

From the Pages of Tradition

R. JACOB HOROWITZ ON THE STUDY OF SCRIPTURE

R. Jacob b. Abraham Horowitz (d. 1622) is perhaps best known for having been the older brother of R. Isaiah Horowitz (d. 1630), the celebrated author of Shenei Luhot ha-Berit. But R. Jacob, a disciple of the Maharal of Prague, was a distinguished talmudist and kabbalist in his own right. In 1615 at Prague, he published his father's last will and testament, Yesh Nohalin, adding fifty-two substantive footnotes to his father's text.¹ The combined effort of father and son would become a classic of Jewish ethical literature. The excerpt published here² is a polemic against those who either neglected or denigrated the study of Scripture, an issue that was the focus of considerable attention in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,³ and whose repercussions—some will claim—are evident to this very day.⁴

ON THE STUDY OF SCRIPTURE

It is well known that our teacher and rabbi, the Gaon Rabbi Judah b. Bezalei, also called Rabbi Leib of Prague, offered a severe critique of the Jewish educational system now in practice, stressing in particular the lack of order in the educational curriculum. See, for example, his insightful comments in his *Gur Aryeh*⁵ and *Derekh Hayyim*.⁶ I wish to take issue with another, more fundamental educational abuse, namely, the total neglect of the study of Scripture. Teachers no longer teach Scripture to young students, in a manner that assures that its content will remain with them throughout their lives. Indeed, we see that even among Torah scholars there are those who have not mastered Scripture. . . . Where can we hide our shame? We are no longer knowledgeable in the very subjects schoolchildren used to master in days of yore, when Torah study was far superior to what it is today.

Surely, the study of Scripture is primary and essential for all who wish to be called Torah scholars. What possible excuse can there be before the Blessed One for casting His Torah aside, the very words He was the first to pronounce? A lesson is to be learned by comparing the study of Scripture to the issuance of a royal edict. As soon as it is issued, the entire citizenry hastens to read it from beginning to end, making every effort to understand and master its content. If anything remains unclear to a particular reader, he does not hesitate to consult even those who are younger than he. Shall not our Torah be treated with at least as much dignity as a royal edict? How much more so must it be treated with dignity when we are obliged to observe all its laws and teachings! For the study of Scripture fills one with wisdom, fear of God, humility before Him, dread of punishment, regret for wrongful actions, abandonment of sin, yearning for repentance, resolve to distance one's self from sin, and the desire to do good deeds. Through the study of the plain sense of the text, the reader comprehends the greatness of God, His strength,

providence, mighty deeds above and below, and innumerable ethical teachings. May the scholar R. Levi b. Gershon⁷ be remembered for good for listing the ethical teachings that are derived from each portion of the biblical narrative. The vast majority of the ethical teachings listed by R. Levi b. Gershon apply to body and soul; the attentive reader will master them and add to them. Only be sure that you read Scripture while fully concentrating your mind and with full understanding, and not like one who reads a secular history book.

In my opinion, the study of Scripture is included in the commandment: *and heed His voice* (Dt. 13:5) which means, according to the rabbis, we must heed the voice of the prophets. Even though, due to our sins, prophecy has ceased and there are no prophets, they are dead but their words endure. We are obligated to follow their teachings, the teaching of the living God. It makes no difference whether the prophets are alive and we actually hear their words, or whether they are dead and we study their teachings that live on forever. Thus, if Scripture is not studied, how can we heed the teachings of the prophets? Even if one's profession is Torah study, his preoccupation with other texts never exempts him entirely from the obligation to study and master Scripture from beginning to end. Thus, no one can claim a dispensation that exempts him from this obligation. This holds true particularly concerning those who engage in spurious *pilpulim* and stand outside the palace of the King. They would be far better off exchanging their spurious *pilpulim* for the study of Scripture, thereby gaining entry into the inner chambers of the palace of the King, Lord of Hosts, while engaging in the study of His words which are the essence of holiness. The gain from such an exchange would be twofold, as can readily be understood.

Those who claim exemption from the study of Scripture point to the rabbinic passage: "He who occupies himself with Scripture engages in an act of dubious merit."⁸ Similarly, they point to the rabbinic passage: "Keep your children from meditating [*higgayon*]," which Rashi explains as referring to the study of Scripture.⁹ They also point to a passage cited by the halakhic decisors in the name of Rabbenu Tam that the Babylonian Talmud consists of a mixture of Scripture, Mishnah, and Talmud, and therefore one fulfills his obligation to study Scripture and Mishnah by studying the Babylonian Talmud.¹⁰

Anyone who relies on these passages in order to exempt himself from the study of Scripture is in error. For elsewhere, we find rabbinic passages that indicate otherwise. Thus, the rabbis taught regarding Torah study: "One must divide the years of his life into three: one third of each day for Scripture; one third of each day for Mishnah; and one third of each day for Talmud."¹¹ In another passage, the rabbis expounded the verse: *when He finished [ke-khalloto] speaking to him* (Ex. 31:18) as follows: "Just like a bride [*kallah*] adorns herself with twenty-four ornaments, so too a rabbinic scholar must master the twenty-four books of the Bible."¹² Rashi cites this rabbinic exposition at Ex. 31:18.

Now I wonder why the great luminary Rashi, and all the other great luminaries, Rashi's colleagues, all of them expert in Talmud, took the time and trouble to write commentaries on the twenty-four books of the Bible? Clearly, the true explanation of the rabbinic passages cited above (that seem to look askance at the study of Scripture) is that they are addressed to those who wish to devote their entire lives, or the major portion of their lives, to the study of Scripture *alone*. Similarly, Rabbenu Tam's statement was a response to the rabbinic passage that requires everyone to

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divide the years of his life into three: one third of each day for Scripture, etc. Rabbenu Tam explained that a person who has mastered the twenty-four books of Scripture need not devote a third of each day to the study of what he has already mastered. Since the Talmud also contains Scripture, he fulfills his daily obligation to study Scripture by studying Talmud. Heaven forbid that anyone entertained the possibility that one is not required to master the twenty-four books of Scripture.

Aside from what I have commanded you to study above, and aside from Talmud study, be sure to study Mishnah every day until you complete all six orders. Throughout your life, every day, study Scripture and Mishnah, starting a new cycle of study as soon as you complete the old one. In this manner, you will never forget either topic or word. Happy is the person who follows this procedure, for he will hold the entire Written and Oral Torah in his hands. About such a person the Talmud states: "Happy is he who come here with his Talmud in hand."¹³ Even greater is the reward for those who study the orders of the Mishnah by heart. It is called the Oral law precisely because it was intended to be studied by heart. Persecutions and other distractions, however, made this an impossible task. Due to exigency, lest Torah be forgotten in Israel, the rabbis permitted it to be reduced to writing. Nonetheless, the essence of its study is that it be studied by heart.

NOTES

1. The definitive edition is R. Abraham b. Shabbetai Sheftel Horowitz, *Yesh Nohalin*, edited by H.Y. Waldman, Jerusalem, 1992.
2. *Op. cit.*, chapter 5, note 40, pp. 196-201.
3. See the references gathered together in Y. Elbaum, *Openness and Insularity: Late Sixteenth Century Jewish Literature in Poland and Ashkenaz* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1990, pp. 93-95.
4. For two nineteenth century adumbrations of this polemical issue, see R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel*, ed. B. Drachman, New York, 1942, pp. 185-186 [= ed. J. Breuer, New York, 1960, p. 1212]; and R. Solomon Kluger, *She'elot u-Teshuvot ha-Elef Lekha Shelomo*, New York, 1949, *Yoreh De'ah*, §259.
5. *Gur Aryeh* to Dt. 6:7 (In *Otzar Perushim al ha-Torah: Mizrahi*, Jerusalem, 1958, vol 5, pp. 9a-b). Cf. the references gathered together in L. Levi, *Sha'arei Talmud Torah*, Jerusalem, 1981, pp. 153-154 and 160-171.
6. *Derekh Hayyim* to M. Avot 6:5-7 (London, 1961, pp. 303-306).
7. Also known as Gersonides, R. Levi b. Gershon (d. 1344) was a distinguished Provencal mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, and biblical exegete. The reference here is to the ethical lessons (*to'aliyyot*) appended to each section of his biblical commentaries. Most of his published biblical commentaries are included in the better editions of *Mikra'ot Gedolot*. Several collections of the ethical lessons on the Torah (and later: the Prophets) were also published separately under the title *To'aliyyot ha-Ralbag* (first edition: Riva di Trento, 1530).
8. B. *Baba Metzi'a* 33a.
9. B. *Berakhot* 28b and Rashi *ad loc.*. For other interpretations of this enigmatic talmudic passage, see M. Breuer, "Keep Your Children From Meditating" (Hebrew), in the *David Ochs Memorial Volume (Mikhtam le-David)*, Ramat Gan, 1978, pp. 242-261.
10. *Tosafot* to B. *Sanhedrin* 24a and B. *Qiddushin* 30a. Cf. R. Natronai Gaon's responsum in *Teshuvot ha-Geonim*, ed. Lyck, 1864, §90, p. 29. For the halakhic decisors, see Maimonides, *Code: Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:11-12; *Tur* and *Shulhan Arukh: Yoreh De'ah*, §246; and commentaries.
11. B. *Avodah Zarah* 19a.
12. *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 41:5.
13. B. *Pesahim* 50a.