



# Likkutei Sichos

Volume 17 | Pirkei Avos | Chapter 6

## Lose Nothing

---

Translated by Rabbi Shmuel Kesselman

General Editor: Rabbi Eliezer Robbins | Editor: Rabbi Y. Eliezer Danzinger

Content Editor: Rabbi Zalmy Avtzon

© Copyright by Sichos In English 2023 ◦ 5783

A note on the translation: Rounded and square brackets reflect their use in the original *sichah*; curly brackets are interpolations of the translator or editor. The footnotes in curly brackets are those of the translator or editors and do not correspond to the footnotes in the original. Words in bold type are italicized in the original text.

Considerable effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the translation, while maintaining readability. As in all translations, however, the possibility of inadvertent errors exists.

**Feedback is appreciated — please send comments to: [info@projectlikkuteisichos.org](mailto:info@projectlikkuteisichos.org)**

## 1.

### FOR ITS OWN SAKE

“Rabbi Meir said: Whoever concentrates on learning<sup>1</sup> the Torah for its own sake merits many things ....”<sup>2</sup> He then lists many “things” that a person merits for learning Torah for its own sake.

We need to clarify:

What sort of Jews is Rabbi Meir intending to address with his lesson? Both options seem problematic: If he is talking to a person who **already learns** Torah for its own sake, why would the person care that he will merit “many things”? This person already learns Torah for its own sake, i.e., for the Torah’s sake, and not to merit these “things.” If, however, Rabbi Meir is addressing Jews who do not yet learn Torah for its own sake, and his intention is to encourage them to do so, this too is difficult. If this person will study Torah in order to attain the “many things,” then his Torah study will then not be for its own sake.

Perhaps, we can answer this question as follows: Rambam<sup>3</sup> discusses the material goodness Torah promises as the reward for learning Torah and fulfilling mitzvos. (Although, seemingly, material benefits cannot possibly serve as an adequate reward for Torah and mitzvos.) Rambam explains that the reason Torah mentions these things is so that we will know: “that if we fulfill it with joy and good spirit... Hashem will remove all the obstacles that prevent us from fulfilling it... He will grant us all the goodness that will reinforce our performance of the Torah....”

The same applies in our context:

Rabbi Meir tells the person who studies Torah for its own sake that he will merit “many things,” “things” that will remove all the obstacles and disturbances

---

<sup>1</sup> {In the original Hebrew, “*osek*,” lit, “occupies,” or “engages”; in this context: engages in Torah study as an occupation.}

<sup>2</sup> {*Pirkei Avos*, ch. 6, mishnah 1.}

<sup>3</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Teshuvah*,” ch. 9, par. 1.

that hinder him from learning Torah. This is evident from Rabbi Meir's following words: "not only that but the entire world is worthwhile for him alone." This means that not only do the material matters not disturb him, but on the contrary, the entire world "is worthwhile for him alone." In other words, worldly matters assist him, enabling him to learn Torah from a calm and comfortable space.

This explanation, however, does not suffice. This answer only explains some of the various benefits that Rabbi Meir enumerates. But many of the benefits have no connection to the promise that "Hashem will remove all the obstacles that prevent us" from learning the Torah for its own sake.

## 2.

### GOING THROUGH THE LIST

Rabbi Meir lists certain benefits that don't appear at all suitable to include among those which are given as reward specifically for learning the Torah for its own sake. **For example**, to mention a few:

(a) "He loves Hashem; he loves His created beings {humanity}." — For each of these, there is a biblically imposed positive mitzvah obligation: "You shall love Hashem, your G-d";<sup>4</sup> "Love your fellow as yourself."<sup>5</sup>

(b) "It keeps him far from sin." Is the special quality of (the reward for) Torah study for its own sake required to distance a Jewish person from sin? The mere feeling of the fear of punishment, the fear of sin, should suffice. Moreover, earlier in *Pirkei Avos*,<sup>6</sup> we find the clear directive, "Reflect upon three things, and **you will not come** to sin." These three things are simple in nature, and reflecting on them, i.e., pondering them, keeps a person from sinning.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Devarim* 6:5.

<sup>5</sup> *Vayikra* 19:18.

<sup>6</sup> *Avos* ch. 2, mishnah 1; ch. 3, mishnah 1.

(c) “Forgiving if he is insulted.” Seemingly, this attribute does not reflect the great virtue derived by learning the Torah for its own sake. This is because **forgiving** an insult (meaning, he **feels** the insult) shows that a person has not yet reached true and complete *bittul*.<sup>7</sup> If the person had reached a deeper level of *bittul*, the insult would, from the outset, not have bothered him at all. Meaning, to begin with, he would not have felt slighted.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.

#### NUANCED WORDING

Additionally, there are several nuances in Rabbi Meir’s **wording** in his teaching. **To mention a few:**<sup>9</sup>

(a) “The Torah **garbs him** with humility and fear of Hashem” and not something closer to the usual expressions (that by learning Torah for its own sake) “a person becomes humble and develops fear of Hashem,” or, “he will achieve humility and the fear of Hashem,” or something to that effect.

(b) What is the purpose of emphasizing, “people **benefit** from his counsel and wisdom,” as opposed to, “people seek his...,” or, “people receive from him...”

(c) At the end of his teaching, it says, “The Torah makes him great, exalting him above all things.” What is the difference in meaning between these two expressions?

---

<sup>7</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See Rambam’s commentary on *Avos* ch. 4, mishnah 4.

<sup>9</sup> See *Nachlas Avos*, et al. on *Avos* ch. 6, mishnah 1.

## 4.

OCCUPIES HIMSELF FOR ITS SAKE

The explanation:

Rabbi Meir is specific in discussing someone who “**concentrates on learning Torah for its own sake.**” His intention here is as follows:

“For its own sake,” means that the person learns Torah for no other purpose other than for the study itself. This person does not even have a **holy** ulterior motive (for example, to know how to behave, or so forth). He studies Torah, purely for the Torah, understanding Torah<sup>10</sup> — just for the sake **of learning Torah itself.**

“**Oisek {concentrates on learning}** Torah for its own sake,” means that when he learns, he labors and pushes himself.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, he approaches his Torah learning like the way a person runs an *eisek* {a business}.<sup>12</sup> Meaning, he is busy with it day and night, and never stops thinking about it. In fact, all his striving and energy is channeled to learning Torah for its own sake, until this becomes his whole identity.

---

<sup>10</sup> In *Tanya*, end of ch. 5 (quoting *Pri Eitz Chaim*), it is written: “{The meaning of Torah study ‘for its own sake’ is study} with the intent of binding one’s soul to Hashem by comprehending Torah.” See also *Bach*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 47, s.v. “*Uma Shekasav DeAmar.*” Alter Rebbe writes in his *Hilchos Talmud Torah* (ch. 4, par. 3) that “learning ‘for its own sake’ means learning Torah in order to observe and do.” For there are many different levels of learning “for its own sake” just as there are many levels of learning “not for its own sake” (and they are interdependent); see *Hilchos Talmud Torah* there. This is discussed at length in the Rambam’s *Commentary on Mishnah*, on *Sanhedrin*, beginning of ch. “*Cheilek.*” The concept of “for its own sake” that we are discussing in *Avos*, which deals with acts of piety (*Bava Kamma* 30a), refers to a very sublime level.

<sup>11</sup> *Bach*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 47, s.v. “*VeNuscha*”; *Taz*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 47, sub-par. 1.

<sup>12</sup> The end of the *Maamarim* “*Amar Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi... Kol Ha’osek BaTorah*” and “*Amar Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: ‘Bechol Yom Vayom,*” 5688; et al.

## 5.

### WHAT ABOUT EVERYTHING ELSE?

This person, who learns Torah for its own sake, may be troubled by the following question:

Our Rabbis say:<sup>13</sup> “Anyone who says he has nothing other than Torah... he does not even have Torah.” This is because a person must also perform acts of kindness. Meaning, even the person who learns Torah for its own sake must also perform acts of kindness. This is only possible if the person interacts with others around him. Furthermore, performing acts of kindness appropriately depends on the person refining and working on his character — being empathetic towards others, not being arrogant, etc. This requires its own specific *avodah* and energies.

Even in the aspects of a person’s *avodah* between him and **Hashem**, there are many aspects of the *avodah* — for example, arousing a love for Hashem, being an appropriately G-d-fearing person, etc. — which do not happen automatically. A person needs to work hard in these areas. This is especially true according to Rambam’s instructions:<sup>14</sup> “What is the path to attain love and fear of Him? When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom... he will immediately love... When he continues to reflect on these same matters, he will immediately recoil in awe and fear....”

Thus, the person learning Torah for its own sake might ask the following question: “If I devote all my time to learning Torah for no ulterior motive, how will I be able to perform and succeed in all these other areas of *avodas Hashem*? Will I forfeit these other elements!?”

Were his Torah study not **for its own sake** but in order to know how to act, also in the realm of *avodas Hashem* — then, his Torah study and behavior

---

<sup>13</sup> *Yevamos* 109b.

<sup>14</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 2, par. 2.

would not conflict. On the contrary, his learning would be a springboard to action and *avodas Hashem*.

However, here we are discussing a person who learns Torah **for its own sake**. He never thinks about what **he** will receive or gain from his studies. He learns Torah just in order to understand the Torah **itself**.

Therefore, this person never thinks about himself and his “level” of *avodas Hashem*. He has no time to figure out if he has yet refined and fine-tuned his character-traits or not. (And he certainly has no time to busy himself with [performing acts of kindness with] the people around him). Thus, what will happen with all the other parts of his *avodas Hashem*?

## 6.

### MERIT VS. REWARD

Rabbi Meir thus teaches: “Whoever concentrates on learning the Torah for its own sake, merits many things....” The word **merits** is carefully chosen. (He does not write that the person will have all these things as a **reward**.)

The **reward** that Hashem repays the Jewish people for their Torah study and mitzvah observance is **relative** to the Torah and mitzvos themselves. This holds true even according to the opinion<sup>15</sup> that the reward for mitzvos comes to a person (not as a result of the mitzvos themselves, rather) in the manner of a *segulah*,<sup>16</sup> like a (side) benefit for doing the mitzvah.

This is because every mitzvah has its **unique** rewards. Thus, the reward certainly has some relation and resemblance with the mitzvah for which **this** reward has been designated.

---

<sup>15</sup> The two opinions are cited and explicated in the *Shalah*, “*Bayis Acharon*” (12:1-2).

<sup>16</sup> {Often translated as *charm*, the term *segulah* refers to certain activities or practices that have various desired effects, but in a largely indirect and apparently, unconnected manner.}

This is certainly true according to the opinion that the reward for mitzvos is a **natural** result of the mitzvah itself. In this case, the reward for the mitzvah is certainly relative to the mitzvah.

The same applies in our case: The **reward** for learning Torah for its own sake is in the same vein. Meaning, the reward is the connection with the Giver of the Torah, for Hashem and Torah are one.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, we cannot call the “many things” listed here by Rabbi Meir, a *reward*. This is because these “many things” do not express the idea of Torah study for its own sake (connection to Hashem, the Giver of the Torah).

This, then, is the novelty Rabbi Meir introduces: **Besides** the primary reward for (and result of) occupying oneself in Torah for its own sake, this person also “**merits** many things.” He receives many things, in the manner of a merit, things that are inferior to the essential level of Torah study that is for its own sake. These “things” help him in all other areas of his *avodas Hashem*, as will be explained.

## 7.

### PARTIAL MERIT

The “many things” that the person who learns Torah for its own sake merits, are divisible into two categories: “Things,” he receives automatically, without needing to invest any additional effort. Other “things” he merits only partially, but he must then put in some *avodah*. Meaning, he can attain these “things” by way of a much easier *avodah* than another person — but he must still **do something** to attain these things satisfactorily and fully.

This explains the differences and nuances in Rabbi Meir’s wording: “The Torah **garbs** him with humility and fear of Hashem. It makes him **fit** to be a tzaddik, a chassid, upright and faithful. It keeps him **far** from sin, and draws **near** to meritorious deeds.” For, regarding these matters, the person who learns

---

<sup>17</sup> See *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 23.



Torah for its own sake, must work hard to ensure that he obtains them in their fullest measure.

Devoting himself to Torah study for its own sake only “**garbs** him with humility and fear of Hashem.” The Torah causes him to have these traits (humility and fear of Hashem) like clothing, i.e., in an external manner (like clothing on a person). These traits, however, are not fully internalized, to the extent that they become **his** traits (“**makes** a person become humble and develop fear of Hashem”). Torah also (only) **makes him fit** to become a tzaddik and faithful, **distant** from sin (similar to, but not actually the same as what it says, “Iniquity will not befall a righteous person”)<sup>18</sup> and draws him **near** to mitzvos. But in order to **actually** become a tzaddik and a faithful person, to actually stay away from sin, and have **actual** merits — he needs to work hard and perform *avodah*.

The same applies to “**forgiving** if he is insulted.” The Torah, concerning which it says, “My word is like fire,”<sup>19</sup> whitens and purifies the character traits of the person who studies Torah for its own sake; it leads him to become “**forgiving** if he is insulted.” But to reach the acme of perfection in refining his character traits — so that the person, at the outset, does not **feel** the insult at all — he needs to perform a special *avodah*.

## 8.

### AUTOMATIC GIFTS

On the other hand, there are certain things that the person who learns Torah for its own sake will merit to obtain completely. Meaning, he receives these things in their entirety with no special effort. For example: {he is called} “lover of G-d, lover of humanity, rejoicer of G-d, rejoicer of humanity... People derive from him the benefit of counsel, wisdom, understanding and strength... The Torah grants him royalty, dominion, and jurisprudence.”

---

<sup>18</sup> *Mishlei* 12:21.

<sup>19</sup> *Yirmiyahu* 23:29.

Since he will be a lover and a rejoicer of humanity, his good behavior with others will not fall short. Furthermore, specifically because he learns Torah for its own sake, he will merit an elevated level of intellect in general, even in regard to **material** matters. In this way, he can offer counsel even in worldly affairs. His counsel will be so good that the Torah of truth testifies about him, “People derive **benefit** from him...” Since people **benefit** from his counsel and wisdom, he will then **rejoice** humanity.

## 9.

### GOOD ADVICE

On this basis, we can appreciate how Rabbi Meir’s teaching contains a directive (not only for the person who learns Torah for its own sake, but even) for **other** Jewish people, who may entertain the following thought:

Someone learning Torah for its own sake lives a life completely removed from material matters and the surrounding people. He does not understand worldly matters. (Otherwise, this itself would prove that he is not the type of person who learns Torah for its own sake.) Certainly, it makes no sense to rely on this person’s advice in material matters or community affairs, and so forth.

Forestalling such thinking, Rabbi Meir teaches, on the contrary! Specifically, because this person learns Torah for its own sake, he merits a **wholesome** understanding of worldly matters. Therefore, “people benefit from his counsel and wisdom, etc.” Such a person’s advice is helpful to other people.

Obviously, if the person being asked lacks clarity on the matter, he will refrain from giving advice. But on the other hand, if he does state his opinion and give advice, then we can be sure that this advice and counsel is correct and true according to the Torah. Even when the advice seems contrary to common sense, since this person, who learns Torah for its own sake, loves humanity and seeks to make others happy, we can be sure that people will **benefit**, etc.

Because this person loves other people and gives advice with the strength of Torah, his advice certainly brings **benefit** to others.

## 10.

### GREAT AND EXALTED

On this basis, we can also clarify the meaning behind the words of the mishnah, “The Torah makes him great, exalting him above all things.” The repetition in wording is not just rhetorical.

Based on all the above, it emerges that the demeanor and station of the person who learns Torah for its own sake, comprises different grades or levels: (a) Due to the fact itself that he learns Torah for its own sake, he is beyond all worldly matters (similar to Torah itself). (b) Due to the fact that he merits these “many things,” he retains some connection to worldly matters (although these matters are very much beneath him, his level and eminence — learning Torah for its own sake).

Mirroring these two levels, the mishnah says, “The Torah makes him great, exalting him above all things.” The word *great* can only be used when comparing someone with another who (is on a similar level, but) is lower than him). *Exalted* refers to a loftiness and detachment wherein the person on the loftier plane is completely and incomparably beyond the one over whom he is exalted.

In our context, as a result of the “many things” (which have some connection and relation to worldly affairs and Creation) that this person merits, he is greater than all things. Worldly affairs and matters can be compared with his greatness, but he is **superior**.

As a result of learning Torah for its own sake, however, he is completely detached and beyond any worldly matters — “exalting him above all things.”

## 11.

### IT'S A PROCESS

This level of **occupying** oneself with Torah for its own sake — constantly — is not attainable universally.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, in *Tanya*,<sup>21</sup> the Alter Rebbe writes every person must at least have this intention to learn Torah for its own sake when he starts his Torah studies.

We can posit the following explanation:

Hashem's Torah is infinite. Thus, the intellect of a human, who is a created and finite being, cannot possibly grasp it — unless the person experiences **bittul**.<sup>22</sup> In this way, he can receive Hashem's Torah. Similar to *Matan Torah*, when the Jewish people made themselves a fitting vessel to receive the Torah by the *bittul* expressed in the declaration: “We will do, and we will understand.”<sup>23</sup> (**First**, “we will do,” then “we will understand.”)<sup>24</sup>

This applies to every person. **Before** he starts the process of **learning Torah**, when the law states that “a person should always learn Torah even if he does so not for its own sake...,”<sup>25</sup> the person must have a stirring to **receive** the Torah in order to achieve a connection with Hashem's Torah.

This occurs through *bittul*, which manifests in the intention to learn Torah for its own sake. In his studies, he has no selfish motives (which would show a feeling of self) and the only thing one senses in him is the reality of Torah.

---

<sup>20</sup> See *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Teshuvah*,” ch. 10, par. 2: “This is a very exalted level not merited by every wise man. It is the level of our Patriarch, Avraham...”

<sup>21</sup> *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 41 (58b).

<sup>22</sup> {*Bittul* — *Bittul* connotes self-nullification, humility, and the negation of ego. It is the antithesis of *yeshus*.}

<sup>23</sup> *Shemos* 24:7.

<sup>24</sup> *Shabbos* 88a.

<sup>25</sup> *Pesachim* 50b.

This is also the reason that the one who arranged the *Beraisa*<sup>26</sup> begins the *beraisa* of “Acquisition of Torah”<sup>27</sup> with the teaching of Rabbi Meir.

— After all, at first glance, this is baffling: Wouldn’t it make sense for the *beraisos* that encourage the **general** learning of Torah, to be presented first, and only afterwards, the *beraisa* that encourages the **highest** level of Torah study (occupying oneself in Torah learning for its own sake)? —

The *beraisa* of “Acquisition of Torah,” which we study on the Shabbos before Shavuos, the time of *Matan Torah*, teaches us how a Jew must go about preparing to receive the Torah on Shavuos.<sup>28</sup> The process is as follows: First and foremost, the drive of “learning Torah for its own sake” is required. That is how the person **receives** the Torah. Only afterwards does the process of actually learning Torah get underway.

-Based on talks delivered on *Shabbos parshas Bamidbar*, *Shavuos*, and *Shabbos parshas Naso*, 5735 (1975)

---

<sup>26</sup> {*Beraisa* — A teaching of the Sages of the Mishnah, not included in the Mishnah; ch. 6 of *Avos* is actually a collection of *beraisos*.}

<sup>27</sup> {The sixth chapter of *Pirkei Avos* is also called “[Kinyan Torah](#),” translated as “Acquisition of Torah.” The chapter focuses on the praise of Torah, and on those traits and principles that are instrumental in helping a person to acquire, internalize, Torah.}

<sup>28</sup> See *Midrash Shmuel* on *Avos*, beg. of ch. 6.