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Parshas Tazria

Suffering in Learning Torah

SELECTED DRASHAS
FROM
THE AUTHOR OF
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THAT HAVE **SOMETHING**
TO DO WITH
THE WEEKLY TORAH
PORTION

Suffering In Learning Torah

Suffering In Learning Enables A Person To Connect to Hashem's Torah

Chazal¹ state that three things are acquired only with suffering (*yissurin*): Torah, Eretz Yisrael, and the Next World. Thus, the way to get to the Torah is through *yissurin*, suffering.

The Hebrew term for “suffering”, *yissurin*, contains the letters *yud*, *samech* and *reish* (רִישׁ), which has the same *gematria* (numerical value in Hebrew) as the Hebrew word “*ra*” (רָע), “evil”². The letters *yud*, *samech* and *reish* which form the root of the word *yissurin*\suffering can also spell the word “*yaseir*”, to “remove”. In other words, suffering can remove from upon ourselves the forces of evil and impurity that are preventing us from holiness, and then we are enabled to acquire the Torah. Thus, suffering is meant to ‘remove’ the evil from upon us.

(There are other reasons as well why a person needs to undergo suffering in order to acquire the Torah. But this is the general reason: it is because exertion in learning Torah (*ameilus*) is needed in order to remove the outer evil forces that have taken hold upon a person.)

¹ Berachos 5a

² The letter ך is equal to 10, the letter ם is equal to 60, and the letter ך is equal to 200, adding up for a total of 270. The word רע is equal to 270 because ך is 200 and ך is 70, adding up to 270.

In the discussion here, what we want to know is: What kind of suffering do we need to undergo in order to acquire Torah?

Physical Suffering In Our Learning: “Exertion In Learning”

The first part of the suffering in learning Torah is that we must have *ameilus* (exertion) in our Torah learning. Suffering is a part of how we acquire the Torah; it is not simply meant to remove the evil from upon us. The Sages state that one of the 48 ways to acquire the Torah is through *yissurin*\suffering\exertion in learning.³

Let us understand how we undergo *yissurin* (suffering) in our Torah learning. Chazal say that we must have *ameilus* (exertion) in learning the Torah. The concept of *ameilus* exists to remove the *he'elam* (concealment) upon our soul from understanding the Torah; we have addressed this previously.⁴

Thus, it is the aspect of *yissurin* in the *ameilus*, **besides** for the *ameilus* itself, which is how you acquire the Torah.

But why is exertion in learning called ‘suffering’ in learning? It is because man is created from earth; the holy side to the element earth is the power to feel serenity (*menuchah*), while the negative aspect to it is

³ Avos 6:1

⁴ see **Getting To Know Your Torah_06_Difficulty In Learning**

laziness, to seek comfort. When one seeks physical comfort, he uses the power *menuchah* for evil, and it becomes laziness. For this reason, one has suffering in his exertion of learning, which removes the evil that is upon him. It is exertion to the physical body.

In deeper terms, the Torah is called *ohr* (spiritual light), while the body is called “*choshuch*”, darkness. A person is naturally lazy and he doesn’t want to exert himself, and this is *yissurin*, as we explained. But in addition, the fact that the body is ‘dark’ [from its materialism] is a contradiction to the spiritual light of the Torah, and this is another degree of the *yissurin* in learning.

If one doesn’t ever feel the spiritual light of Torah when he learns, he actually has less *yissurin*. The more a person sees and feels the *ohr* of Torah in his learning, the more his body feels challenged by that spiritual light he is seeing. For this reason, one who hasn’t yet seen the *ohr* of Torah has it easier in this way when it comes to learning: it’s easier for him to learn, because his physical body won’t feel the challenge.

Chazal say that “Torah only remains in someone who vomits the milk he nursed from his mother”. The depth of this is that one has to experience a fatigue of energy in order to acquire Torah. It means to vomit the materialism of This World. The body contradicts the Torah, and that is why *ameilus* is needed.

Contradiction Between Our Body and The Torah

Until now we have explained the physical aspects of our suffering in learning; we will go further in this discussion.

There are also more aspects to our suffering in learning. We have suffering in learning because there is an inner contradiction inside ourselves as we learn Torah, and thus we need to become aligned with the Torah, which causes us a degree of suffering. Thus, *yissurin* in our learning is needed, because in essence, man and Torah are a contradiction with each other, and through *yissurin* in learning Torah, man can become more aligned with the will of the Torah.

Although Chazal state that “Torah and Yisrael are one”, which seems to imply that we are already aligned with the Torah, this refers to the *neshamah* (the Divine soul), the deeper part of our soul which is intrinsically connected with the Torah. But the lower parts of our soul, which are closer to physicality, are not “one” with the Torah; they are in contradiction with the Torah. Those outer parts of our soul undergo some suffering when we learn Torah, as they become subjugated to the Torah. It is in those lower parts of our soul that we experience suffering as we learn Torah and we become subservient to the will of the Torah.

There is physical suffering in our Torah learning, being that man naturally seeks comfort, and learning about the Torah’s will

challenges our desire for comfort. Also, our very physical body itself is in contradiction with the Torah.

Contradiction Between Our (Lower) Soul and the Torah

Another aspect of our suffering in learning Torah is due to the lower parts of our soul, which include our **actions**, our **emotions**, our **speech**, our **thoughts**, and our **will**. These parts of ourselves also encounter some friction with the Torah.

The physical exertion that we have in learning Torah is only the outer part of the exertion in Torah (*ameilus*). The reason why we experience exertion in our learning is because even our soul (that is, the lower parts of the soul) experiences contradiction with the Torah.

Thus, *ameilus* in Torah is essentially about bonding our soul with the Torah – all of the parts of ourselves – and to align them with the Torah. This entails some suffering for the soul.

Now we will explain how the parts of our soul are in contradiction with the Torah and how these [outer] parts of our soul need to undergo exertion in learning the Torah.

Contradiction Between Our Actions and the Torah

We will start by explaining how our **actions** face a contradiction with the Torah.

When one commits an act of sin, this is clearly a contradiction between him and Torah. The *Nefesh HaChaim* says that one must do *teshuvah* before he learns, so that his sins won't prevent him from success in his learning. We explained about this in the earlier chapters.

We also explained earlier that there are two levels in learning, called "*Ner Mitzvah*" and "*Torah Ohr*". The lower aspect in our learning is called "*Ner Mitzvah*", which is when we learn Torah on the level of "*mitzvah*". The higher aspect of our learning is "*Torah Ohr*", which refers to learning Torah on a level of "Torah". The level of *Ner Mitzvah* is actually in contradiction with the level of *Torah Ohr*. Although the Sages state that the purpose of Torah learning is to be able to act upon it (as Chazal state, that one should always "learn" Torah in order to "do"), still, the *mitzvos* are of second in importance to Torah itself. Thus, in a subtle sense, even our good actions (*mitzvos*) are in contradiction with the Torah.

Before the sin, there was not yet a "world of action", as the Vilna Gaon explained. This world only became a "world of action" after the sin, when man's level became lowered to the level of physicality. Thus, all "action" as we know it came about entirely as a result of the "action" of sin. Thus, when one's soul is only on the level of "action", he feels a contradiction in his being to the Torah, and this is a degree of suffering to him.

This is why when one wants to really connect himself to what the Torah is that he will

encounter some kind of contradiction to his being. It is because the Torah is called “*Torah Ohr*”, it is an “*ohr*” (a spiritual light), while he is on a lower level than *ohr*; he starts out on the level of “*Ner Mitzvah*”, which is lower than the level of “*ohr*”. He is meeting up with a spiritual light that is challenging to his initial, current level.

Suffering In Learning Helps You Acquire The Torah

The more one has this suffering in his Torah learning, though, the better he will acquire his learning. The fact that a person identifies so strongly with doing action, whereas the Torah is nothing but pure and holy intellect (and learning it doesn't always lead to action) – this itself will feel like a degree of suffering to a person, when he learns Torah.

If one perseveres in his learning in spite of this suffering, he will be able to acquire the holy intellect of Torah, slowly but surely - precisely because he has gone through suffering in learning with this aspect.

How To Proceed From The Level of Action To Intellect

The one who is an “action” kind of person needs to get used to the following. He should learn parts of Torah which are not “*l'maaseh*” (parts that are not “practical”). By getting used to learning areas that will not lead to any practical action, a person slowly trains himself to learn about the pure intellect of the Torah [and in this way he can slowly rise from the level of “action” to the higher levels].

A good example of this is learning *Seder Kodshim* (the laws of sacrifices). These laws of the Torah are not of practical relevance in our times, so one who learns this area of Torah is learning it purely for the intellect of the Torah, and not because of any action that it will lead to.

Some people learn *Seder Kodshim* so that they will know the *halachos* of the *Beis HaMikdash* when it becomes relevant. *Kohanim* especially will learn it for its practical outcomes, because *Kohanim* have to know well the *halachos* of the *Beis HaMikdash*, for it will be very relevant to them one day. However, this will not help a person identify with the concept of learning Torah when it's not about practical action, because in these cases, the person is still learning it on the level of action.

The point of what we are saying is that a person has to be able to learn the Torah even if won't lead to any action at all. This will feel hard to accept at first. To illustrate further, the Gemara says that there are parts of Torah to learn just for the sake of reward of learning about it, even though it will never be relevant.⁵

Another example: a person is contemplating his own novel thoughts as he is learning a sugya, and he has two options that he's not sure about. Usually a person likes to think of how a *Halachic* difference that will result as

⁵ The examples which the Gemara brings is: the laws of *ben sorer u'moreh* (a wayward child), the laws of *ir nidachas* (a city of idol-worshippers), and the laws of *beis ha-menu-ga* (a house of tzaraas\leprosy). See Talmud Bavli, end of Tractate Sanhedrin Ch. 8.

one of the options. However, even if there won't be a difference affecting *Halacha*, a person can still come up with a purely intellectual difference - a difference in understanding - and that should suffice.

Someone who always seeks the "*l'maaseh*" (practical outcomes) of all that hears and learns in Torah will have a hard time with this. But according to what we are saying here, such a person needs to learn how to think just for the sake of thinking, even if it won't lead to a practical difference. Or, he can try learning some part of Torah that won't be relevant right now in his life. He should learn it even if it will never lead to anything *l'maaseh!*

This is a degree of *yissurin* in learning Torah, and it will help you acquire the Torah if you can come to terms with accepting this.

Emotional Suffering In Learning

Moving past the point of "action" in our soul, we also have our emotions. Ever since the sin of Adam, good and evil has entered our emotions, and now our all of our emotions contain a mixture of good and evil that need to be sorted out. Therefore, we contain both good and evil emotions. All of our emotions are rooted in holiness, but they can be used for good or evil. Although we generally associate our negative emotions such as hatred and jealousy as being totally evil, the truth is that each emotion and trait can be used for either good or evil.

We must become aware that initially, our emotions will be in contradiction with the Torah. Chazal say that "*Derech erez* (proper behavior) must precede Torah", therefore, when a person doesn't have good *middos*⁶, his *middos* contradict what he comes across in his learning. If one hasn't gone through the "*derech*", the "path" that must come before the Torah, then he will not reach it. For this reason, one who hasn't traversed the "path" of good *middos* won't be able to get to the Torah. So we must become aware of how our own personal *middos* emotions are not always in line with the Torah.

In this way, our emotions as well undergo suffering in our learning. When a person is aware about the truths he is learning about in Torah, but his negative emotions *middos* are rebelling inside, this causes a person to have another degree of suffering in his learning. Becoming aware of this inner contradiction is a step that is necessary for a person to traverse, in order to acquire his Torah learning.

One whose *middos* haven't been worked on yet needs to suffer when he learns Torah, with regards to the fact that some of the laws of the Torah contradict his various interests (his "*negios*"). He feels a need for truth, and this contradicts his *middos*. That is the contradiction one must come to feel. One who feels how his unfixed *middos* take control of him will know that he is being blocked from seeing the truths of the Torah, and upon feeling this he can become aware of a huge

6 character traits

contradiction between himself and with what he knows the Torah wants from him.

Our good *middos* will already be aligned with the Torah's will, to an extent; but our various uncorrected *middos* are not yet aligned with the Torah. What happens when our bad/unfixed *middos* clash with something the Torah wants from us...?

Most people do not encounter this kind of suffering. But this is not necessarily because most of these people have reached a higher level of character refinement where they have perfected their *middos*. It is simply because they are unaware of their *middos*, and they live in oblivion of their weaknesses. They have gotten used to lying to themselves, since they lack self-awareness of their inner character.

But someone who has become more self-aware will feel his bad *middos* and be painfully aware of them. This does not mean that he just 'knows' of his bad *middos*; it's not big feat for a person to 'know' of his bad *middos*. It means that he feels the bad *middos* and he is consciously aware of them. He feels how his bad *middos* do not want to accept the truths of Torah that he learns. This causes him to feel suffering at this. He sees that sometimes he overcomes his bad *middos* and sometimes he loses the battle, and he feels the frustration at this.

As a person is learning Torah, he is actually able to feel the suffering in his Torah learning that occurs from his unrefined *middos*. However, he will only feel this pain if he is

consciously aware of his *middos*; when he has become self-aware of his unimproved *middos*. He will be able to feel, as he is learning, how the Torah's laws are against his various desires and interests.

One needs to become aware of this when it happens. If one becomes aware of this, it's possible that he will be able to push himself to eventually become aligned with the truths of the Torah. But if one never becomes aware of this and he instead lives his life in denial of his unfixed *middos*, he will never be able to align himself with the Torah's truths.

It's possible that a person has been learning Torah for many years, and even with exertion in his learning, yet he never truly understands his learning. Why does this happen? It is all because he has never become aware of how his unfixed *middos* are in contradiction with the Torah. Therefore he never felt the suffering he is supposed to feel in order to acquire the Torah.

Learning with a *chavrusa* (study partner) can definitely help a person work on his *middos* as he's learning Torah, but this will not be enough. One needs to become aware of how his *middos* are working as he learns Torah, and he should notice the contradictions that he is encountering between what his feelings are saying with the Torah's laws.

The *middos* are actually more revealed to us as we learn Torah. If one is aware of this revelation and he is also aware of the truths of what he's learning about in the Torah, he can

feel a contradiction between his feelings and the Torah. This causes him to feel a degree of suffering, when he realizes that his emotions are not aligned yet with the Torah's will. This process of becoming aware is another key in acquiring the Torah.

But if one is lacking self-awareness to his *middos* as he learns, he doesn't feel the contradiction between his *middos* with the truths of the Torah as he is learning, which means that he doesn't suffer from this; he will be missing a step in acquiring the Torah.

Suffering To Our Speech: The Difficulty of Maintaining Torah Conversations

There is another aspect of suffering that one needs to undergo in his Torah learning, in order to acquire the Torah: a suffering that our speech undergoes.

It is written in the Torah, "*And you shall speak in them*", and Chazal expound upon this *possuk* that "one should speak words of Torah, and not idle words". We have a *mitzvah* to have Torah conversations. By speaking words of Torah on a continuous basis, we fulfill the *mitzvah* of "*And you shall speak in them*", and through this *mitzvah* we can bond with Hashem, for we are then speaking of His words.

The power of *dibbur* (speech) in man was negatively affected by the Serpent after the sin, who spoke *lashon hora* (gossip). It is written, "*Life and death are in the hands of the tongue.*" The simple meaning of this *possuk* is that we must choose to use our tongue to speak good

and not choose to speak evil. But the deeper meaning of this is that every word we speak contains it both "life" and "death". Therefore, all words we speak can be like "life" to us or "death" to us. With Moshe Rabbeinu, the "*Shechinah* spoke from his throat", so his speech was entirely life-giving, but with all other people, all of our words contain a mixture of both "life" and "death."

Chazal say that "If one merits, the Torah becomes like an elixir of life to him; if he does not merit, the Torah becomes to him like deadly poison." Besides for the simple meaning of this statement of Chazal, there is also a more subtle interpretation: when one has to speak words of Torah which he doesn't want to speak about, the words he speaks feels like death to him!

For example, if one speaks words that have to do with *halacha* and he doesn't like to speak about *halacha* (and he would rather just discuss the Gemara in-depth), he is uncomfortable speaking these words, so it feels like a subtle kind of "death" to him. (One who speaks words of Torah that are truthful will always feel alive from these words.)

In any case, all words we speak contain both "good and evil", or "life and death". Ever since man ate from the *Eitz HaDaas* and death was decreed upon man, there is no real "life" on this world, thus, all of our life that we do recognize is mixed with "death". This is most apparent in speech, being that "*life*

and death are in the hands of the tongue.” All speech has in it “life” and “death”.

Thus, even when we speak words of Torah - which is the ideal way to use our speech - it can also feel to us as a contradiction to the Torah. The deep reason for this is because the Torah contains no evil (as explained in the previous chapter), whereas our speech contains some evil, for it was negatively affected by the Serpent. So there is always a contradiction between the words of Torah that one speaks, with the actual power of speech that is currently present in us.

To further bring out this point, let us reflect on the *possuk* that says, “*Midvar sheker tirchak*” – “Keep distance from words of falsity.” It is not enough to speak truth – one must avoid falsity too. It is not possible to speak truth, unless one avoids falsity. This is because our words always contain good and evil. Even if a person avoids falsity and he speaks truth, there is always some degree of falsity in speech. (In fact, even now as I am talking, there is some subtle degree of falsity in it, because there is no such thing in our current times as any speech that is totally true.)

There are two reasons why one has difficulty in “talking in learning [Torah]”. One reason, a spiritual reason, is when a person is a heavy thinker. A heavy thinker might have a hard time expressing his thoughts, and the inner reason for this is because speech is at a lower point in the soul than thought, so the person might feel like he is ‘lowering’ himself spiritually, by descending from the plane of

thought and putting these thoughts into the spoken word. He’d rather avoid this, and that is why he finds it hard to verbally express his Torah thoughts.

The average person, though, has an easy time with speaking. As the *Chovos HaLevovos* says “the tongue is the lightest part of the body”, so relatively speaking, it’s easy for a person to talk. If so, why do people suddenly have a hard time when it comes to “talking in learning”? Why should having a Torah conversation be any different than the nature to have any other conversation?

For some people, it is hard because they have to concentrate as they are talking in learning, and they find it difficult to remain concentrated. However, this is a difficulty in the thinking process, and not in the speech itself. It does not explain why there is a difficulty to maintain a Torah conversation.

The inner reason for the difficulty is really because the words of Torah that one speaks contradict his very power of speech. Whenever we speak in general, we are always speaking from a mixture of good and evil, for our speech has become mixed with good and evil as a result of the Serpent. But when we speak words of Torah, the very lofty nature of this kind of speech contradicts our human power of speech.

Thus, our ability to talk, and the *mitzvah* to talk words of Torah, are really two contradicting concepts to each other. It is the deep contradiction that is found in us.

The Sages that Hashem forced us to accept the Torah at Har Sinai⁷, and one of the reasons given for this is because the Torah itself was a contradiction to our very being, which made it naturally impossible for us to accept. Our very speech contradicts the ability to speak Torah. It is really because Torah is from the Next World whereas man resides on This World. This World is a world of action, a world where we must keep the mitzvos, which is a dimension that is lower than the Torah itself.

One who feels this concept will be able to feel the inner contradiction taking place in himself as he speaks words of Torah. He will be able to feel the mixture of good and evil contained in his speech and how it contradicts the nature of words of Torah, which are otherworldly.

Chazal say that the “words of Torah should be sharp in your mouth”. One of the explanations of this, which is along the lines of our discussion, is that when you speak true words, those words are higher than your own speech, and then you can be clear that they are true, because you feel the contradiction between the nature of the words and the nature of speech. The awareness of this deep inner contradiction is what enables a person to acquire daas (true understanding) in his Torah learning and to speak words of Torah from this inner place of clear understanding.

When one is aware of the contradiction between the words of Torah that he is speaking, with the one who is speaking those words – this is the Torah learning that is acquired through suffering, which he can acquire just by speaking words of Torah, feeling the inner contradiction. The words of Torah he then speaks will show him if his words of Torah that he spoke were truthful or not.

By contrast, if one simply thinks that the words of Torah he speaks are always “words of Torah” and he is unaware that there is a contradiction between his speech and his words of Torah, he will never experience the suffering he is supposed to feel when he talks in learning. He will think that he always speaks the truth and he doesn’t see what the problem is. But he is not really being truthful, because he is denying the contradiction between his speech and the words of Torah that he is speaking.

We hope to continue with these concepts in the next chapter, with Hashem’s help.

Translated from the original Hebrew shiur:

דע את תורתך 008

⁷ *Shabbos 88a*