

The Internal Logic of Talmud Torah

- We're past the half way mark at the yeshiva this year, and I'd like to reflect a little on what we're doing.
- The mishnah in berachot opens with the question. "מאימתי קורין את שמע בערבית?" (from when do we say shmah at night). Now there are a lot of questions we could ask about this text. We could ask when it was written. We could ask what's the original text ערבית או ערבים? We could try to reconstruct the historical cultural context in which such a question was asked. These are all important questions, they all help us learn Torah, but they are not the heart of our learning, they're not the central questions for yeshivah.
- The gemara asks about our mishnah: "תנא היכא קאי דקתני מאימתי": The tanna (sage), where is he standing that he asks "when do we say Shma at night"?
- This isn't an external question about the tana. Its not a question about where physically stood, or even where he lived, or what cultural influences we can discern in his thinking.
- תנא היכא קאי: "the tanna, where is he standing?" is an internal question, it's a question about the internal logic of the Torah world, which is shared by the Tana and the stama degemara (the anonymous voice of the Talmud). The torah world is a profoundly a-historical web of text and tradition. The gemara is asking: where is the tanna holding, standing, in the internal logic of Torah, so that he's faced with the question מאימתי קורין שמע בערבית (from when do we say the Shma at night) davka here in the beginning of the mesechet (tractate)?
- Sometimes I feel that in our liberal world we're so busy answering the questions arising from Western scholarship that we're unable to see the inner logic of the mishnah and the gemarah. The question then is - us - our generation, היכא קאי, where is it standing, that it has so much trouble seeing, and היכא בעי למיקם where must it stand, so that we can see what the tannah and the stama degemarah could see.
- The stama degamarah in brachot answers: תנא אקרא קאי, the tannah is standing, is holding, on the scripture.
- Of course he's not talking about E or J or P. He's talking about the meaning of chumash when read through the prism of what we call today mishnah and gemarah.
- גמרא, משנה, מקרא (bible, mishna, gemara). In the a-historical world of the tana and the gemarah, these texts are not clues on a trail of historical reconstruction, but rather a living whole, whose meaning arises only in light of each other and in light of the ongoing Torah life of those who learn them. When the tana stands on the scripture he hears Hashem command reciting shma

yisrael וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ (when you lie down and when you get up) and he asks: מאימתי קורין שמע בערבית? (when do we say shma at night)?

- Yeshivah learning is to learn מקרא משנה וגמרא (bible, mishnah, gemarah) in light of each other - to learn to fit the pieces together into a living whole, in the way that they were for the tana and the stama degemarah. And I think that that's the first step towards standing in the place where we can see what they saw.
- Shabbat shalom.

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