

Instructions for *Talmud Torah* in Study Groups

Talmud Torah Guidelines

1. Discovery

The goal of our study today is one of discovery: both of what the text may be teaching, and about the truth of our experience in relation to prayer. Our study is not oriented to “getting it right”! We hope that you will experience a sense of living Torah unfolding in the give and take of text study and honest conversation.

2. Listening

We hope to learn as much from listening to each other’s views of the text and each other’s experience in prayer as we do from speaking from our own perspective. Please give as much or more of your mindful attention to listening as to speaking.

3. Safety

We are a diverse learning community. At the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, we strive to create learning environments that feel safe. Respect for various opinions, viewpoints, feelings and ways of expression is paramount. While we enjoy deeply engaged Torah discussion and sometimes even “arguing” for the sake of heaven, we encourage everyone to please be aware of their tone of voice, as well as internalized or projected presumptions of authority based on age, gender, title or role in the Jewish community.

Talmud Torah Process

1. Listen to Nancy read the entire text in English. Notice what jumps out at you as you listen.
2. Break up into small groups of four, taking turns reading aloud each section in Hebrew or English and then reading aloud the commentary. Discuss the questions in the study guide for each section.
3. Pace yourselves so as to get through the entire text and study guide.

אור המאיר, ראש השנה
Or HaMeir, Drush leRosh HaShanah
s.v., verazal nitoreru

R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, was a member of the Maggid of Mezeritch's inner circle. His Torah commentary, Or HaMeir, was published in Koretz in 1795, where he died in 1800.

I.

The Sages were awakened in considering this teaching: "Always, we must order our praises of the blessed Holy One, and after that pray" (*Berachot 32a*).... Take note: On what basis did the Men of the Great Assembly establish the twelve intermediate petitions of the *Amidah* – for health, sustenance, the fall of our oppressors and the like - among the many things that we need? Can there be any change in the Divine Will (Heaven forbid!)? Let it never be suggested that there is any change in the will of the Creator of the world, as it says, "I am YHVH – I have not changed" (*Mal. 3:6*). Rather, in truth, all [change] is on the part of the recipients [of God's blessings].

ורז"ל נתעוררו (ברכות לב, א) "לעולם יסדר אדם שבחיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, ואחר כך יתפלל" ... כי ראוי לשום לב, איך סדרו לנו אנשי כנסת הגדולה י"ב אמצעות, לשאול רפואה ומזונא ומפלת שונאים וכדומה מצרכי המרובים. וכי יש שנוי רצון לפניו יתברך חס ושלוש?! חלילה וחלילה לומר על בורא עולם שנוי רצון, כתיב (מלאכי ג, ו) "אני ה' לא שניתי". אמנם כבר נודע מספרים, שבאמת הכל תולה מצד המקבלים.

Study Guide:

The *Or HaMe'ir* wants to understand the relationship between first engaging in praising God (through the psalms of *Pesukei D'Zimra*/passages of praise) and then engaging in "Tefillah" (here understood to be the daily *Amidah*, with its intermediate section of petitions). We will explore this more deeply further on.

He also wants to understand why we ask God for things if God is (in his view) Omniscient and if everything happens according to the Divine Will. Will God change God's mind on account of our prayers? The problem of the Divine not changing its mind was not a problem for the sages, of course; the problem he presents only becomes an issue in a post-Maimonidian world of Jewish thought.

- How do you relate to the concept of "Divine Will"?
- What is the *Or HaMe'ir's* sense as to who and what actually changes with prayer? What is your sense, based on your own experience?



II.

So observe: First we recite “*Pesukei D’Zimra* (passages of praise)”. Our Sages taught, “Why are they called *pesukei d’zimra*? Because we trim off (*mezamerim*) the husks” (*Sha’arei Orah*, Gate One). Now, has any of you ever once seen husks scattered around the floor of the synagogue?! Rather, the meaning here is that we trim the husks from our hearts and inner beings. So, for instance, when we recite “**Great is YHVH and highly praised**” (*Ps. 145:3*), we find that we start to turn toward the Holy One, thinking, “Do I believe what I am saying?” (*Ps. 116:10*) God is great and the whole earth is full of God’s glory! If so, why have I behaved in this (unseemly) manner, doing this and that?” And, indeed, each of us knows our shortcomings and the sorts of petty thoughts in which we are mired. When we stop to consider, we begin to regret what we’ve done. So too, when we read “**YHVH is good to all and His mercy is over all His works**” (*Ps. 145:9*), we actually take these words to heart, and ask, “If this is so, then why am I missing out?! Am I not also one of God’s works?” We realize that if we sense some lack, there is some lack in us; we have not yet made ourselves into vessels to receive God’s goodness. So we then determine to adorn our whole being with good qualities, casting off the blemish caused by foreign influence, so that God will dwell in our every limb and sensation.

ועתה תחזה, טרם כל, אנו אומרים פסוקי דזמרה, וחז"ל אמרו (שערי אורה שער א) "למה נקרא פסוקי דזמרה? על שם שמזמרים הקליפות". ולכאורה, מי האיש שראה אפילו פעם אחת, קליפות מוטלים לארץ בבית המדרש? אמנם הכונה שמזמר הקליפות מקרב לבו ועצמותו. על דרך משל, באומרו "גדול ה' ומהולל מאוד" (תהלים קמה, ג), מתחיל לשוב אליו יתברך. ונותן אל לבו: "האמנתי כי אדבר? גדול ה' ומלא כל הארץ כבודו? אם כן למה עשיתי ככה, כזאת וכזאת עשיתי?" כי ידע איניש בנפשיה גריעות ערכו, ומחשבותיו הפרטים שמושקע בהם תמיד. ואזי מתחיל להתחרט ולתהות על הראשונות. וכן באומרו "טוב ה' לכל ורחמיו על כל מעשיו" (שם, ט), אזי ישיב אמרו אל לבו: "אם כן למה גרע אני? הלא גם אני אחת מהנה?" ותולה החסרון בבחינת עצמו, שאינו כלי מוכן ומוכשר לקבל ההטבה. ומקבל על עצמו לקשוט מלא קומתו במדות טובות, ולהשליך מעליו כל מום ממגע נכרי, כי אם מראש עד עקב ישרה אלהותו על כל פרטי האיברים והחושים.

Study Guide:

Notice the play-on-words here with *zemirot*/songs and *zemurah*/trimming or pruning. The “husks” are the shells of negativity, unwholesome action and constant distraction that obscure the reality of sparks of holiness in the world. Jewish mysticism teaches one the importance of working with the heart and mind in order to uncover these sparks and reconnect them to the divine.



The *Or Hame'ir* is describing a practice, here giving an example in our devotional reading of the *Ashrei* (Psalm 145), central to *Pesukei D'Zimra*. We allow the words of the psalm to wake us up, arousing in us a sense of God's great reality, which leads us to regret having gone so far from God in thought and deed. Sobered but not dejected, we resolve to do better. We employ the words of Psalms to reflect on our lives, to challenge our assumptions and to open our hearts. This is a sort of "purification." And "pruning."

- Have you ever had the experience of a word, phrase and/or tune challenging you, lifting off the page to get your attention? Do you remember the particulars? How did you respond?
- In what way do you or might you experience entering *Pesukei D'Zimrah* as an experience of pruning or removing husks?

Note the central challenge the *Or Ha'Meir* presents. It is understood that God's blessing is constantly flowing to all of creation – yet if God is merciful to all and the whole earth is filled with God's glory, then why am I suffering? The problem is that the blessing passes right through us without our being able to contain it, hold onto it, become aware of it. Our vessels have holes in them! We are like sieves. But the blessing is always flowing, for it is in God's nature to shower life and blessing upon all. Here the *Or Ha'Meir* does not address whether a change of perspective would enable us to see that all that happens is for blessing – simply perceiving experience differently – or if something changes in material reality to ease our suffering. With the latter perspective especially, he certainly runs the risk of "blaming the victim."

III.

In this manner we continue with all of the psalms (*zemirot*), trimming off the husks, the negative qualities that we sense in ourselves. And, then, we are truly able to pray (*lehitpallel*)– in the sense of "connection" (*hitchabrut*) – to connect our innermost thoughts with the exaltedness of the Holy One, so that when we recite the *Sh'ma* we become entirely unified with the blessed Creator ... becoming completely one with the blessed Holy One. And we gain the capacity to nullify decrees, as the Sages taught, "the Holy One makes decrees and the righteous person nullifies them" (*Mo'ed Katan 16b*). Thus, when we arrive at the word "one" (at the end of the *Sh'ma*) and unite ourselves with the Creator completely, our practical capacity for good will be so great that we can move the six directions, the six directions through which the world

וכמוהו מהזמירות. מזמר בקרבו את הקליפיות ממדות המגונות שמרגיש בעצמו, ואחר כך יתכן לו להתפלל, משמעו לשון התחברות, לייחד פנימיות מחשבתו לרוממות אלהותו, וכשבא לקריאת שמע נעשה אחדות אחד עם הבורא ברוך הוא ... אזי נעשה אחדות גמור עם הקדוש ברוך הוא. ויש לאל ידו לבטל גזרותיו -- "ויגזור אומר ויקם", כמאמרם ז"ל (מועד קטן טז, ב) "קודשא בריך הוא גוזר גזרה והצדיק מבטל". וזהו הכוונה בהגיע לתיבת "אחד", ומייחד את עצמו עם בורא עולם אחדות גמור, תועלתו גדולה, אשר כחו יפה לנענע לשית סטרין, המה הוי"ו קצוות שעמהם נבנה העולם, הוא מנענע

was created, and can direct them according to our will, can “change the times and switch the seasons” because of our complete unity with God’s exalted oneness, which is itself beyond time ...

אותם להנהיגם כרצונו וחפצו, ומשנה עתים ומחליף את הזמנים, כיון שנעשה אחדות גמור ביחוד עליון, ששם למעלה מהזמנים ...:

Study Guide:

The claim here for the practice of prayer (by the adept) is nothing less than utterly audacious! Removing husks is one thing. Becoming one with the Holy One is quite another! And beyond this, annulling decrees (i.e. truly affecting manifest reality, including averting evil or suffering) by entering a dimension that is beyond time – how can we understand this, let alone consider that we or others might accomplish it?! But this is the worldview, the theology and the understanding of the power and place of the human being taught by R. Ze’ev Wolf. We may not hold such views of the person and the Divine. But we may agree that prayer might be a process of *avodah she-balev*, “inner work,” that has to do with a journey of consciousness, will and feeling.

Note that the Talmud speaks of arranging *Pesukei D’Zimra* before the *Amidah*. *The Or Ha’Meir* inserts the work of *Sh’ma* as essential to the practice.

- How do you understand the inner journey from *Pesukei D’Zimra* to *Sh’ma* to *Amidah*?

IV.

Then afterwards, when we come to the *Shemoneh Esreh (Amidah)*, adorned from head to heel (with good qualities) and prepared to serve as a proper receptacle for the divine blessing – having trimmed the husks away in *Pesukei D’Zimra*, and attained a complete unity in reciting the *Sh’ma* – then of itself the divine flow will pour out blessing from above, since nothing is lacking in the Sovereign’s palace. Therefore, there is no change in (God’s) will, rather (after having trimmed away the husks from oneself and having become a vessel prepared to receive) the change is in us, from our side. If only we had been a worthy vessel from the very beginning - we would have known how the nature of the divine is to do good (i.e. shower blessing) upon all creatures.

ואחר כך בהגיע לשמנה עשרה, וכבר קישט מלא קומתו ונעשה כלי מוכן ומוכשר לקבלה - כיון שזימר מעליו הקליפות בפסוקי דזמרה, ובקריאת שמע נעשה אחדות אחד ממילא נשפע עליו שפע וברכה עליונה, כי כלום חסר מבית המלך. ונמצא אין כאן שנוי רצון. רק (אחר שזימר מעליו הקליפות ונעשה כלי לקבלה) השנוי מצדו. ואם היה כלי מוכשר בתחלה, בודאי מדרכו הטוב להטיב לנבראיו.



Study Guide:

- In what way, if at all, is this sense that prayer changes us rather than God a useful frame? Do you recognize this in your experience?
- What change do you seek through prayer?
- What change do you notice through prayer?

Another play-on-words: in the mystical tradition, our study, prayer and performance of *mitzvot* is how we “adorn” the *Shekhinah*, preparing her as a bride to unite with her Beloved, the blessed Holy One. When we engage in spiritual practice – as in this lesson – we adorn the *Shekhinah* as well as our selves. The word “adorn” is *kishet*, which shares the consonants of the Aramaic word for “truth”. The work we do in reciting the psalms of *Pesukei D’Zimrah* leads us to greater truth-telling. False-view, self-concern, competition cloud the mind and obscure the heart, keeping us from God. Reorienting our perspective opens us up to see others, to notice their needs, to care for their concerns.

V.

This is the intention of the Sages in their teaching, “Always, we must order our praises of the blessed Holy One”. That is, by means of the praises that we experience internally, we come to realize our imperfections, the flaws that limit us. And, “anyone who has a blemish cannot approach the altar” (*Lev. 21:18*); that is, cannot bring himself close to God, Who is complete in the most absolute sense of completeness. But, after we order our praises in *Pesukei D’Zimra*, trimming off the husks from within us, regretting our earlier actions, we become whole, and can bring ourselves close to the Holy One. That is why it says, “and after that, we can pray.” We are speaking the language of connection, as noted above.

The process is that when we trim off the husks with *Pesukei D’Zimra*, then it is befitting and good to pray and request the fulfillment of our needs, for certainly then we will not direct our attention to ask food for our bellies, but rather we will deepen our request to raise it on high, praying for the needs of all being.

ולזה כיונו במאמרם, "לעולם יסדר אדם שבחיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא". כנזכר, שבאמצעות השבחים שיכניס בקרבנו, יראה ויבין פחיתות ערכו ומום הקבוע בו: "וכל ... אשר בו מום לא יקרב" (ויקרא כא, יח), אינו יכול לקרב את עצמו אליו יתברך השלם בכל מיני שלימות. ואחר שמסדר השבחים בפסוקי דזמרה, ומזמר הקליפות מקרבנו, ותוהה על הראשונות כנזכר, ונעשה שלם, ויכול לקרב את עצמו אל הקדוש ברוך הוא, וזהו שאמרו "ואחר כך יתפלל", לשון התחברות כמבואר:

והכלל כאשר יזמר הקליפיות תחלה בפסוקי דזמרה, לו יאה ונאה אחר כך להתפלל ולשאול צרכיו, כי בודאי לא ישים מגמתו לשאול אוכל לנפשו, כי אם יעמיק שאלה להגביה למעלה, עבור צורך גבוה.



Even when we recite the twelve intermediate blessings in which we ask for healing, sustenance, the fall of our oppressors etc., our appeal is to ease the suffering of the *Shekhinah*, Who shares in the suffering of all.

ואפילו ביי"ב ברכות אמצעות, שאלות
רפואה ופרנסה ומפלת שונאים וכדומה,
אמירתו לגבוה להקל צער השכינה, אשר
בכל צרתם לה צער כביכול:

Study Guide:

Many people would say that there is nothing wrong with praying to fill our bellies. Especially if we are hungry! But R. Ze'ev Wolf seems to be saying that if all we are praying for is the fulfillment of our own needs, we have somehow missed out on what the practice of prayer can be. He has described a process of realizing the truth of interconnection and the oneness of all, and of organizing our minds and hearts to direct blessing to all creatures.

Attending to the suffering of the *Shekhinah* is how the Hasidic teachers spoke about exile, alienation, dislocation and lack in the world. Easing the pain of – and raising – the *Shekhinah* is a metaphor for concern for all of creation, for the suffering of others. The goal of our practice is to shift our perspective from self to other, from lack to abundance, from alienation to blessing.

- Does this teaching hold any inspiration for how you might understand or engage in your own prayer practice? Or in how you might lead others?

