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Prepared by US Living and Learning

AI AND CHATGPT - Is study about the journey or the result?

LEARNING MATERIAL FOR SHAVUOT

Study of the Torah that we received over 3,000 years ago and its related texts, is one of the tenets of Judaism which has helped us to both survive and thrive over the ages. And we have never been shy of using new inventions, such as the printing press or the Internet, to enhance our studies and, by extension, our practice of Judaism.

ChatGPT is the newest Artificial Intelligence (AI) product; a programme that can generate an answer to pretty much any question instantly. It can enhance our day to day lives with the ease of access to knowledge – but it can be tempting to use it for everything.

We have not had even 50 years since the invention of the internet to monitor the long-term social, physiological and psychological effects of instant and constant streams of information. The methods of acquiring knowledge have changed immensely, but due to the sheer amount our generation is exposed to, are we really internalising it? All of this begs the question: Is Torah study about the journey or the result? We shall consider this critical question through studying the excerpts below.

Sources

Rashi on Parashat Bechukotai (Vayikra 26:3)

This source from eminent Torah commentator Rashi (1040-1105) is bringing down the idea that learning Torah is not just a practical endeavour in learning how to live life, it is an exercise for its own sake. Grappling with Torah learning is important in and of itself.

אִם־בְּחֻקֹּתַי תֵּלֵכוּ וְאֶת־מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם:

If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments,

אם בחקתי תלכו. יָכוֹל זֶה קִיּוּם הַמִּצְוֹות, כְּשֶׁהוּא אוֹמֵר וְאֶת מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם הֲרֵי קִיּוּם הַמִּצְוֹות אָמוּר, הָא מָה אֲנִי מְקַיֵּם אִם בְּחֻקֹּתַי תֵּלֵכוּ? שֶׁתִּהְיוּ עֲמֵלִים בַּתּוֹרָה (ספרא):

אם בחקתי תלכו IF YOU WALK IN MY LAWS. One might think that this denotes the fulfilment of the commandments; but when the Torah states “and you shall keep My commandments and do them” in the same sentence, it is plain that this phrase must refer to “fulfilment of the commands”. How then must I explain אם בחקתי תלכו As an emphatic? instruction that you should study the Torah assiduously.

ואת מצותי תשמרו. וְעָמֵל בִּתּוֹרָה עַל מְנָת לִשְׁמֹר וְלַקַּיֵּם, כְּמוֹ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וְלָמַדְתֶּם אֹתָם וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם לַעֲשׂוֹתָם" (דברים ה
ואת מצותי תשמרו AND FAITHFULLY OBSERVE MY COMMANDMENTS — Apply yourself to Torah study with diligence, with the intention to take heed and to fulfil its teachings, as it is said,
(Deuteronomy 5:1) “and you shall learn them and take heed to do them".

Questions

What do you think Rashi means when he says one must study Torah ‘assiduously’ and does this refer to the journey or the result?

Why do you think study and performance are mentioned in the same sentence, according to Rashi?

What religious benefit, according to your answers above, is found in studying Torah which does not lead to practice currently, such as laws relating to the Beit Hamikdash (Temple)?

Sources
Gemara Chagigah 3a

Torah learning is never finished. Even the most erudite scholars must find new insights in what they learn. We may think such scholars, and in the discussion at hand, AI machines, know all that can possibly be known. This is untrue. There is always more to be found in Torah.

תָּנוּ רַבָּנָן: מַעֲשֶׂה בְּרַבִּי יוֹחָנָן בֶּן בְּרוֹקָה וְרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר [בֶּן] חִסְמָא שֶׁהָלְכוּ לְהַקְבִּיל פְּנֵי רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בְּפְקִיעִין. אָמַר לָהֶם: מָה חִידּוּשׁ הָיָה בְּבֵית הַמִּדְרָשׁ הַיּוֹם? אָמְרוּ לוֹ: תַּלְמִידֶיךָ אָנוּ וּמֵימֶיךָ אָנוּ שׁוֹתִין. אָמַר לָהֶם: אַף עַל פִּי כֵן, אִי אֶפְשָׁר לְבֵית הַמִּדְרָשׁ בְּלֹא חִידּוּשׁ.

The Sages taught: There was an incident involving Rabbi Yochanan ben Beroka and Rabbi Elazar ben Chisma, when they went to greet Rabbi Yehoshua in Peki'in. Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: What new explanation did you learn today in the study hall? They said to him: We are your students and we drink from your water, i.e., all of our Torah knowledge comes from you, and therefore how can we tell you something you have not already learned? He said to them: **Even if you have learned from me, there cannot be a study hall without a new, creative insight.**

Questions

What is Rabbi Yehoshua teaching his students by acknowledging the chain of Torah knowledge from teacher to student, alongside creativity? What practical examples could you give to describe your answer?

Do you think the creative explanations in Torah study are for either academic or practical purposes, or for both?

What does your answer to the question above tell you about Torah study?

Sources

Gemara Eruvin 54b

This source from the Gemara has many important messages within it. The first is that we learn in order that we can teach others. The second is that 'a teacher must show the students the reason for what is taught' - we should understand what lies behind the things we learn. And thirdly, that the way to fully understand a concept is by reviewing it many times.

רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אוֹמֵר: מִנַּיִן שֶׁחַיָּיב אָדָם לְשָׁנוֹת לְתַלְמִידוֹ עַד שֶׁיִּלְמָדֶנּוּ — שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ״וְלַמְּדָהּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל״, וּמִנַּיִן עַד שֶׁתְּהֵא סִדּוּרָה בְּפִיהֶם — שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ״שִׂימָהּ בְּפִיהֶם״,

Rabbi Akiva says: From where do we learn that a person is obligated to teach a student until the student learns the material and understands it? The Torah says: "... write this song (the Torah) for you, and teach it to the children of Israel; put it in their mouths..." (Devarim 31:19). This indicates that one must teach Torah to others. And from where do we derive that one must teach his students until the material is organized in their mouths? As it is stated: "Put it in their mouths," so that they should be capable of teaching it to others.

רַבִּי פְּרִידָא הֲוָה לֵיהּ הָהוּא תַּלְמִידָא דַּהֲוָה תָּנֵי לֵיהּ אַרְבַּע מְאָה זִימְנֵי וְגָמַר. יוֹמָא חַד בַּעְיוּהּ לְמִלְּתָא דְמִצְוָה. תְּנָא לֵיהּ וְלָא גְּמַר

Having discussed the importance of reviewing one's Torah study, the Gemara relates that Rabbi Perida had a certain student whom he would have to teach four hundred times, and only then would he learn the material, as he was incapable of understanding it otherwise. One day they requested Rabbi Perida's presence to help a particular mitzva be performed after the lesson. Rabbi Perida taught his student four hundred times as usual, but this time the student did not successfully learn the material.

[source continues on next page]

וּמִנַּיִין שֶׁחַיָּיב לְהַרְאוֹת לוֹ פָּנִים — שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ״וְאֵלֶּה הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר תָּשִׂים לִפְנֵיהֶם

And from where do we derive that a teacher must show the students reasons for what is taught? The Torah says: "Now these are the judgments which you shall set before them" (Shemot 21:1), which indicates that the lessons must be set out in logical fashion for students.

אֲמַר לֵיהּ: הָאִידָּנָא מַאי שְׁנָא? אֲמַר לֵיהּ: מִדְּהָהִיא שַׁעְתָּא דַּאֲמַר לֵיהּ לְמָר אִיכָּא מִילְתָא דְּמִצְוָה — אַסְחַאי לְדַעְתַּאי, וְכָל שַׁעְתָּא אָמֵינָא: הַשְׁתָּא קָאֵי מָר, הַשְׁתָּא קָאֵי מָר. אֲמַר לֵיהּ: הַב דַּעְתָּךְ וְאַתְנֵי לִיךְ. הֲדַר תְּנָא לֵיהּ אַרְבַּע מְאָה זִימְנֵי [אַחֲרִינֵי].

Rabbi Perida said to him: What is different today that you are unable to grasp the lesson? The student replied: From the time you were told that there was a particular mitzva for which you were needed, my mind was distracted from the lesson. Every moment I said to myself: Now my teacher will go, now my teacher will go and facilitate the mitzva, he will not complete the lesson. Rabbi Perida said to him: Pay attention this time and I will teach you, and know that I will not leave until you have fully mastered the lesson. He taught him again an additional four hundred times.

נְפַקָא בַּת קָלָא וַאֲמַר לֵיהּ: נִיחָא לָךְ דְּלִיסְפּוֹ אַרְבַּע מְאָה שְׁנֵי, אוֹ דְּתֵיזְכּוֹ אַתְּ וְדָרָךְ לְעָלְמָא דְּאָתֵי? אָמַר: דְּנֵיזְכּוֹ אֲנָא וְדָרַיי לְעָלְמָא דְּאָתֵי. אָמַר לָהֶן הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא: תְּנוּ לוֹ זוֹ וְזוֹ.

Due to the merit of Rabbi Perida's great devotion to his students, a Divine Voice emerged from heaven and said: Is it preferable to you, Rav Perida, that four hundred years be added to your life, or that you and the rest of your generation will merit the World-to-Come? Rav Perida replied: I prefer that I and my generation merit the World-to-Come. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to the angels: Give him both; he shall live a very long life and he and the rest of his generation will merit the World-to-Come.

Questions:

What is the view shown in this passage of the Talmud about the journey versus result question?

Why is there an obligation to understand, not just learn the material? Consider this against how you have studied secular studies at school or elsewhere.

Why does the Talmud ascribe such importance to the obligation of reviewing what you have studied?

What does the reward offered and then given to Rav Perida tell us about how the rabbis in this passage taught us about Torah study (even in a world without AI and ChatGPT)?

Sources

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Ha'Adam v'Olamo (Man and his World), published in 1998

Learning Torah is important for more than just knowing how to live. It is what our relationship with God is founded upon.

מצוות תלמוד תורשת הרבה מאד מן האדם: ליטוד, ריכוז, העמקה, התמדה וכדומה, אולם שווה הוא כל המאמץ הזה מפני שהמטרה הסופית היא להגיע אל "המיפגש" עם השכינה. דומה הוא ליטוד התורה למסע שאינו נגמר לעולם, למהלך לקראת יעד שקשה מאוד להגיע אליו...

בהשקפה היהודית קיימת הקביעה "ושבת עד ה' אלקיך" (דברים ל',ב'). לאחר שהאיש הישראלי הירבה לתהות ולתעות, להיטמע בתרביות ניכר ובעבודת אלילים– בסופו של דבר מובטח לו כי יוכה לשוב אל אלקיו: "ובקשתם משם את ה' אלקיך ומצאת כי תדרשנו בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך" (שם ד', כט'). מופלא הוא הצו "ובקשתם", לאחר שכבר ידוע וברור, כי אנו מאמינים בני מאמינים. לשם מה צריכים אנו לעסוק כה הרבה בתחום זה של "ובקשתם"? הרי אנו מבירים ברבש"ע מימות אברהם אבינו? למה "ובקשתם"?

The mitzvah of studying Torah demands much from Man; concentration, intense involvement, persistence and other intellectual efforts but all that work is worthwhile because its ultimate goal is to reach "a meeting with the Shechinah." The study of Torah is similar to a journey that never ends, to a walk towards a destination that is difficult to reach.... In the Jewish view there exists the rule (Devarim 30:2) "and you will return to your God." Even if we stray from the path on which God wants us to walk - in the end, he is promised that he will be worthy to return to God: "and you will seek from there your God and you will find Him if you pursue Him with all your heart and all your soul (Devarim 4:29). The commandment to "seek" is surprising because it is well known that we are believers, the children of believers. What purpose is there to our putting in effort to "seek" ? After all, we have recognized God as the Supreme Being since the time of Avraham our father? Why do we need to "seek"?

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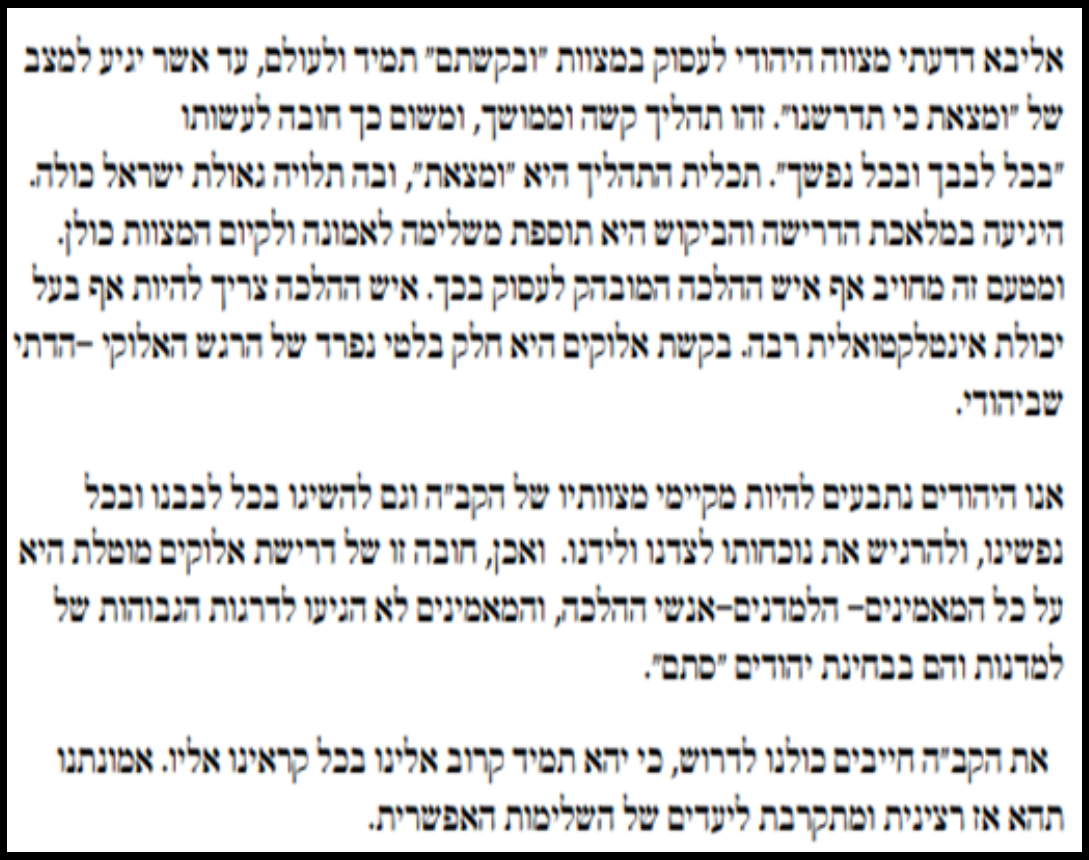

אליבא דדעתי מצווה היהודי לעסוק במצוות "ובקשתם" תמיד ולעולם, עד אשר יגיע למצב של "ומצאת כי תדרשנו". זהו תהליך קשה וממושך, ומשום כך חובה לעשותו "בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך". תכלית התהליך היא "ומצאת", ובה תלויה גאולת ישראל כולה. היגיעה במלאכת הדרישה והביקוש היא תוספת משלימה לאמונה ולקיום המצוות כולן. ומטעם זה מחויב אף איש ההלכה המובהק לעסוק בכך. איש ההלכה צריך להיות אף בעל יכולת אינטלקטואלית רבה. בקשת אלוקים היא חלק בלתי נפרד של הרגש האלוקי –הדתי שביהודי.

אנו היהודים נתבעים להיות מקיימי מצוותיו של הקב"ה וגם להשיגו בכל לבבנו ובכל נפשינו, ולהרגיש את נוכחותו לצדנו ולידנו. ואכן, חובה זו של דרישת אלוקים מוטלת היא על כל המאמינים– הלמדנים–אנשי ההלכה, והמאמינים לא הגיעו לדרגות הגבוהות של למדנות והם בבחינת יהודים "סתם".

את הקב"ה חייבים כולנו לדרוש, כי יהא תמיד קרוב אלינו בכל קראינו אליו. אמונתנו תהא אז רצינית ומתקרבת ליעדים של השלימות האפשרית.

It is my opinion that a Jew is commanded to put in effort “to seek” at all times and forever until he reaches the status of one “who sought and then found.” This is a journey that is hard and long, and because of that, it must be undertaken “with all your heart and with all your soul.” The purpose of the journey is “to find” and the redemption of the Jewish people is dependent on each of us making that journey. The effort involved in seeking and asking is the element that completes our faith and the fulfilment of the mitzvot. For that reason, even a “quintessential person of halacha” must undertake that effort. A person of halacha must therefore be one with substantial intellectual abilities. Seeking out God is an inseparable part of the emotional and religious bond between man and God that a Jew needs to feel.

We Jews are committed to perform the commandments of God and to seek God with all of our hearts and with all of our souls, and to feel that God is close and by our side. It is for that reason that the obligation to seek God is thrust upon all believers, teachers, people of halacha and even believers who have not yet learned much.

We are all obligated to seek God because in that way God will always be close to us when we need to call out to Him. Our faith will then be sincere. Our effort will bring us closer to fulfilling our goal of having the closest possible relationship with God.

Text sourced from: https://beureihatefila.com/files/Birchos_Ha_Torah.pdf

Question

According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, what are the reasons and objectives for learning? Can the goals of learning be achieved through a platform like ChatGPT?

Article: AI Meets Halacha?" an interview with Rabbi Dr. Aaron Glatt

Jewish Action Magazine Vol 83. No.3, February 16, 2023

JA: Is there a danger in having access to too much information?

Rabbi Glatt: For the layperson, absolutely. Too much information is not helpful. A comprehensive document, for instance, of all the opinions on reheating food on Shabbat is not going to help the layperson know what to do. He might see many contradictory opinions depending on the kind of food and other factors. He could very well throw up his hands and say, "I have no idea what to do. I'll do whatever I want, and then I'll find one of the rabbis cited online who agrees with me." This would represent a serious misunderstanding of the halachic process.

In the Gemara, Rabbi Yossi HaGlili rules that one can eat chicken with cheese... But we don't follow that opinion. If, however, one does an online search and sees Rabbi Yossi HaGlili's opinion, he might think that that's acceptable in halacha. He won't necessarily realize that it's a minority opinion that is not accepted.

Other people might deliberately seek out non-accepted halachic opinions. ChatGPT could easily write a convincing document based upon non-accepted halachic positions, albeit from great individuals, illustrating how eating chicken and cheese together is permissible in Jewish law, when, of course, it is not. Some might use the information to then proceed to do what they want to do. This is a distortion of the halachic process.

JA: Right. So it would seem that AI would be most useful as a tool for Torah scholarship.

Rabbi Glatt: Currently, that seems to me to be the best use for it. One could use AI not to get a halachic pesak, but rather for limud Torah, to study the various opinions of Chazal for the sake of learning. One could ask ChatGPT: *Can you provide me with all the gemaras in Bavli and Yerushalmi on this topic? Can you then show me the Rishonim on the subject, then the piskei halacha and any relevant she'eilot and teshuvot that are in Shulchan Aruch?*
So yes, AI could be an excellent tool for learning.

JA: Could a machine ever really pasken (make rulings on halachic questions) anyway?

Rabbi Glatt: The human element is essential in pesak halacha. There's a well-known story about the great posek Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, zt"l. In response to a person who asked him a question, Rav Shlomo Zalman got

up from his chair. I must have asked Rav Shlomo Zalman a really good question, thought the inquirer. I'm making him pace. He's walking to the window. Rav Shlomo Zalman then motioned to the individual to come to the window. He approached the rav, anxious to hear what he would say. Rav Shlomo Zalman pointed to a house down the street and said, "That's where your rav lives; ask your rav this question."

When it comes to pesak halacha, the relationship is critical. The rav has to know the individual asking the question. There are many considerations that are taken into account when rendering a halachic decision. Is the questioner wealthy? Is he poor? Will the halachic decision impact a couple's shalom bayit, et cetera?

Rabbi Hershel Schachter recalls that his rebbi, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, would sometimes be asked the same question twice in one day and would give two different answers. Rabbi Schachter explains that the Rav understood the individual's personal situation, and therefore the halacha for that person was X. For the second individual, whose circumstances didn't allow for that leniency, the halacha was Y.

It's not that the halacha changes willy-nilly, but it allows for factors other than objective data to be taken into consideration. The halacha of the beit midrash, that is, the theoretical halacha, will always be the same. But its application will depend upon various factors.

There's another aspect as well. A man once came to the Beit Halevi and asked, "Is it permissible for me to fulfil the mitzvah of four cups at the Seder with milk?" The Beit Halevi responded to the man's question in the affirmative. But he realized that if the man was asking about using milk at the Seder, he obviously didn't have enough money for meat or chicken at the Seder. The Beit Halevi told his wife to give the family funds to ensure their needs would be met for Pesach. A gadol b'Yisrael (a great Jewish person) does not simply provide a mechanical yes-or-no answer to a question. He recognizes the real question underlying the question that is being asked.

https://jewishaction.com/cover-story/ai-meets-halachah/

Questions

What does this source and the extract from the Rabbi above teach us about the differences between Talmud Torah (Torah study) and Pesak Halacha (the rules, understanding and processes of making practical decision in Jewish law)?

What are the positive aspects of ChatGPT and AI for Jewish life?

What do you feel are the potential issues with ChatGPT and AI?

Torah is not merely learned. It cries out to be lived. Nor is the Torah merely a private code of conduct. It is about the way we construct a society. By establishing a dialogue between Torah and contemporary society, we will find ourselves enlightened by new facets of its insight into the human condition."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks - Community of Faith p. 127

Questions

Rabbi Sacks describes Torah learning as 'a conversation' and 'a dialogue'. Why do you think this is?

What does Rabbi Sacks mean when he says, "Torah is not merely learned. It cries out to be lived"? Apply your answer to the question of the journey or the result?

If you are familiar with Rabbi Sacks' work and perhaps heard him speak, how did he put his ideas about Torah study into practice and what can you learn from this?

"Torah – not simply 'that which is taught' but the process of learning and teaching, the ongoing conversation between parents and children, teachers and disciples – is the oxygen which Judaism breathes."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks - Covenant and Conversation: Exodus p. 294

Article: Building Muscles, One Rashi at a Time

By Sarah Rudolph (Jewish writer and educator, Editor of Derachecha)

Despite years of really trying to maintain a minimal but fairly steady exercise regimen, I'm still extraordinarily weak. This became painfully clear in recent months when I began experiencing a lot of knee pain and was sent to physical therapy.

I was temporarily banned from anything that might exacerbate the pain, and received a new daily regimen aimed at strengthening my leg muscles so my knees won't have to work so hard. Some days, I try and fail to remember to do them. Other days, I remember successfully, and progress to trying and failing to actually do the exercises.
Turns out, legs can be really heavy when you're trying to lift them to build strength. One night, I was diligently attempting a lot of reps when I just couldn't do it anymore and decided to recruit some help from one of my kids. "Would you do me a favour? Just come over here and lift this for me." Not surprisingly, I was met with laughter, and no help at all.
Turns out, even my kids know you can't always get someone else to do the work for you.

If I want to build strength in my own muscles, I have to do the work. The work hurts and is not always fun, but I will hurt more if I don't do it – and my life will improve overall if I do. If I'm honest, the effort itself sometimes feels good, once I get past the challenge of actually starting to do it.
And I can recruit help: not to do the work for me, but to do it with me. It's great when I get someone down on the floor to do the exercises with me, or when I'm actually with the physical therapist and can get guidance to make sure my form is good and I'm hitting the right muscles. Those are the times I stay focused and progress the most.

There are some really obvious metaphors here about the benefits of hard work and the support we might get from peers and advisors, as long as we don't fall into the trap of letting them do the hard work for us. I think we all know we have to work hard, ourselves, if we want to see results – in any area of life and growth. As the memorably named Ben Hei Hei reminds us: l'fum tza'ara, agra; reward is achieved in direct correlation with effort (Avot 5:23).

One area, though, where I think this truth is sometimes overlooked is the religious arena. In particular from my perspective as a Jewish educator, the arena of Jewish learning.
My passion for Jewish education is bound up with text study, and text study can be hard. I hear from lots of people who feel they don't have the necessary skills to engage with texts, or who have the skills but feel they have too much going on in other areas of life to put time and energy into using those skills. Even those who make the effort to attend classes or read something will often tell me they want their Torah study spoonfed. Not my word; often, this is precisely what I hear from prospective students. They don't want to delve, question, and analyze; they want nice ideas handed to them in a neat, inspirational package. I get that, and there is certainly a place for it. And of course, there can be plenty of effort involved simply in finding the time to imbibe those spoonfed bits of packaged Torah inspiration.

But there is a place for hard work, too, including the hard work of delving into Torah sources on our own. As Rambam points out (Hilchot

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Talmud Torah 3:1), the "crown" of Torah, greater than the "crowns" of royalty or priesthood, is a morasha (inheritance) for us all, ready and waiting for each of us to take it – but we have to come take it. How do we take possession of this inheritance? Several paragraphs later, Rambam offers guidance from Avot 6:4, describing the trials and tribulations that accompany Torah study, including deep engagement and struggle (ameilus) with Torah itself. When we look at Pirkei Avot in context, we find that embarking on those trials is said to bring happiness not only in the next world, but even in this one. Weird; struggles can make us happy!

The commentaries I've seen on this line suggest the mishna is offering reassurance that one will ultimately enjoy worldly comforts to make up for initial hardships endured while pursuing Torah study, but it seems to me that the word "ashrecha" also implies a less physical sense of satisfaction that comes from personal effort that leads to personal achievement. (Cf. Malbim on Tehillim 1:1.) The inherent satisfaction that comes from jumping in the sea of Torah and emerging victorious. Don't we feel that way when we get down to it and really work ourselves physically? Why shouldn't the same hold true for a spiritual/mental workout?

But only if we do it – we, through our efforts, not by finding someone to lift the weights for us. Two paragraphs later in Pirkei Avot, Chazal further emphasize the challenges involved in making Torah ours: Torah is only truly acquired through 48 "things" (qualities?). The very first item on the list – because apparently it's not obvious – is talmud – learning. We can't truly acquire our Torah heritage without putting in some effort to learn it.

What is "acquisition," anyway? We use the Hebrew word kinyan to refer to taking ownership of property – but it's also the word we use to describe the creation of a marriage. Perhaps kinyan is not really about owning per se, but about relationship. There are all sorts of kinyanim in halacha; there are different methods of demonstrating a relationship with a person, place, or thing. There are different kinds of relationships. If we want to enact a kinyan of Torah, to accept G-d's gift and make it ours, we have to delve into it. Get to know it. Form a relationship with it, even through trials and tribulations.

Don't all relationships take a little effort, a little struggle? Isn't it worth putting in that effort to build up our relationship muscles, with Torah as with all our relationships? If we try to get someone else to do the work of Torah study for us… well, my kid might laugh at us. It doesn't work that way, at least not if we want a full kinyan of our Torah. Fortunately, it also doesn't have to be as hard as it might seem. Rambam continues in Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:6 by applying another line from Pirkei Avot to the study of Torah: "It is not your responsibility to complete the matter – but neither are you free to neglect it." Torah study doesn't have to be overwhelming; it's not a matter of "I have the skills, so I can learn" or "I don't have the skills, so I can't." I had the privilege for four years to teach adult beginners, completely new to Jewish texts and sometimes even to Hebrew language, in a text-based, skills-oriented environment. It was an amazing opportunity for my students and for me; for those who have hours available to dedicate to developing skills in Torah study, even if you've never tried that sort of study before, I highly recommend it. But even those without large swaths of time – it's still possible. That inheritance is still

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available to be acquired, little by little. Despite the challenges I face in doing my physical therapy routine regularly, I've begun to notice that I might actually be getting a little stronger. I can feel the presence of muscles, though my knees still hurt on stairs and I have a long way to go. I'm heartened by this progress, and attribute it not only to my official exercise routine, which is often too much to fit into my day and even too hard to do, but to the little ways I've tried to let awareness of my need for growth spill into the rest of my life. Standing in a pool watching my kids, I made a conscious effort to simply walk back and forth, focusing my muscles against the water. I try to remember not to head for the closest parking space unless it's raining or I'm in a particular rush. On a long phone call the other day, I made a point of walking around while talking. Those little things seem to be making a difference.

In the same way, even if it's sometimes too much to engage in a regular extensive routine of dedicated Torah study – there are little things we can work into our everyday lives, if we remain alert to their potential value. A few minutes, maybe, to open a Chumash and read, and simply notice. What strikes me as interesting, or strange? Look at that word choice; what does that suggest to me? …and now I have a Torah insight that's all my own. Or that other word choice that just seems really strange? … and the next time I have a few minutes, I can see what Rashi has to say about it, or Ramban or Malbim or whomever I have time to consult, and before I know it, I own one or two or seventy facets of a little slice of Torah. My Torah muscles are stronger for having used them; I've connected with the Torah that was there for the taking all along. It's mine now, in this world and the next. And if I'm not sure how to go about these exercises – I can get help. Maybe I simply look around daily life for things to wonder about, and enlist a teacher or friend to help find out what our traditional sources have to say about the topic. Maybe, like my physical therapist, they can guide my progress, keeping an eye on my alignment and catching any mistakes stemming from my lack of experience. Through the simple effort of asking, I make an issue my own; when I look up an answer, with or without help – that becomes mine, too.

In Devarim 30:11-14, Moshe reassures the Jewish people that "this mitzvah which I am commanding you today, it is not too wondrous for you and it is not far. It is not in the heavens… Rather, the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it." Powerful words – but what do they mean? Which mitzvah is he talking about? Particularly at this time of year, we might hear a lot about the Ramban's suggestion that Moshe is referring to teshuva, telling us repentance is not as hard as we might think – but as with virtually every Torah question, there are other explanations too. As the Netziv points out, others believe this passage is about deep Torah study: It might seem to be beyond us, with ideas too high above our heads to grasp, or requiring resources too difficult to consult. But it's actually right there, in our very own mouths and hearts. We have the capacity, even if we think we don't, because G-d gave it to us. We just have to find ways to engage our rusty muscles and take what is rightfully ours.

https://www.ou.org/life/inspiration/building-muscles-one-rashi-at-a-time/

Conclusion

The festival of Shavuot is the festival celebrating the receiving of the Torah. It provides us with the opportunity to refocus - what is this gift all about?

It is vital for our relationship with God, and most probably for our very souls, that we make an effort to learn for ourselves in order to take ownership of the Torah, as Rabbi Soloveitchik points out. After all, it was for this very purpose that we were created. If we were to type in all our questions and receive instant answers, are we living up to the potential God gifted us?

Our sources have reminded us that we study Torah in order to know how to perform mitzvot but we also study it for its own sake. This knowledge has no end. There is always more to be drawn out of the Torah; always a 'novel idea in the study hall'. There is a lot of worry that AI will squash creativity, and the Jewish idea of a 'chiddush' (new take on a passage of Jewish literature) is something that artificial intelligence cannot do.

Actual mastery of knowledge takes assiduous study, discussion, debate and differences of opinion which broaden your mind and sharpen your critical thinking. Bringing this colour to our study will surely lead us to real, hard-earned intelligence.

As Rabbi Akiva taught us in the passage cited above from the Talmud (Eruvin 54b), we learn so that we can teach others. In order to do this, we really need to know our stuff - even if that means learning something 800 times!

Studying Torah is truly a journey that never ends.