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.

ז. המהרהר בדברי תורה, אינו צריך לברך קודם לכן ברכות התורה. (ראה ש"ע סי' מז ס"ד). ומותר להרהר בדברי תורה קודם שיברך ברכות התורה. [הליכות עולם ח"א עמ' נו. יבי"א ח"ד סי' ח אות כא]

Blessing for thinking on Torah subjects

7) It is not necessary to recite the blessings before thinking about Torah subjects, and it is permissible to concentrate on such subjects in your mind even before you recite the blessings.[67] After reciting the blessings, people must make

Based on this, Maran the Rishon Letziyon concluded that if a firstborn man reads the entire *Zohar*, completing it on the day before Pesah, he can make a *siyum* and exempt himself from fasting.

Based on this discussion, if someone wishes to recite passages from the Oral Torah without paying any attention to their meaning, it is not necessary for him to recite the blessings over Torah study beforehand, since this is simply an exercise in reading and not an act of the mitzvah of Torah study. If he at least understands what the words mean, however, he must first recite the blessings. If someone wishes to recite passages from the Written Torah or from the *Zohar*, he likewise must first recite the blessings even if he has no comprension whatsoever of what he is reading. Simply reciting the holy words have a spiritual affect.

The *Piske Teshuvot* (47:3) states: "Regarding the study of the Written Torah, the Mishnah, and the Talmud, one must first recite the blessings even if one does not understand what he is saying." At face value, this is an erroneous ruling. After studying the author's footnotes, one can understand that the final phrase applies only to the Written Torah. Even so, the author mistakenly gave his readers the impression that he disagreed with the *Magen Avraham*.

Mahar"i Moelin and the *Halakha Berura*

The *Halakha Berura* (page 377) ruled that it is necessary to recite the blessings for Torah study even if one intends to read a text of the Oral Torah without understanding it at all. This ruling is based on the responsa of Mahar"i Moelin (*Hahadashot* 45:2). Nevertheless, the *Halakha Berura* failed to add that in such a case the person must make sure to recite the verses of *birkat kohanim* immediately following the blessings, to ensure that they are not recited in vain. As demonstrated above, according to the *Magen Avraham* and other *Aharonim*, the act of reading such a text is not considered an act of Torah study whatsoever.

Other Texts of Kabbalah

Although the act of reciting *Zohar* is considered Torah study even without any comprehension, this does not apply to other texts on kabbalistic subjects, such as the teachings of the Arizal or of Harav Shalom Mizrahi Sharabi. One must not recite the blessings over Torah study intending to read such texts without comprehension, unless he makes sure to first recite the traditional verses of *birkat kohanim*.

67. Mulling Over a Torah Subject

The *Bet Yosef* cited the *Agur* ruling that it is permissible to ponder a Torah subject even before reciting the blessings over the mitzvah of Torah study, because no blessing is necessary in order to think. Thinking is not equal to reciting, just as thinking one's prayers is not an act of praying, and just as one cannot fulfill the mitzvah of *Shema* by thinking of the passage's words. This is likewise the ruling of the Tosafot (to *Berakhot* 20b), concurring with the opinion of Rav Hasda in the Talmud. For this reason, someone who is impure because of a nocturnal pollution may not study Torah or pray verbally, but he may think the words of the *Shema*.

Harav Eliyahu, the *Ga'on* of Vilna

In his glosses on the *Shulhan Arukh* (47:4), Harav Eliyahu of Vilna argued that thinking about Torah is just as much a mitzvah as reciting the words aloud. He cited proof from the verse (*Yehoshua* 1:8), "וְהָגִיתָ בּוֹ יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה – You shall ponder it day and night."

The *Nishmat Adam* (9:4) countered that the Talmud's source for the obligation to recite the blessings over Torah study is the verse of, "כִּי שֵׁם ה' אֶקְרָא – When I call out the Name of God." This verse is specifically referring to verbal communication, for you cannot call out to others in your mind. Our Sages did not institute a blessing for a mitzvah fulfilled through thinking, since an onlooker will not be able to discern that the person is performing any mitzvah when he is doing nothing but thinking. The *Nishmat Adam* noted that the text of the blessing recited by Ashkenazic Jews is לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה – to engage in Torah words. To engage in an activity is to do more than to think or meditate, he reasoned. The verse cited by Harav Eliyahu – *vehagita* – means that God instructed Yehoshua to continue thinking about Torah subjects even in situations when it would not be possible to speak, such as in the heat of battle while conquering the Land. The full-fledged mitzvah of Torah study, however, is to speak the words and enunciate them, as our Sages taught (*Kiddushin* 30a), "that Torah words should be fluent in your mouth." Furthermore, the plain meaning of the word *vehagita* is "you shall speak. Although Harav Eliyahu demonstrated from other verses that this

word refers to thinking, it is likely that this is true only when the word refers to the heart, such as "וְהֶגְיוֹן לִבִּי – my heart's musings" (*Tehillim* 19:15). In support of this, the *Arokh Hashulhan* Epstein (47:10) cited several verses where the term הגה definitely means speaking: **1)** וּלְשׁוֹנִי תֶּהְגֶּה צִדְקֶךָ *Tehillim* 35:28; **2)** פִּי צַדִּיק יֶהְגֶּה חָכְמָה *Tehillim* 37:30; **3)** לֹא יֶהְגּוּ בגרונם *Tehillim* 115:7. Whenever the term הגה refers to thinking, the word heart is added. Examples of this are: **1)** וְהֶגְיוֹן לִבִּי; **2)** וְהֶגְיוֹן לִבִּי תְּבוּנוֹת *Tehillim* 49:4; **3)** לֵב צַדִּיק יֶהְגֶּה *Mishle* 15:28; **4)** כִּי שֹׂד יֶהְגֶּה לִבָּם *Mishle* 24:2. According to this, the verse in *Yehoshua* must be translated, "You shall speak of it day and night." The text of the blessings over Torah study demonstrates that the mitzvah is to speak the words of Torah, since we ask that the words be pleasant "in our mouths and in the mouths of Your nation."

The responsa *Binyan Olam* (*O.H.* #6) challenged the *Nishmat Adam's* first argument, citing Rashi's comment in *Berakhot* 21: When I call out in the Name of God, meaning when I recite the blessing over Torah study, give homage to our Master by responding Amen. According to this interpretation, the verse is not describing how to fulfill the mitzvah of Torah study at all.

Maran the Rishon Letziyon (responsa *Yabia Omer* Vol. IV, #8:8) countered that the *Nishmat Adam* drew his proof from the interpretation of Rabbenu David Abudarham, the Maharsh"a, and the *Sefer Haredim*, all of whom wrote that the phrase "When I call out in the Name of God" refers to the act of studying Torah out loud.

Regarding the meaning of the term הגה, the *Binyan Olam* argued that we can say quite the opposite – that the term always means thinking unless the Torah specifies that it refers to speaking, as it does in all the examples cited above. It must be, he concluded, that the term refers to both thinking and speaking unless the verse specifies one or the other. Therefore, Harav Eliyahu of Vilna was correct in saying that the blessings are necessary before speaking words of Torah and before thinking words of Torah.

Maran the Rishon Letziyon added (ibid. #8:10) that there is no doubt that the ideal manner of Torah study is to speak the words, as our Sages taught (*Eruvin* 54a), "Words of Torah bring life to those who pronounce them verbally." Although Ravina ruled that thinking is equal to speaking, he agreed that the mitzvah of Torah study must be fulfilled by speaking the words, as our Sages taught in *Eruvin*. For this reason, our Sages instituted these blessings to be recited for fulfilling the mitzvah in the ideal manner, which is to speak the words of Torah.

Why is it so important to speak the words, when it is possible to study Torah by reading the text without pronouncing anything? It is because it is not enough to simply learn the information; one must learn it in order to remember it and recall it when one needs the information. If someone studies the text without speaking the words, he will likely forget what he has learned, as the Talmud warned in *Eruvin* (54a). Our Sages spoke severely about someone who, due to his own negligence, forgets the Torah he has learned, equating him to a woman who goes through all the efforts of pregnancy and birth, but afterward the child dies and she has to bury him.

The *Levush* (47:4) concurred with the *Shulhan Arukh*, explaining that our Sages would never institute a blessing for a mitzvah fulfilled through thinking. Maran the Rishon Letziyon compared this to the explanation offered by the *Bet Yosef* (*Siman* 432) that no blessing was instituted for the mitzvah of *bittul hametz* since it can be accomplished through thinking without saying anything. Although there are *Poskim* who ruled that we do recite a blessing for the mitzvah of *bittul hametz*, it could be that those *Poskim* ruled that the *bittul* must be verbalized and that it is not fulfilled through thoughts alone.

Regarding the mitzvah of *teruma*, the halakha allows the owner to determine which portion of the produce becomes *teruma* through his thoughts, even if he does not say anything. Even so, our Sages instituted a blessing to be recited before performing the mitzvah of separating *teruma* from produce. This does not contradict Maran's principle, as Harav Akiva Eiger pointed out, since the mitzvah is to perform the physical act of separating the *teruma* from the rest of the produce.

In practice

The *Ben Ish Hai* (*parashat Vayeshev* halakha 12) and the *Kaf Hahayim* Sofer (47:6) both ruled that it is permissible to think about Torah subjects before reciting the blessings for the mitzvah of Torah study. The *Me'orer Yeshenim* (page 10a) ruled that we must avoid thinking of Torah before reciting the blessings in deference to the opinion forwarded by Harav Eliyahu, but Maran the Rishon Letziyon ruled (*Halikhot Olam* Vol. I, page 56) ruled that we do not have to take that opinion into consideration, and we may think of Torah subjects before reciting the blessings.

The *Mishna Berura* (47:7) cited Harav Eliyahu's ruling that it is forbidden to think about Torah subjects before reciting the blessings, but he did not say that according to Harav Eliyahu one may recite the blessings and proceed to study Torah in one's mind without pronouncing the words. This is because, as Harav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv commented on *Berakhot* 11b, that Harav Eliyahu never ruled definitely that a blessing is needed for thinking of Torah, only that it might be needed.

The responsa *She'elat Yaakov* (#2) asserted that he had a tradition that Harav Eliyahu always recited the blessings over Torah study the moment he woke up to make sure that he did not think any Torah thoughts before reciting the blessings. This account implies that once he recited the blessings, he freely thought about Torah without bothering to recite the verses of *birkat kohanim*.

The responsa *Divre Mordekhai* Friedburg (#59:24) insisted, however, that Harav Eliyahu would not have recited the blessings in order to think Torah thoughts without verbalizing them. He surely recited the verses as we are accustomed and then allowed himself to think freely. The *Devar Avraham* (responsa Vol. I, #15:26) likewise maintained that Harav Eliyahu did not disagree in

ולכן יש ליזהר לאותן הלומדים בהרהור, שיזהרו להוציא קצת דברי תורה בפה אחר ברכת התורה (אם אינו אומר פסוקי ברכת כהנים). [משנ"ב ס"ק ה, וע"ע כה"ח ס"ק ו]

ח. אף על פי שהמהרהר בדברי תורה אינו צריך לברך ברכות התורה, מכל מקום הרוצה לעיין בספר, נכון להחמיר שיברך תחלה ברכות התורה (ויסמוך להם פרשת כהנים כנהוג), ואז יוכל לעיין בספר בהרהור בלא פקפוק. [ראה יבי"א ח"ד סי' ח סוף אות כא]

sure to recite the traditional verses or to read aloud the Torah text that they are studying.[68]

Reading without pronouncing the words

8) Although it is not necessary to recite the blessings before one thinks about Torah subjects, that is true only if he simply thinks in his mind. If he wishes to read a Torah book without saying the words, however, he should first recite the blessings and the traditional verses of *birkat kohanim*. Then he may learn in whatever manner he wishes.[69]

practice with the *Shulhan Arukh*. On the other hand, the responsa *Halakhot Ketanot* (Vol. II, #159, cited in responsa *Yabia Omer* Vol. IV, #8:13) ruled expressly that one is permitted to recite the blessings and to think of Torah subjects immediately afterward without verbalizing the words.

If someone wakes up during the night and intends to go right back to sleep, may he think of Torah subjects until he drowses off? There is a rumor that the author of *Hatam Sofer* suggested that in such a case one may think the words of the blessings before beginning to think about the Torah. See the comments of the responsa *Minhat Yitzhak* (Vol. V, #100) and the *Piske Teshuvot* (*Siman* 47, footnote 56). Sefardic Jews, however, can certainly rely on the *Shulhan Arukh* and think about Torah subjects without reciting the blessings.

68. The *Kaf Hahayim* Sofer (47:6) commented that if someone recited the blessings over Torah study and then spoke about mundane subjects before he begins studying Torah, he might be guilty of interrupting between the blessing and the mitzvah. The *Shulhan Arukh* (47:9) ruled that one must avoid such an interruption. If the person recited the traditional verses of *birkat kohanim* immediately after reciting the blessings, he has avoided this issue.

69. The *Ben Ish Hai* (*parashat Vayeshev* halakha 12) mentioned that according to some *Poskim*, it is permissible to think in one's mind about Torah subjects without reciting the blessings, but it is not permissible to read a book on Torah subjects even if one does not say the words. The *Minhat Aharon* (5:34, cited in the *Kaf Hahayim* Sofer 47:7) asserted that when someone studies a book he invariably says the words occasionally, and therefore the blessings are necessary. The *Petah Hadevir* (47:2) added that the *Bet Oved* concurred with this ruling.

Harav Zalman (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 2:12) ruled: "Every person must take care to pronounce all the text that he studies at least loud enough to hear himself. This applies to the *Tanach*, the Mishnah, and the Talmud. When deep in thought trying to decipher the intricacies of the material one is learning, however, it is not necessary to verbalize one's thoughts. Anyone who is able to verbalize the words when he studies Torah texts and does not take the effort to do so, *fails to fulfill the mitzvah of* 'וּלְמַדְתֶּם אוֹתָם' – *You must learn them*.'"

Harav Yaakov of Emden, cited in responsa *Yabia Omer* (Vol. IV, #8:21), likewise ruled that it is not necessary to verbalize one's thoughts while analyzing the material one is studying. Analyzing Torfah concepts in one's mind is considered genuine Torah study, and one must recite the blessings before engaging in such activity, even if one does not verbalize one's monologue. Maran the Rishon Letziyon explained that it is impossible to read any Torah text critically without a back-and-forth discussion in one's mind, and he cited proof for this from the *Shibole Haleket's* discussion of the halakha forbidding reading letters on Shabbat.

The Rama (68:1), however, seems to imply that the act of studying a Torah text without verbalizing the words is not equal to the regular mitzvah of Torah study. Despite this, the *Petah Hadevir* cited a number of *Aharonim* who ruled that one should not read a Torah text without first reciting the blessings over the mitzvah of Torah study. This is likewise the conclusion of Maran the Rishon Letziyon.