wise.” And so Solomon, in his wisdom, said, “If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small indeed” (Prov. 24:10). He also said, “Also my wisdom stood unto me” (Eccles. 2:9). This is explained by our wise men thus, “The wisdom that I learned in wrath, this has remained with me.” The sages said

“There is a solemn covenant that anyone who toils privately in learning, will become wise, as it is said, “With the lowly (literally, the *reserved*) is wisdom” (Prov. 11:2). If one recites aloud while studying, what he learns will remain with him. But he who reads silently soon forgets.

13 While it is a duty to study by day and by night, most of one’s knowledge is acquired at night. Accordingly, when one aspires to win the crown of the Torah, he should be especially heedful of all his nights and not waste a single one of them in sleep, eating, drinking, idle talk, and so forth, but devote all of them to study of the Torah and words of wisdom. The sages said, “That sound of the Torah has worth which is heard by night, as it is said ‘Arise, cry out in the night’ (Lam. 2:19). And whoever occupies himself with the study of the Torah by night—a mark of spiritual grace distinguishes him by day, as it is said, ‘By day the Lord will command His loving kindness, and in the night His song shall be with me, even a prayer unto the God of my life’ (Ps. 42:9). A house wherein the words of the Torah are not heard at night will be consumed by fire, as it is said, ‘All darkness is laid up for his treasures; a fire not blown by man shall consume him’ (Job 20:26). ‘Because he has despised the word of the Lord’ (Num. 15:31)—this refers to one who has utterly neglected [the study of ] the words of the Torah.” And, so too, one who is able to occupy himself with the Torah and does not do so, or who had read Scripture and learned Mishnah and gave them up for worldly inanities, and abandoned and completely renounced this study, is included in the condemnation, “Because he has despised the word of the Lord.” The sages said, “Whoever neglects the Torah because of wealth will, at last, be forced to neglect it owing to poverty. And whoever fulfills the Torah in poverty, will ultimately fulfill it amid wealth” (Ethics of the Fathers 4:11, with order of sentences reversed). And this is explicitly set forth in the Torah, as it is said, “Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and with gladness of heart, by reason of the abundance of all things, therefore shall you serve your enemy” (Deut. 28:47-48). It is also said “That He might afflict you . . . to do you good at your latter end . . .” (*ibid.* 8:16).

## **Chapter 5:1;4;12 & 13**

1 Just as a person is commanded to honor and revere his father, so is he under an obligation to honor and revere his teacher, even to a greater extent than his father; for his father gave him life in this world, while his teacher who instructs him in wisdom, secures for him life in the world to come.

4 A disciple who is not thus qualified and nevertheless gives decisions is “wicked, foolish, and of an arrogant spirit” (Ethics of the Fathers 4:9). And of him it is said, “For she has cast down many wounded” (Prov. 7:26). On the other hand, a sage who is qualified and refrains from rendering decisions withholds knowledge of the Torah and puts stumbling blocks before the blind. Of him it is said “Even the mighty are all her slain” (Prov. 7:26). The students of small minds who have acquired an insufficient knowledge of the Torah, and yet seek to aggrandize themselves before the ignorant and among their townsmen by impertinently putting themselves forward and presuming to judge and render decisions in Israel—these are ones who multiply strife, devastate the world, quench the light of the Torah, and spoil the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts. Of such, Solomon, in his wisdom, said, “Seize for us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vineyard” (Song of Songs 2:15).

12 As pupils are bound to honor their teacher, so a teacher ought to show courtesy and friendliness to his pupils. The sages said, “Let the honor of your disciples be as dear to you as your own” (Ethics of the Fathers 4:15). A man should take an interest in his pupils and love them, for they are his spiritual children who will bring him happiness in this world and in the world hereafter.

13 Disciples increase the teacher’s wisdom and broaden his mind. The sages said, “Much wisdom I learned from my teachers, more from my colleagues; from my pupils, most of all.” Even as a small piece of wood kindles a large log, so a pupil of small attainments sharpens the mind of his teacher, so that by his questions, he elicits glorious wisdom.

## **Chapter 6:1; 3; 5; 11**

1 It is a duty to honor every scholar, even if he is not one's teacher, as it is said, "You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of the old man" (Lev. 19:32). "Old man" refers to one who has acquired wisdom.

3 It is improper for a sage to put the people to inconvenience by deliberately passing before them, so that they should have to stand up before him. He should use a short route and endeavor to avoid notice so that they should not be troubled to stand up. The sages were wont to use circuitous and exterior paths, where they were not likely to meet those who might recognize them, so as not to trouble them.

11 It is exceedingly iniquitous to contemn sages or hate them. Jerusalem was destroyed only-when its scholars were treated with contumely, as it is said, "but they mocked the messengers of God and despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets" (II Chron. 36:16); this means that they "despised those who taught His words." So too, the text, "And if you shall abhor My statutes" (Lev. 26:15) means "if you abhor the teachers of My statutes." Whoever contemns the sages will have no portion in the world to come, and is included in the censure. "For the word of the Lord has he despised" (Num. 15:31).