



Forgetting the Torah

Or: All the Torah I Never Learned

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While I love learning Torah, I have a very poor memory for it. More often than not, when I re-encounter a piece of Torah that I have surely learned before, it's as if it's for the first time.

Given on the one hand, my love for Torah and a genuine desire to learn Talmud and Midrash, Hasidut and Musar, and on the other, the inevitability that I will forget all of this Torah I learn, I find myself wondering on this Shavuot, what is the point? What is the point of staying up late all night long learning Torah that I know at worst by next year's time I will have already forgotten and, at best, will just become a shady shift-shaping memory of something I once learned? Often I have the experience of feeling the shadows of Torah I once learned shimmering on the peripheries of my brain, so close and so far, unable to be recalled into concrete existence.

According to the Talmud (Niddah 30b), we actually learn all of Torah during our early months spent in the womb with God as our teacher. However,



תלמוד בבלי נדה ל:

כיון שבא לאויר העולם, בא מלאך וסטר על פיו ומשכחו כל התורה כולה

Talmud Bavli Niddah 30b

when [the fetus is ready to leave the womb and] enter the world, an angel comes, slaps it on its mouth, and causes it to forget all of Torah in its entirety.

There is something at once beautiful and deeply sad about this teaching. It is beautiful that as fetuses in the womb, God reveals all Torah to us. There is this moment in our lives, before we even enter the world, in which we get to know all of Torah and God Godself teaches it to us through intimate encounter. And yet, this Torah is then taken from us the moment we enter the world through a sort of violence, a slap on the mouth, causing us not only to forget all of the Torah God taught us, but to forget this direct encounter with God. This teaching begs the question: what is the point of God teaching us all of the Torah if only to take it away from us before we enter the world? What kind of gift is this?

Despite the text's ending in which we are made to forget all of the Torah that we have learned, I imagine, after the fact, there still remains an impression, a remnant of that close encounter. I wonder if God teaches us all of the Torah not so that we should actually know the Torah but for the sake of the impression that it leaves on us, a trace of something we once knew. This trace is the shadows of Torah shimmering on the peripheries that draws us in and causes us to long for what we lost. There is some subconscious part of us that remembers this close encounter with God and wants to get back to that Torah. If we never learned the Torah, perhaps there would be nothing to draw us back to it; there would be no impression calling us home.



According to a *midrash*, it is actually a good thing that we forget the Torah that we learn. In Midrash Kohelet Rabbah, R. Abahu teaches quite simply:

קהלת רבה א:יג

זו שפוטתה של תורה, שאדם למד תורה ושוכחה.

Kohelet Rabbah 1:13

This is the manner of Torah, a person learns Torah and forgets it

This is not something to be mourned; this is simply a fact of the nature of Torah learning. We learn and then we forget. The rabbis then expand upon R. Abahu's statement and teach:

לטובתו אדם למד תורה ושוכח, שאלו היה אדם למד תורה ולא שוכחה, היה מתעסק בתורה שנים שלש שנים וחוזר ומתעסק במלאכתו, ולא היה משגיח בה לעולם כל ימיו. אלא מתוך שאדם למד תורה ושוכחה, אינו מזיז ואינו מזיע את עצמו מדברי תורה.

It is for her benefit that a person learns Torah and forgets, because if a person learned Torah and did not forget it, she would engage with Torah two or three years and then return and engage with her work, and she would not invest in it all of her days, rather instead because a person learns and forgets it, she doesn't move herself from the words of Torah.

Perhaps, if we were gifted all of the Torah at birth and actually allowed to remember it, that's where our engagement with Torah would stop. We would have one close encounter with God and then we'd check the box of Torah learning and move on with our lives. As a result of forgetting, we are forced to keep coming back to Torah—to work harder, to go deeper, to rediscover that which we lost.



In *Sihot ha-Ra"n* (26), Rebbe Nahman similarly teaches that there is great benefit in forgetting. He shares the following parable about one who learns and forgets.¹ Once, there were people who were hired to fill barrels. Unfortunately, these barrels had holes such that whenever the workers filled them, the contents would simply spill out. Now, the ones who didn't quite get it, when their contents would spill out, they'd grow frustrated and say, why should we struggle to fill these again if they are just going to spill again. However, the smart ones—they would say, well, since we're being paid by day for our labor, what difference does it matter if the contents spill out, since I will still be paid. So too, Rebbe Nahman teaches about one who learns and forgets.

אף-על-פי ששוכח למודו, שכרו לא יקפח מכל יום ויום.

Even though one forgets one's learning, one's pay is not deducted from day to day.

When it comes to learning Torah, we are meant to be barrel-fillers. In the Book of Joshua, we read:

יהושע א:

לֹא-יָמוּשׁ סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה מִפִּיךָ וְהָיְתָ בּוֹ יוֹמָם וָלַיְלָה

Joshua 1:8

Let the Torah not move from your lips; recite it by day and by night.

Day in and day out, we fill our barrels. We center our lives around learning; we keep the words of the Torah on our lips. The point is not how much Torah we know at the end of the day; the point is that we have oriented our lives around Torah. This is a central part of what it means

¹ The parable is found also in *Vayikra Rabbah* 19:2, among other places.



to be Jewish: וְהָגִיתָ בּוֹ יוֹמָם וּלְיָלָה.

As someone who has forgotten a lot of Torah, I find this teaching to be extremely comforting. The goal of learning Torah is not to amass a large amount of Torah learning. Rather, the goal is simply to be a person who regularly and routinely learns Torah as a part of their daily rhythm. While I can't promise I will remember by next Shavuot the Torah that I learn on this Shavuot, I can keep filling my barrel, one day after the next.

May all of the Torah that we learn this Shavuot leave a sweet impression on our hearts that will outlast the details of the Torah itself, calling us back for more.

