

Beginner Torah Lesson #12

Hebraic Teaching Methods

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This is the final installment in the teaching series of “Beginner Torah Lessons”. The student after reading the first eleven articles should have become familiar with Hebraic thought and the various methods of Torah interpretation. In this concluding session, you as a student and future teacher, will learn more Hebraic teaching methods that you may incorporate into your lessons for your students.

Oral Teaching

The first copy of the “Bible” was in 1453 by Guttenberg. Before that time Torah scrolls were laboriously copied letter by letter by hand by a scribe. It took just about one year to complete a scroll of the Torah.¹ And during the time of the Second Temple they were not widely available to the average Yisraelite. Scrolls could only be found in the synagogues and houses of study. This is why the Torah teaches us to:

- “Tell your son...” **Shemot 13:8**
- “Talk about them when you sit in your home.” **Devarim 6:7**

The Scripture lessons were exclusively learned by the students by constant repetition. The Hebrew word *Mishnah*² means “repetition or review”. The *Talmud*³ talks about the importance of repeating the lesson learned from your teacher or rabbi.

- “He who studies the Torah and does not review is like the one who plants and does not harvest.” **Talmud, Sanhedrin 99a.**
- “I planted, Apollos watered, but Elohim was giving growth.” **1 Cor. 3:6**
- “He who repeated his chapter a hundred times is not to be compared with him who repeated it a hundred and one times.” **Talmud, Hagigah 9b**

What Ephraim has not understood is that the people of the Middle East have always relied upon Oral Tradition or spoken lessons to teach Scriptural truths. As a result, they have rejected the oral teachings and traditions that help us do the *mitzvot*. Thus they have rejected the Hebraic thought pattern of teaching students and of obtaining a Torah education. The *TaNakh*⁴ itself is the collection of early Hebraic sources that were meant to be spoken and read aloud to others by repetition. In the time of Yahshua, the teacher was expected to listen as the students constantly repeated the lesson back to him word for word. One of the most prized possessions of a scholar was a well trained and retentive memory. After the lesson or saying was learned by sitting at the feet of their master, the student then could teach it to others “in the name of” the teacher.

The written accounts in the Messianic Scriptures about our Master Rebbe Yahshua HaMoshiach are good examples of Oral Traditions that at a much later date were written down for others to read and learn. A number of years passed, possibly up to twenty years according to some scholars, between the resurrection and the actual writing of the first account of Yahshua’s life and ministry. Before the first account was written, the early *talmidim*⁵ of Yahshua kept His teachings alive by means of the Hebraic education method of repetition by Oral Tradition. The early *talmidim* had keenly trained memories that were prompted by the *Ruach HaKodesh* to tell others about their Master and His sayings. The late scholar William Foxwell Albright argued that the reliability and trustworthiness of the accounts in the Good News were due to the trained memory techniques of the Yehudim students of the Master. He summarized his research with, “Writing was used in antiquity largely as an aid or guide to memory, not a substitute for it.”⁶

¹ The first 5 books of Moses

² Part of the Oral Law

³ the teachings of the sages and rabbis about the mitzvot

⁴ Torah Nevi'im Ketuvim

⁵ disciples

⁶ William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity?*, 2nd Ed. p.64

The Hebrew people used many aids to help develop their memories. Almost one third of the TaNaK is poetry. Biblical poetry uses what is called parallelism, balance of thought, and figures of speech which made the memorization easier for the Yisraelite. Teachings were tightly and tersely worded. Another aid to memory was the Alef-bet acrostic, such as Tehillim (Psalms) 119, Echa (Lamentations) and Mishle (Proverbs) 31. Other teachings were sung as songs so the singer would memorize the teachings. Examples are Shemot (Ex.) 15 and Judges (Shoftim) 5. These songs were set to music and dances to aid the memory. Repetition, alliteration, tautology, onomatopoeia, and word plays were widely used teaching techniques.

The rabbis insisted that the student have a scheduled time of study. This was considered a great mitzvah. Oral Tradition teaches one of the first questions you will be asked at the judgment is, "Did you fix times for learning?"⁷ Set times of study were important especially during the Talmudic period.

- Rabbi Hiyya did not eat breakfast until he reviewed the previous days lesson with the child and added another verse. **Talmud, Kiddushin 30a**

The local assembly or synagogue became the center for study and prayer. It was the study hall where all members of the community gathered to engage in the study of the Torah and Talmud. Another name for the synagogue was "House of Study".

However, during the second Temple period there were times of spontaneous teaching. Yahshua was an itinerant rabbi. At the time of the Exodus, Moshe taught the Yisraelites to use the question-answer method of learning:

- "In the days to come, when your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' say to him.." **Shemot 13:14**

The father, as the spiritual head of the home, was expected to always be ready to give a *Haggadah* (telling, narration) about the Exodus from *Mitzrayim*. This method is still used today at *Pesach* in the Passover *Seder*.

In the *Brit Chadasha* this method is also used by Philip to answer the questions of the man from Kush who was a Yehudim:

- "And the eunuch answering Philip, said, 'I ask you, about whom does the prophet say this, about himself or about some other?'" **Acts 8:34**

The fact that most Orthodox Jews send their children to a private school to learn helps to prevent assimilation. A solid Torah education is imperative for a mature Believer. There is no short cut to a well grounded Torah education. It takes years of commitment. So many want to be teacher and leaders of others before they receive an education at the feet of another teacher or rabbi. Learning requires commitment and time!

- "His delight is in the Torah of Yahweh, and on His Torah he meditates day AND night." **Tehillim 1:2**

The Talmud says:

- "The words of Torah are firmly held only by one who kills himself for it." Talmud, **Berakhot 63b**

Study brings self-respect. It is the honorable pursuit of *chokmah* (Wisdom) that has kept the Jewish people throughout the centuries of persecution.

- "In almost every Jewish home in Eastern Europe, even in the humblest and poorest, stood a bookcase full of volumes... They possessed whole treasures of thought, a wealth of information, of ideas and sayings of many ages. When a problem came up, there was immediately a host of people, pouring out opinions, arguments, quotations... The stomachs were empty, the homes barren, but the minds were crammed with the riches of Torah."⁸

⁷ Talmud, Shabbat 31a

⁸ Avraham J. Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's*, pp.42-44

Visual aids and symbols were employed as aids for the memory. Covenants were visual aids to the memory. Blood was usually shed in the sealing of the brit. Blood was the object lesson. It was a bonding by blood. It impressed the mind of the Yisraelite to remind him that a covenant was serious business and could not be broken. Even the grasping of the genitals was a visual token of a covenant bond (**Bereshith 24:2, 9**):

- And Avraham said to the oldest servant of his house, who ruled over all that he had, ‘Please, put your hand under my thigh.’ **Bereshith 24:2**
- “Then the servant put his hand under the thigh of Avraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter.” **Bereshith 24:9**

This was the foundation (*YESOD*) of reproductive power and continuation of seed, therefore to touch it or hold onto it in making a *brit* would convey to the parties involved that failure to carry out the terms of this covenant would result in the sterility or the destruction of his seed after him. This is the root of the English word “testify”. A witness would take the oath by clutching his reproductive organs⁹. This signified the seriousness of the oath. Not only was your reputation at the stake but also the lives of your children and children’s children.

The Passover Seder is another example of visual learning aids. The Seder contains many symbols that stir the memory of the participant in understanding the meaning of the Exodus and Liberation from *Mitzrayim*. Those who reject the *Seder* as “rabbinical” are missing one of the greatest learning experiences of the Festival Year. Piles of stones as a witness could also provoke future generations to remember different events of their ancestors (Yehoshua 4:20-23).

Our Master Yahshua used symbols and visual aids in his teachings. He used a coin, rocks, seeds, pearls, and other visual aids to teach His lessons to His *talmidim*.

The Brit Chadasha refers to the TaNaK as “Sacred Writings” or the “Set Apart Scriptures”.¹⁰ They were sacred and worthy of respect as they contained the very words of Elohim spoken by the prophets. The TaNaK was the WORD of Yahweh. The ark or *Haaron HaKodesh* was holy because it contained the tablets that Elohim gave to Moshe. In our synagogue today, we have an ark that contains the Torah Scroll. When the ark is opened the people stand in reverence. This is in accordance with Scripture:

- “And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people. And when he opened it, the people stood up.” **Nehemiah 8:5**

The Torah is then taken in a procession throughout the assembly, and it is the custom for the congregation to touch the Torah with their Tzitzit, Scriptures, or Siddur. The Tzitzit or sefer is then kissed in a gesture of honor and respect for the Torah. The Torah is dressed like the Kohen HaGadol with a mantle, breastplate, girdle, and a crown. When a scroll becomes old or the scribe is unable to repair it properly, it is given a burial, just like a person.

The Scriptures are not just a “book”. We as Yisrael must learn the lesson of its sacredness and reverence the Word. One way to begin is to have the congregation stand when the Torah is being read.

Study is the ultimate act of worship (*avodah*). The word in Hebrew means work and worship. Study as well as prayer is called by the name of the service of the altar by the Levites (*Avodah*). For this reason the synonym for education is “heavenly work”.

Rav Shaul, from the Tribe of Binyamin, a *P'rushim*, never separated secular and sacred. He taught that all life is in the arena of service to Elohim. Every detail of our life must be set apart to Yahweh. Every area of our lives must reflect the Master and His Kingship over our hearts and minds. Study too must be elevated into a spiritual experience.

- “Whatever you do, do it all for the esteem of Elohim.” **1 Cor.10:31**

The Hasidim have taught that a person worships and serves the Creator not simply from the depths of his soul but with his body and mind as well. A person is to worship Elohim with his whole being.

- “I have set YHWH always before me.” **Tehillim 16:8a**
- “In all your ways acknowledge Him.” **Mishle 3:6**

⁹ Daniel Polish, *Witnessing G-d after Auschwitz*, N.Y. Paulist Press, p.134

¹⁰ 2 Tim.3:15

- “Genuine reverence for the sanctity of study is bound to invoke in the pupils the awareness that study is not an ordeal but an act of edification; that the school is a sanctuary, not a factory; that study is a form of worship.” **Avraham J.Heschel, Insecurity of Freedom, page 42**

Today many Believers have excuses as to why they do not study the Scriptures. Anyone making any excuses has yet to understand and take seriously the heritage of Hebraic learning and education that has been bequeathed to us from our *Avot* (fathers). By a complete return to the heritage of the Torah the next generation of Yisraelites will be sustained.

- “As the fishes of the sea immediately perish when they come out of the water, so do men perish when they separate themselves from the words of Torah.” **Talmud, Avodah Zarah 3b**

Education and Torah study are not preparation for life, it is life! Learning is life and life is for learning. We have two choices: study the Torah in the Hebraic manner and embark on the adventure of living or remain ignorant of the Scriptures and fall prey to the deceptions of religion and lose our identity as Yisrael.

- “Hold on to instruction, do not let go, guard it well, for it is your life.” **Mishle 4:13**

Please study all twelve lessons and review them every so often to refresh your mind to Hebraic thought. May Yahweh bless your studies.

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