

How Limud Hatorah Builds a Better Person

We've been discussing how to demonstrate to our families the benefits of a Torah life, showing them that following Hashem's prescription for living enables a Jew to thrive and succeed and enjoy this world in an endless variety of ways.

Since learning Torah is the greatest mitzvah of all (as stated in the first Mishnah in Pei'ah), it seems reasonable to assume that it also bestows the widest range of blessings in our lives, in number and in kind. And, indeed, that's so.

There is so much to say about this topic, but let's begin by exploring what limud haTorah does for us on a very personal level. First, there are the effects it has in helping to make us into better human beings. We all want to develop into more refined, more ethical, more righteous people, and studying Torah is the single most effective way to achieve those enviable goals.

To begin with, how can one possibly know right from wrong, and ethical from immoral, if not by consulting Hashem's own guide to human behavior? Does it make sense that every machine we own comes with a detailed user's manual, but the human being, possessed of the two most exquisitely sophisticated 'machines' in all of existence – the brain and the heart — can just figure life out on his own as he quickly moves through it?

Any Jew who gives "To be a good person" as his first answer to "What is the most important thing in life?" has to simply dance and sing for joy that he actually has access to a detailed, all-encompassing program for making that happen. The same can't be said of the millions of other people who give that same answer but haven't the foggiest idea of how to achieve their own self-stated most important life goal.

We would be fortunate if the Torah were only to give us guidelines for living merely a life of basic goodness that meets the rather minimal contemporary standard of "to live and let live," which is to say, to be a decent person who does no harm to others. As even a brief look at countries around the globe will tell us, we can't take for granted even the most elementary level of humane behavior, not even in the supposedly advanced twenty-first century.

But Yiddishkeit doesn't settle for what is basic and elementary; it strives not for the absence of wrongdoing, but for positive goodness of the highest order. Hashem created Man for him to transform himself from a minimal mensch into a majestic malach, and his Torah provides the tools to do so.

As we learn Torah, we reveal the possibilities of human greatness, we discover the exalted heights a mortal can reach in his thoughts, speech and actions. If a person promises a child a candy for helping him carry a table but fails to give him that candy the same day, he transgresses a D'oraysa-level prohibition. If one says one word to remind a ba'al teshuva or convert of his past life, he too transgresses a Torah-level prohibition. The same is true for a Jewish farmer who muzzles his ox while threshing his wheat crop, thus causing it anguish.

And if any of these people can avoid these prohibited behaviors by parting with all the money to their name, Torah law obligates them to do so. What shall we call such standards of the good and the just, if not simply angelic? But these are the ethical standards even young children learn about through Torah study.

But the Torah doesn't just teach us what to do and not do. When we engage in limud haTorah in an intensive and sustained way, it has the subtler, deeper effect of making various behaviors simply unthinkable, placing them beyond our entire frame of reference. This, the Machzor Vitri writes, is what the Mishna means when it states that Torah is mashkachavon, it causes sin to be forgotten.

The very fact that a Jew learns about the care one must with another's property or the requirement to testify truthfully or the duty to preserve life, sensitizes us more generally to our ethical obligations. In the same way that murder is unthinkable for all normal people, by learning Torah even things many people permit themselves, like telling a lie or petty theft, become inconceivable.

This holds true even if we are learning the abstract lomdus of these topics rather than the practical halacha. Rav Shlomo Wolbe writes that on every page in Shas, even those devoted to topics seemingly unrelated to there is at least one teaching that can make us better, more ethical people.

Rav Yisrael Salanter took things even further, teaching that "when a Jew studies the laws of 'the ox that gored a cow,' he becomes less likely to speak loshon hora." His point is that all Torah that a person learns – which, after all, is the wisdom of Hashem, Who is the Source of all good — refines him and affects him positively in numerous, subtle ways.