ג. ברכות התורה לדעת רבים מהראשונים היא מצות עשה מן התורה, ונלמד מן הפסוק דכתיב [דברים לב, ג] "כִּי שֵׁם ה' אֶקְרָא הָבוּ גֹדֶל לֵאלֹהֵינוּ". אולם לדעת הרמב"ם והשלחן ערוך חיוב ברכות התורה הוא מדרבנן. וכן עיקר להלכה. ונתבאר בהקדמה.

ולכן מי שנסתפק אם בירך ברכות התורה, לא יחזור לברך מספק, שאף לענין ברכות התורה יש לומר ספק ברכות להקל. אלא יברך בלי שם ומלכות, [ויהרהר שם ומלכות בתוך הברכה], או ישמע ברכות התורה מאחר, או יכוין לצאת ידי חובה בברכת "אהבת עולם", וילמד מעט מיד אחר תפלת שמונה עשרה. [באו"ח וישב הי"ב, כה"ח סי' מו ס"ק נב, יבי"א ח"ח סי' ה בהערה, הליכו"ע ח"א עמ' נז]

ד. אסור לעסוק בדברי תורה, קודם שיברך ברכות התורה. [יבי"א ח"ד סי' ח סוף אות כג]. **אולם מי שהוא אנוס** ואינו יכול לברך ברכות התורה, יכול ללמוד בלא ברכה. [הליכות שלמה תפלה עמ' עו]

Day 23

Is it a Torah obligation?

3) Many *Aharonim* ruled that the obligation to recite the blessings over the mitzvah of Torah study is mandated by the Torah, since the Talmud derives this obligation from the verse (*Devarim* 32:3), "כִּי שֵׁם ה' אֶקְרָא הָבוּ גֹדֶל לֵאלֹהֵינוּ – When I pronounce God's Name, give tribute to our Master." Rambam and the *Shulhan Arukh*, however, ruled that this obligation is an institution of our Sages, and this is the halakha in practice, as explained in the preface to this *Siman*. Therefore, if someone cannot remember whether or not he has recited the blessings, he must not recite them in full. He may recite the blessings while only thinking of God's Names without pronouncing them verbally. Alternatively, he may ask another person who is about to recite the blessings to recite them on his behalf as well.

Another option is for this person to recite the *shaharit* prayers and to have in mind when reciting the blessing of *Ahavat olam* that it should count as the blessing for Torah study. Immediately after completing the *Amida*, he should recite some words of Torah to validate the blessing as such.[61]

Forbidden to study Torah without the blessings

4) It is forbidden to study Torah each day until one recites the blessings over this mitzvah.[62] Nevertheless, if for some reason it is impossible for someone to recite the blessings, he may study Torah without reciting them.[63]

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61. This was already explained fully in the preface to this *Siman*.

62. The responsa *Betzel Hahokhma* (#1:18; appendix, page 187a) stated that it is not actually forbidden to study Torah without reciting the blessings. There is a mitzvah to recite the blessings, but if someone does not know how to recite them, he may study Torah without reciting them. This is no different than any other mitzvah – we are supposed to recite the appropriate blessing before performing it, but if for some reason we cannot recite the blessing we may still fulfill the mitzvah.

Maran the Rishon Letziyon (responsa *Yabia Omer* Vol. IV, #8:23) pointed out, in contrast, that it is clear from many *Aharonim* that it is forbidden to study Torah unless one has recited the blessings. For example, Harav Hayim of Volozhin cited Harav Eliyahu of Vilna issuing this ruling (foreword to Harav Eliyahu's commentary on *Sifra Ditzni'uta*). This is likewise the ruling of Harav Naftali Tzevi Yehuda Berlin (responsa *Meshiv Davar O.H.* #47), Harav HIDA (responsa *Yosef Ometz* #66), and the *Haye Adam* (9:11). In a gloss included in the new edition of *Yabia Omer*, Maran the Rishon Letziyon added the responsa of Harav Shimon Greenfeld, responsa *Keren leDavid*, and the author of *Hazon Ish* (as testified in the *Imre Yosher*, *Minhage haHazon Ish*, *hilkhot netillat yadayim* #10).

63. This is the ruling of Harav Shelomo Zalman Auerbach (*Halikhot Shelomo Tefilla* page 76). He explained that our Sages never proclaimed that it is forbidden to perform

על מה מברכים ברכות התורה

ה. צריך לברך ברכות התורה, בין למקרא, בין למשנה, בין לגמרא. בין למדרש. [ש"ע סי' מז ס"א וברמ"א]. וכן לדברי הזוהר וקבלה. [כה"ח סופר ס"ק ג]

Birkhot Hatorah – When These Blessings Are Needed

What texts are considered Torah study

5) We must recite the blessings over Torah study whether we wish to study the *Tanach*, the Mishnah, the Talmud, or the Midrash.[64] It is likewise necessary before studying the *Zohar* or other works of Kabbalah.[65]

a mitzvah without first reciting the appropriate blessing; they only added the additional mitzvah of reciting a blessing beforehand. This is in contrast to the blessings instituted for reciting before eating or drinking; in that case, they emphatically declared (*Berakhot* 35a) that anyone who eats or drinks without first reciting the appropriate blessing is considered to be a thief who has robbed sacred property. Even if the halakha forbids studying Torah without first reciting the blessings, that halakha applies only when the person is capable of reciting the blessings. If he cannot, then he may study Torah without the blessings. This is comparable to an *onen*, who is allowed to eat without reciting any blessings since it is forbidden for him to recite them.

Rav Auerbach's first argument, it seems, contradicts the ruling of Harav Shelomo Luria (responsa #68) that if someone performs a mitzvah such as eating a meal in a sukkah without the blessing designated for that mitzvah, he is guilty of committing a grievous sin. See more about this in HaKeter's *Birkat Hamazon Bekhavana* Hebrew Edition (*birurim* #2). Rav Auerbach's second argument is solid, however, and Maran the Rishon Letziyon supported it in responsa *Hazon Ovadya* (#26).

64. The Talmud (*Berakhot* 11a) displays several opinions regarding this subject: Rav Huna ruled that the blessings are necessary in order to recite verses from *Tanakh*, but not in order to learn Midrash. Ribbi El'azar ruled that the blessings are necessary for *Tanakh* and for Midrash, since Midrash involves the interpretation of the verses. This includes *Mekhilta*, *Safra*, and *Sifri*. The blessings are not necessary to study Mishnah according to Ribbi El'azar. Ribbi Yohanan ruled that the blessings are necessary for Mishnah as well, but not for Talmud. Rava ruled that they are necessary for Talmud as well.

Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 7:10) ruled that the blessings are necessary whether the person wishes to study the Written Torah or the Oral Torah, following the final opinion of Rava. This is likewise the ruling of the *Shulhan Arukh* (47:2). The Rama added that the blessings are necessary for Midrash as well, and it is not clear why Maran omitted Midrash from the list. Despite that omission, the *Peri Hadash*, cited by the *Mishna Berura* (47:3), insisted that Maran agreed with Rama, and assumed that the reader would understand that Midrash is included in the word *Mikra*.

65. *Zohar* and Kabbalah

The *Arokh Hashulhan* Epstein (47:80) wrote that it is unclear whether one must recite the blessings over Torah study before studying Aggadah, *Midrash Rabba*, or the wisdom of Kabbalah. Citing Rabbenu Yona's commentary to *Berakhot*, he demonstrated that the blessings are necessary before studying the Mishnah since it is the basis of the halakha, and before studying Talmud since it explains how halakha is derived from the verses of the Torah. We must recite them before studying Midrash since the Midrash demonstrates the use of the 13 "tools" in deriving halakha from the verses, such as *kal vahomer* and *gezera shava*. But all these areas of Torah study are connected to halakha. Aggadah and Kabbalah are not studies of the halakha at all, and therefore it might be that no blessing is necessary before studying those subjects.

But it is also possible that the Talmud's premise is that Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash are all parts of the Torah given to us at Mount Sinai, as Harav Zalman explained (47:2), or that the blessings are necessary for any subject that is called Torah, as the *Levush* explained (47:2). According to this, the halakha definitely demands that one recite the blessings before studying Aggadah or Kabbalah. The *Arokh Hashulhan* did not come to any clear ruling on this subject.

The *Kaf Hahayim* Sofer (47:3), on the other hand, ruled that there is no question that one must recite the blessings before studying *Zohar* or other works of Kabbalah. He did not offer any explanation for his ruling. Harav Zalman ruled (*Y.D. Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 2:1) that the study of Kabbalah is considered an aspect of the study of Torah or Talmud.

Midrash

Although the *Arokh Hashulhan* wrote that he was not sure whether the blessings are necessary before studying Aggadah, Harav Zalman (ibid.) ruled that Aggadah, such as *Midrash Rabba*, is considered equal to the study of Mishnah, since it likewise expounds on the 613 mitzvot of the Torah.

Mussar* and *Hassidut

The *Mekor Hayim* Bachrach (47:2) ruled that it is necessary to recite the blessings before studying works of biblical exegesis or *mussar*, since they contain verses and citations from the Talmud. The *Piske Teshuvot* (47:3) added that this applies to the study of *Hassidut* philosophies as well. It should be noted that sometimes, and especially in our age, a volume that is spiritually inspiring might not cite any verses or passages from our Sages.

Vignettes About Tzaddikim

The *Piske Teshuvot* (47:3) ruled that it is not necessary to recite the blessings before relating a story about great Torah leaders, even if the stories inspire people to improve their manner of worshipping God. Of course, the halakha is different if the story includes references to halakha or the explanation of a verse.

The Hebrew Alphabet

The responsa *Teshuvot Vehanhagot* (Vol. IV, #17) discussed the question of the need for reciting the blessings in order to learn or teach the Hebrew alphabet. Is the knowledge of recognizing the letters considered Torah knowledge, therefore making the blessings necessary? Or is it only a basic tool for Torah study but not Torah knowledge in and of itself, and there is no need to recite the blessings before studying it?

He explained that the characters of the Hebrew are not arbitrary symbols like the letters of other alphabets. Each letter, and in fact each part of the letter, represents numerous kabbalistic secrets. The mitzvah of Torah study begins with learning to recognize the Hebrew letters that are engraved on the two Tablets of the Law. Learning to distinguish the letters is definitely an act of Torah study and calls for reciting the blessings. Furthermore, even if it is not an actual act of Torah study, since it is a basic skill necessary for all Torah study, it gains the status of Torah study.

Many people, however, do not have any understanding of this, and they think that learning how to read the letters is no more than learning a skill enabling the student to learn Torah afterward. If this is really what these people think, then they would not need to recite the blessings. Their study of the letters is similar to reciting a prayer that happens to include some phrases taken from verses. Several *Poskim* ruled that it is unnecessary to recite the blessings in such a case.

The responsum concludes by ruling that the proper thing to do is to recite the blessings before studying the letters. Nonetheless, if a student comes over and asks someone who has not yet recitied the blessings to identity a letter for him, that person may answer him but he should have in mind that he does not intend to fulfill the mitzvah of Torah study with that answer.

Hebrew Grammar

The responsa *She'elat Ya'abetz*, cited in the *Mishna Berura* (85:5), ruled that it is forbidden to study Hebrew grammar while in a restroom, since it is impossible to avoid thinking about verses from the Torah during such study. Apparently, if not for this problem it would be permissible. We can deduce from this that the study of grammar is not considered Torah study.

The responsa *Salmat Hayim* Sonnenfeld (#108), however, ruled that the classic texts of Hebrew grammar, which were composed by great and devout Torah scholars and are necessary tools for a serious Torah student, are definitely considered Torah texts. A modern grammar text whose purpose is to teach the student how to write proper prose, however, is not considered a Torah text.

It appears from this that when someone studies Hebrew grammar for the purpose of increasing his understanding of Torah texts, he already fulfills the mitzvah of Torah study [even without applying the rules to verses] and he needs to first recite the blessings for that mitzvah. According to *Ya'abetz*, however, the pure study of Hebrew grammar itself is not considered an act of Torah study.

Perhaps there is no contradiction. *Ya'abetz* discussed a case where someone studies grammar as if it was a secular subject. He ruled that even so, it is forbidden to study it in a restroom since he is likely to apply the rules to verses. The *Salmat Hayim* discussed a case where someone studies grammar in order to enhance his Torah knowledge. This is considered an act of the mitzvah of Torah study even if no verses are included in his lesson.

Medicine and Other Sciences

In light of the above discussion, if someone studies geometry for the express purpose of understanding the halakhot of sukkah, *eiruv*, and *kil'ayim* that call for this knowledge, he will be credited for these studies as if it was pure Torah study. The same applies to a Torah scholar who studies medicine in order to decide which people must fast on Yom Kippur and who must not fast because of illness, to someone who studies astronomy in order to understand the mechanics of the Hebrew calendar, or genetics in order to help people who seek fertility treatments. Maran the Rishon Letziyon studied the mechanics of a hot-water boiler in order to rule about using household hot water on Shabbat. All these efforts are considered a facet of Torah study itself. It is unclear, however, whether it becomes necessary to recite the blessings before studying these subjects.

The famed doctor of Shklov, Harav Barukh Shick, cited Harav Eliyahu of Vilna claiming that if someone is ignorant of the pure sciences, he will miss a hundredfold more of his understanding of the Torah. The Torah's wisdom is intertwined with all other wisdom. See more about this in *Otzarot HaGra* (page 275). Mahara"l of Prague wrote

ו. הלומד תורה שבעל פה כמשנה ותלמוד, הלכה ופוסקים, בלא שמבין דבריהם כלל, אינו נחשב ללימוד. [משנ"ב סי' נ ס"ק ב. יבי"א ח"א סי' כו אות ט]. **ויש חולקים** (וראה בהערה). **אולם הקורא בתורה שבכתב או בזוהר הקדוש, נחשב לו ללימוד, אף על פי שאינו מבין מה שקורא.** [יבי"א שם אות ט ובמילואים], **וקודם שיברך** ברכות התורה אסור לעסוק באלו, כמבואר לעיל.

Day 24

Reading Oral Torah without comprehension

6) If someone reads the text of the Oral Torah, such as Mishnah, Talmud, or halakha without understanding what he is reading, it is not considered an act of Torah study at all. If someone reads the text of the Written Torah without understanding it, however, it is considered an act of Torah study.[66] The same applies to the study of the *Zohar*. Therefore, it is forbidden for anyone to read those texts before reciting the blessing over the mitzvah of Torah study, even though he does not understand what he is saying.

(*Derekh Hayim* on *Avot* 3:17) that the natural sciences are the first stage of Divine wisdom, and without it one cannot succeed in climbing the ladder to Torah wisdom.

Despite these testimonies, other areas of wisdom cannot be categorized as Torah itself; they are background information that make it possible to comprehend the Torah. Rambam, for example, described his study of the sciences (letter to Rabbenu Yehonatan Hakohen) referring to them as "maidservants, cooks, and chefs for the Torah, who is the mistress." Therefore, after reciting the blessings for Torah study, one must make sure to recite the verses of *Birkat Kohanim* before continuing with the study of the sciences.

66. Reading Torah Texts Without Comprehension

Harav Zalman (*Y.D. Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 2:12) ruled that if someone reads a text of the Oral Torah without comprehension, it is not considered an act of Torah study whatsoever. In contrast, if someone reads a text of the Written Torah, then even if he does not understand a word he says, he fulfills the mitzvah of Torah study. For this reason, even someone completely ignorant of Torah must recite the blessings over Torah study in the morning before reciting any verses of Torah, and he may recite the blessings before and after the public Torah reading.

The *Magen Avraham*, cited by the *Mishna Berura* (50:2), ruled likewise that when someone recites the chapter of *Ezehu mekoman* or the *baraita* of Ribbi Yishma'el, it counts as Torah study only if he comprehends what he is saying. Otherwise, he accomplishes nothing at all by reciting the words of those passages. Maran the Rishon Letziyon (responsa *Yabia Omer* Vol. I, #26:9) ruled that if someone who is a firstborn recited an entire tractate without comprehension, he cannot celebrate a *siyum* of that tractate on the morning before Pesah in order to exempt himself from fasting that day. He based this ruling on the *Magen Avraham* cited here. He then qualified this ruling, citing Harav HIDA (*More Ba'etzba* 2:44) who explained that if someone read the tractate and understood what each word means, it is sufficient even though he does not understand the subject matter. Maran the Rishon Letziyon emphasized that anyone who is capable of understanding the material but doesn't bother to concentrate or to take the time to comprehend it is guilty of improperly serving God.

This applies to the Mishnah, the Talmud, and halakha. Regarding the holy *Zohar*, Harav HIDA (responsa *Hayim Sha'al* Vol. I, #75:2) declared that simply reading its text has the power to brighten one's soul. He related that the Arizal once instructed a former sinner to recite five pages of the *Zohar* each day, even if he does not comprehend it at all. In *More Ba'etzba* (2:44), Harav HIDA added that reciting the *Zohar* is the most exalted form of Torah study, even if the reader does not understand a word, and even if he pronounces the words incorrectly. By reciting the text, he brings about an incredible rectification for his soul. Although the entire Torah is a conglomerate of God's Names, all other Torah texts disguise the Names with stories and halakhot, and the reader concentrates on the simple meaning of those texts instead of their inner meaning. When someone reads the *Zohar*, however, he is fully aware that this is secret knowledge and that this is the deep mystical wisdom of the Torah, although he does not comprehend what he is reading.

Harav Hayim Palachi (*Zekhira Lehayim* Vol. II, page 53d) cited the kabbalists teaching that when someone learns the Mishnah he must comprehend what he is reading, but when reciting passages of the *Zohar*, God accepts it even if the reader does not comprehend it whatsoever.