

TORAH WEEKLY



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Always a Challenge

By: Rabbi Akiva Stern (Originally Published 2016)

Like most complex endeavors, learning how to drive a car begins as a cognitive task, demanding an unwavering focus. A new driver struggles with simultaneously ensuring the vehicle is straight, keeping an eye on the mirrors and maintaining an appropriate speed. Not to mention the other drivers whizzing past, looking at him. But in short order, this becomes an associative task, one we do almost entirely without thought. An experienced driver can weave through traffic while munching on a sandwich and still carry on an intense conversation with his passenger with no difficulty whatsoever! This idea is true in almost all human endeavors or disciplines. No matter how complex, at a certain level of practice and precision any task becomes relatively simple.

It seems from Rashi in the beginning of our parsha that Torah study is a glaring exception to this rule. Prior to the section of the Tochacha (Admonition), we are told of the blessing granted to those who follow the will of G-d. The verse begins, "If you will go with my decrees and safeguard my commandments and observe them..." (Bechukosai 26:3) Rashi (ibid.) explains that from the apparent redundancy of the verse we can deduce that the end of the verse is referring to mitzvos while the beginning is talking about Torah study. Furthermore, he understands that the words mean "if you toil in my Torah."

Rashi's comprehensive explanation of the verse highlights the incredible importance of committing to, and expending effort in, the pursuit of Torah study. The entirety of the subsequent blessings are associated only with rigorous study, not armchair philosophy. We also understand from Rashi that the difficulty Torah study entails is not simply a condition that plagues beginner learners, but it is, rather, an essential rule. At all levels of study, we will always meet resistance and have to work hard and apply ourselves to succeed.

How and why can this be?

Rabbi Shimshon Pincus (1944/45-2001) explains with a profound idea found in the Zohar. The Zohar cryptically states that in the Torah, G-d can be found. The explanation seems to be that being that the Torah is a manifestation of G-d's will, it is therefore a representation of G-d Himself! With this in mind, we can better understand. G-d is infinite and unlimited. It is not possible for a finite human being to complete the study of Torah or to even become proficient to the point that it is no longer challenging.

This explanation brings two very important ideas to the fore. The first is that Torah study is unlike every other form of education. In other disciplines, the goal is to become knowledgeable and/or proficient. They are but a means to an end. In contrast, Torah study is the purpose itself. When we study Torah, we have the unbelievable opportunity to know G-d and cleave to him in the deepest way available to a human being. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, if we find ourselves feeling blasé, bored and unexcited about our Torah study, there must be something fundamentally wrong with the approach to our methodology of learning. It behooves us to revisit and revamp our appreciation of Torah, and what better time to do so than this auspicious period of Sefiras Ha'Omer? May we arrive at Shavuot with a renewed excitement for the holy Torah.

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Rabbi Akiva Stern

PAST



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2012-2017

Years as a Denver
Kollel Scholar

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Rabbi, Aish Kodesh

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